

Chapter 1

Forging ahead in the East Midlands

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Abstract

Closing the attainment gap in schools can only be achieved through people – dedicated people. Such a dedicated person is Lee Hessey, CEO of The Forge Trust. Encompassing former mining villages and towns of the East Midlands this multi academy trust lives up to its motto – *Labor Omnia Vincit* – “work conquers everything”. As the driving force behind this trust, Lee speaks of *talent*, *standards*, *curriculum* and *research* as four of the key areas contributing to their successes. The Forge Trust invests in *talent* – its people – through paying for MA courses and sponsoring its Head of Teaching and Learning to qualify successfully in England’s first cohort of Chartered Teachers. A deliberate reduction in class sizes is one of the key features underpinning the sustained improvement in *standards* of pupil attainment. There is a like-mindedness and a collective will amongst the teaching staff to drive up standards through a continuous improvement of the *curriculum*; and their pedagogy is underpinned by a willingness to undertake *research*. It was through listening to Lee in conversation that I became involved with schools sited in areas of deprivation – and so, in this opening chapter, we listen to Lee, a National Leader of Education working in the top performing school in Newark.

*“Mansfield no more
Newark no more
Worksop no more”*

The plaintive cry from the *Proclaimers* ‘...mourning over the devastation wreaked upon Bathgate, Linwood and Methil in the industrial heartlands of their native Scotland...’ (Luby, 2019) in *Letter from America* is adapted for the sorrow that has been poured out for the former mining towns and villages of Nottinghamshire. In the last few years I have been

humbled to witness the inspiring efforts of dedicated primary school staff alleviating the poverty wrought upon the children of these towns and villages. And it all began with a chance conversation.

That chance arose in a nondescript seminar room of the cathedral city of Lincoln's Bishop Grosseteste University. However, nondescript is not a word to be used for my partner in conversation – Lee Hessey, Executive Principal of The Forge Trust comprising 7 schools in the East Midlands. *A diamond in the rough* is a more apt description for Lee. Physically imposing, he shares the same characteristics of honesty and humility lauded by Sir Steve Lancashire (2019) in his review of Steve Munby's book *Imperfect Leadership*. Notably, though, neither Lee nor The Forge Trust come alone. Born of similar stock is Grant Worthington, formerly head teacher of Forest View Junior School and now Director of Quality Assurance and School Improvement with the Flying High Trust. Down-to-earth is another of the attributes that they share as exemplified by their conversation whilst surveying the football field of a struggling primary school that no-one wants - except them:

Grant: How many is that then?

Lee: I make it four.

Grant: So, that's four syringes on the football field. What about the dog poo?

Lee: Let's not go there...!

(Luby and Beckley, 2019)

Others see failure and waste; but Grant and Lee see opportunity and challenge. For Grant, it is an opportunity to revive the fortunes of his old primary school; whilst for Lee it is the challenge of growing The Forge Trust.

The Ad Astra Primary Partnership

In early 2015, Lee introduced me to fellow members of the Ad Astra Primary Partnership which, at that time, comprised 6 Nottinghamshire schools - one primary academy, three primary schools, one junior school and one infant school. They shared the challenge and also their expertise of narrowing the attainment gap for white working class pupils sited in areas of deprivation.

The *Ad Astra* member schools:

- Lee at The Sir Donald Bailey Academy, Newark that, according to the Index of Multiple Deprivation is sited within the top 6% most deprived neighbourhoods.
- Grant at Forest View Junior School in New Ollerton that is situated close to Newark and Sherwood 001A within the top 10% most deprived areas.
- Head teacher Helen Chambers of Abbey Hill Primary and Nursery School sited five miles south-west of the town of Mansfield and serving an area of high social and economic disadvantage as attested by forty-seven per cent of the pupils living in families that are income deprived. The school receives substantial pupil premium funding and a significant number of families are supported by social services with the school employing a full time Child and Family Support Worker.
- Head teacher (and now HMI) Peter Stonier then at Jacksdale Primary and Nursery School that is close to the Derbyshire border. Situated within the heart of Jacksdale village, there are 250 pupils on the school roll including a number of children from Amber Valley which is in the top 10% most deprived areas nationally.
- Head teacher Chris Wilson of Ramsden Primary School in the deceptively picturesque Carlton in Lindrick near Worksop. The housing scheme from which the majority of pupils are drawn is found in Bassetlaw 004A that according to the Index of Multiple Deprivation is also in the top 10% of England's most deprived areas.
- And last, but not least, Jo Cook at Hallcroft Infant School that is sited not far from Bassetlaw 008A within the top 20% most deprived areas nationally.¹

The Ad Astra Primary Partnership focuses on significant factors affecting outcomes for pupils in areas of deprivation, namely

- material poverty;
- emotional poverty;
- poverty of experience;
- poverty of language; and
- poverty of aspiration.

¹ Bassetlaw is the electoral constituency that had the largest swing nationally of 18% from Labour to the Conservatives at the 2019 UK General Election (source: *The Sunday Times*, 15 December, 2019). This is of significance given the tenor of Lee Hessey's political comments.

The group investigate strategies and ideas for minimising the impact of such poverty on their children and the approach of the Ad Astra Primary Partnership is one of collaboration between equal partners, working in similar contexts, but with one shared ambition to identify and implement the most effective strategies to address this long standing issue. The partnership schools are also responsive to the assertion by Hammersley-Fletcher et al (2015: 5) that ‘The strengths of schools working alongside researchers... is an effective and supportive way to develop practices which are led and informed by schools themselves, bringing them an extra level of autonomy to pursue issues and change initiatives that are relevant to their own setting and context.’ This is evidenced by their openness to a series of research consultancy projects (Luby, 2016b) that culminates with five-day ethnographic studies in five of the partnership schools (Puttick et al, 2020).

The nitty-gritty of what some of the Ad Astra partnership schools actually do in the classroom to address poverty will be discussed later; but, for now, let us focus on the professional conversation with Lee.²

Thursday 2nd May, 2019.

The Forge Trust centre, North Muskham, Notts

AL: I’m with Lee Hessey who is the Chief Executive Officer of the Forge Trust and Lee we’re discussing leadership. Would you like to just tell me what’s your...where did it all start for you?

LEE: *Yeah, I started as a young teacher who came into teaching from business, so always had a view of teaching possibly different to the majority of teachers because I didn’t go from school to school; I went from school at 16 to work for Wilkinson’s at the time and then a couple of years later, Unilever in the big wide world. I went and got my qualifications at night school. So I wasn’t your typical orthodox route, it was very unorthodox which is probably why some of my views are probably really challenging for the profession because I have views that aren’t in line with the profession. Especially these days now, the profession is going in another direction post Wilshaw, post Michael Gove, which I liked, that era.*³

² Methodologically speaking, the professional conversations outlined within this book are *unstructured interviews* – but more is said about this in the Afterword.

³ Presumably, Lee was heartened to read in the *Times Education Supplement* that ‘The Gove gang are back in business,’ (Dorrell, 2019).

I don't like this era so much today because it doesn't fit with me as a man, me as a person, what I believe in and the values of the Trust. I think we're losing... I'm passionate about teaching, I'm passionate about leadership; but I think the profession is losing the plot. We're dropping our standards...

The emphasis Wilshaw said should be on standards and curriculum. I do like that. I do like the emphasis on curriculum today. That is something that is new and I'm welcoming because kids need a balanced curriculum and, in the past, maybe it was too narrow. I'm a standards man but, maybe, it was just all standards in some schools. It needs to be developed with artistic talent. Find the talent and push it. I'm absolutely with them on that but not at the expense of standards; and standards shouldn't come at the expense of talent either. It should be both.

But what you're going towards here is a slipping of the standards, especially for white working class kids, the biggest underperforming group in the country. I feel the national agenda is tipping away from that again and we're going to be leaving these kids stood still again.

But back to your question on leadership, yeah, it starts with me as a young teacher. I was obviously open to learning but quickly recognised that I had skills that the schools I worked for, which generally were underperforming needed; because you need a bit of grit and a bit of whatever word you want to use, the government like resilience, don't they? Use that one, you need a bit of something, you need a bit of know-how and I would say the main thing you need is dedication and an interest and a concern for the job. It's not just a job. It's more than that.

There are over 600 words in Lee's opening statement (some have been excised) or, rather, his outpouring of *passion*. It is the passion of which Hattie speaks in the opening pages of his renowned *Visible Learning for Teachers*. It is the passion that I have seen, heard, witnessed in Lee's dealings with head teacher colleagues, school staff and children. It is the passion that drives him to overcome obstacles and to succeed in highly challenging circumstances. One only has to visit the sites of the six academies within The Forge Trust:

- Bowbridge estate, Newark, in which the most common council tax band is A, for The Sir Donald Bailey Academy;

- for both the Parkgate Academy and the Forest View Academy, the colliery village of New Ollerton, originally built in the mid-1920s; but times have changed with the closure of the mine twenty-five years ago;
- the non-ethnically diverse (98% White British) village of Rainworth for Python Hill Academy that also suffered when nearby Rufford Colliery stopped producing coal in 1993;
- Kirkby-in-Ashfield, a part of the Mansfield Urban Area for West Park Academy; and
- 5 miles south from Gainsborough, the civil parish of Marton for The Marton Academy.

Soon to be joined by a seventh school, St Augustine's in Worksop, it is noteworthy that all but two of The Forge Trust schools are currently rated "Good" by Ofsted.⁴

Talent

But back to Lee. He speaks of talent, standards, curriculum, among others: but how does he address these? With talent – with his staff – Lee is generous. The Forge Trust fully funds Sophie Longney, the Head of Teaching and Learning as she successfully becomes one of England's first cohort of ninety-eight teachers to achieve the prestigious award of Chartered Teacher from the Chartered College of Teaching (graduated July, 2019). This is a highly demanding course and as the CEO of the Chartered College of Teaching points out:

Design and accreditation of our *CTeach* programme has been a major part of our collective endeavour to rebuild the professional status of teaching. These teachers take with them into their school confidence born out of rigorous study and a commitment to share this knowledge in the spirit of collaboration... your success will help to make an alternative high-status future a reality for other teaching professionals. (Lough, 2019)

Words of caution however. The Chartered Teacher Scheme in Scotland attracted thousands of teachers and, whilst not flawless, was a subject of international acclaim and scrutiny (Ingvarson, 2009). Commencing with a pilot scheme in 2002, and with strong support from

⁴ Two of the schools were previously deemed "Inadequate" and were subsequently closed prior to becoming new members of The Forge Trust.

the Scottish Government and the “great and good” of Scottish education; it was launched at Holyrood, the home of the *Scots Parliament*: a decade later it was gone (Denholm, 2012).

On a dreich, winter’s morning, I accompanied two other members of the Committee of the Association of Chartered Teachers Scotland, David Noble and Dorothy Coe, as we stepped warily into the imposing *art deco* government building that is St. Andrew's House, on the southern flank of Calton Hill, Edinburgh. Our wariness stemmed from an impending unease about the future; and that was confirmed when Mike Russell, then Education Secretary, informed us that the Chartered Teacher Scheme was to be disbanded. This was despite more than two-thirds of the evidence supporting maintenance or reform of the Scheme - as opposed to less than one-third proposing disbandment. This was no evidence-based decision. Ironically, a few years later, the same Scottish Government is considering the introduction of a new “Lead Teacher” scheme (McCall, 2019).

Thankfully, the new Chartered Teacher programme is not within the purview of government and remains within the hands of the teaching profession. And it is a tough programme as it requires,

...deep subject knowledge, understanding of pedagogy, assessment, and excellent classroom practice, as well as critical evaluation, engagement with research evidence and a desire to contribute to the profession. Assessments include rigorous written and oral assignments, completion of a professional development plan, participation in debate activities, a research-based school improvement project, and submission of a portfolio of videos of practice, work samples and reflections...

(source: <https://chartered.college/chartered-teacher>)

Lee is rightly proud of his new chartered teacher and describes her and similar staff thus: “...I would shine their shoes for them because I think they do a marvellous job. Sophie Longney, at our place, Head of Teaching and Learning, what a practitioner, chartered teacher, just finished her MA. Year 6 leader, lives and breathes it, inspirational.” Lee and his senior leadership colleagues take the view that teacher professional development is to be viewed as a long-term investment and so worthy of funding. Whilst waiting for a professional conversation with Sophie, I chatted with Lee – and he was interrupted, briefly, to sign a cheque for over £3,000 to pay the university fees for a staff colleague – a *talent* – undertaking MA studies. Talent is to be nurtured and supported and this comes at a price – but the price is worth paying.

Standards

Labor Omnia Vincit – “work conquers everything” is the motto of The Forge Trust and this derives from the context of the schools serving areas that have very high levels of unemployment and poverty. The trust’s approach is to educate the child in order to break the cycle of low aspirations leading to low attainment. Their intention is to build character and make the children competitively driven such that they want the children to be winners; but also to know how to be good losers. This was partly affirmed by the Ofsted (2018) inspection of the lead school, The Sir Donald Bailey Academy, with the inspector noting ‘...an emphasis [placed] on the pupils being confident and self-assured’. As CEO of The Forge Trust, Lee and his senior colleagues believe that their values clearly express these goals.

The long term objective is to produce children who can contribute positively to society and not to have low aspirations which prevent this from happening e.g. they have a “dreams” board where all the children have their dreams displayed and these are shared in assemblies. The trust heavily subsidises day and residential trips in order that no child misses out due to financial difficulties. More controversially, the pupil premium grant is directly spent on teaching staff in order to reduce class sizes and allow personalised learning; and the teaching assistant workforce has been much reduced in order to fund teaching staff. The provision of quality first teaching is seen as key to achieving the school’s aims of driving up standards. As a multi-academy trust, the ultimate aim is that children will benefit from an education in schools which are at least ‘Good’ by Ofsted criteria. The senior leadership believes that they are becoming expert in poverty; and they are very confident with regard to the effectiveness of their methods.

Whilst Lee acknowledges that their approach may be viewed as unorthodox, he points out that The Sir Donald Bailey Academy was achieving 50% Level 4+ at the end of Key Stage 2 but is now over 90%. Similarly, Ofsted (2018) records that ‘...the progress pupils made was above average in reading, and in both writing and mathematics it was in the top 10% of all schools nationally.’ The trust’s data suggests that the attainment of these high standards will continue. This evidences their unrelenting drive to ensure quality first teaching and learning (Luby with Farrar, 2016).

Curriculum

This new focus on curriculum excites Lee and he adopts a “hands-on” approach. Following a consultation with staff and school leaders at The Sir Donald Bailey Academy, he produced a report “The Speaking & Listening Functional Skills Curriculum” and this 24 pages’ document identifies 4 strands to be addressed in particular i.e.

- Opportunities for Children to show an Awareness of their Audience;
- Opportunities for Children to Speak and Discuss;
- Opportunities for Children to Listen; and
- Opportunities for Children to Practise Non-Verbal Communication.

Each of these strands is supported by 10-14 exemplars that school staff had discussed beforehand and identifies activities and actions that require to be undertaken. Outlined below in Figures 1-4 (adapted from Luby with Farrar 2016: 21-22) those activities and actions that are *italicized* are more evident.

Figure 1

Opportunities for Children to show an Awareness of their Audience

- *To correct children and have a consistent approach by all staff.*
 - *Class assemblies where children formally present information to the school.*
 - *Answering registers properly - ‘Good morning Miss.../Dinners please Miss...’*
 - *Expectations of the children: how we speak and discipline them.*
 - *House assemblies, where older children plan & deliver an assembly linked to themes of week.*
 - Video blog on school website, making use of green screen technology.
 - Children to meet and greet visitors and conduct school tours to potential parents.
 - Children take on roles in class projects such as ‘project lead’.
 - Build in opportunities to speak to different audiences, making use of the community café.
-

Role play opportunities in class is one of the exemplars for which there was very little evidence but one teacher ‘bucked the trend’ and spoke convincingly of how “high ability” pupils took on different roles within group work e.g. as illustrator, leader, questioner or summariser.

Figure 2

Opportunities for Children to Speak and Discuss

- *Superstar Assemblies where children discuss and talk about their dreams.*
 - *Circle time and ‘show n’ tell’ sessions.*
 - *Hot seating as a teaching strategy in English.*
 - *Class debates using house system, and use of talk partners in lessons.*
 - *Taking messages on behalf of the class teacher to other classes or departments.*
 - *Children bring in newspapers – “what’s been happening in the week?”⁷*
 - *Talking Tables (EYFS).*
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Figure 3

Opportunities for Children to Listen

- *Following instructions for ‘what makes a good listener’. “Eyes looking and ears listening”.*
 - *Listening to audio stories.*
 - *Watching videos in lessons.*
 - *Working in pairs and responding to a partner.*
 - *Taking messages on behalf of staff and following instructions.*
 - *Note taking and actively listening for key information.*
 - *Having a ‘look out’ focus and selecting 3 things to spot.*
 - *Visitors coming into school to speak.*
 - *‘Every Lesson Counts’ - demonstrating excellent behaviour for learning.*
-

A particularly good example is that of *Tinga Tinga Tales* which are African fables from YouTube (approx. 5-10 minutes long). Children’s ability to listen is “tested” by teacher questioning afterwards and by them acting out the stories. There was also notable praise for *Let’s Interact Training* that had been implemented several years ago and repeated by a Speech & Language therapist.

Figure 4

Opportunities for Children to Practise Non-Verbal Communication

- *Using drama and freeze frames in lessons.*
- *Children to create social stories and act them out. Pay particular attention to body language and facial expressions.*
- *Using signs and symbols in the classroom.*

- Training children for a range of contexts e.g., when showing visitors round school children should be taught to use a firm handshake (also when leaving lessons shake teacher's hand and make eye contact).
 - Using Makaton where applicable.
 - Showing appropriate emotions and being taught these. For example, what does it look like to be angry?
 - Modelling scenarios. For example, 'Your dog has died. Is it appropriate to smile?'
-

In some sense these activities and actions may appear unremarkable – with widespread use across the country - but applied consistently it moves the Ofsted inspector to comment that:

You and your team have worked hard to improve the speaking skills of pupils across the school. In each classroom that I visited, I was greeted by two class ambassadors. These pupils shook my hand, told me their names and what they were learning in their lesson. They were consistently courteous and polite, and were obviously proud of their roles. (Ofsted, 2018)

This has been a *collaborative approach* to the curriculum from Lee and his staff; each and all have opportunities to contribute – albeit there is a clear steer from senior leadership. A different, *competitive approach* is adopted, though, when it comes to the quality of teachers.

Controversy and teacher quality

A well-used adage is that “the quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers” which is usually attributed to the McKinsey Report, *How the world's best performing education systems come out on top* (Barber and Mourshed, 2007). The Forge Trust takes this mantra to heart. Lee and his senior leadership team seek out the best teachers that they can find and, from their perspective, it is a small pool. In Lee's estimation only about twenty per cent of teachers are capable of teaching well in The Forge Trust schools and he puts it bluntly:

LEE: *You're probably going to disagree with me here but I do see a lot of teachers, not in my own Trust, but I do when we're...when we've taken over a school that's been underperforming I see a lot of the opposite. It's just a number for them, it's just a job, they're pulling a wage, pinching money; and I'm brave enough to say that because I love the job. I love the teaching profession and the 20% of teachers that I see that I admire and that's*

not a lot is it percentage but I would... shak[e] my head thinking where's it all...how's this happened? How has this been allowed to happen? Because in the world of business they'd have been sacked and that's the side of the teaching profession under the County Council regime, they get away with being weak teachers forever and a day...

The profession...I'm going to be brave and say this because it's what I think, the profession isn't good enough, nowhere near. 20% of us live and breathe it and I'd like to think I'm one of the 20% and I'd like to think I can find that 20% out there to put in front of my kids in the schools, that's my ambition. That's what drives me on but I say to Jamie and the other key leaders around me, I'm not impressed with the profession at all. It's not a profession. It should be a profession. It should be, it's a great job, it's a great profession but it's not. I don't feel it is.

Perhaps Lee does have a jaundiced view of the teaching profession. This is understandable given that he has absorbed into The Forge Trust some schools that were deemed to be struggling. Nonetheless, I was prompted to concede that he does have a point:

AL: Uh huh. I think, ...Also to back up what you say about the teachers, well I'm afraid... the Scottish Chartered Teacher Scheme people get a £7,000 pay rise. I was sitting at a conference talking to a teacher from Central Scotland and she was telling me that there were 13 Chartered Teachers in her school. I was amazed. I thought, "Well, that's fabulous; what a great school that must be." But then she said, "Ah! but only 2 of us stick our head above the parapet and take on extra work, which is what you expect of a Chartered Teacher. The other 11 take the money and do nothing for it."

LEE: *Yeah and there is the problem isn't it?*

AL: Well, that was a real blow to me being a Chartered Teacher myself... I was just so disappointed and eventually the Chartered Teacher Scheme in Scotland was disbanded.

For Lee, and others, the truth of the matter is that some, perhaps many teachers are not "up to the job" when it comes to teaching in challenging schools sited in areas of social deprivation. A clear problem for The Forge Trust is that from their viewpoint they are drawing upon a limited supply of teachers – with approximately only 20% sufficiently "inspirational". This means that they have to develop their own.

AL: How do you grow these good leaders in your own Trust then?

LEE: *Well, you get back to philosophy and having a view on things aren't you? And I'm in a way of doing things; and when you're getting the NQTs in, you know impart that knowledge on them; and they either like or they take it in and they're sponges, or they start and think it's not for me and they leave. But when they stay, generally speaking, they don't... they stay and the Sophie Longney's of this world...she's the best example I can think of; but there are others, Amy Wilson at Parkgate, Emily Bonner at Python Hill: we've grown these leaders, they speak the same language as I do. 100% -*

AL: So you're prepared to live with quite a high attrition rate then in order to find –

LEE: *Oh yeah.*

AL: Diamonds –

LEE: *That's right, and that's what I hang on to Tony, to be honest; and I've got plenty of good leaders in my own Trust...*

In one sense you know the best leaders in our Trust are hard taskmasters, they have to be. But in the other sense, show me other Trusts that pay for Masters Degrees, show me the Trust where your class size average is 17 so your workload is brilliant... They've got class sizes to die for in our Trust...

I've got plenty of staff following me, who agree with the philosophy. Laura Davis, you know Laura Davis very well, handed her notice in this week. I got a lovely letter and it's the best...compliment I've ever had, it's the best reference I could ever have because in the letter she states inspirational leadership. I was really sorry to be going but I'm relocating, thanks for all the opportunities I've had, I've loved every minute of it, blah-blah-blah and I said to Jamie I'm putting that in a frame because I've had her from day 1. So although we may sound very rigid in what I'm saying to you, these things are hard hitting at times. There's an example of somebody who has had a ball but agrees with it as well. So...

Investment for tough love

The senior leaders at The Forge Trust, like all school leaders, only want what is best for their children. For them, though, this means that there is a limited pool of talent available and that they need to develop and invest in school teachers and leaders who *speak the same language*. It is a language of “tough love”. They do not “suffer fools gladly” but this is because of *compassion*. In a prior conversation, Lee was talking about visiting the first school to join their trust. On this first visit he looked at the children in the classrooms and it was a loving look – “these children are just like ours” he thought. And this thought drove him to establish a multi-academy trust.

The Forge Trust invests significantly in their staff. Studying for a Master’s degree and becoming a chartered teacher have significant costs but the senior leaders view this as a worthwhile investment in like-minded staff.

Like-mindedness

It is clear that the leaders of The Forge Trust identify and employ staff who identify with their values – especially the trust motto of *Labor Omnia Vincit* – as Lee elucidates below.

LEE: *And I want our kids to have a work ethic, I want them to not have an entitlement culture because I’ve not got it. You can say what you want about me as a man but I don’t think I’m entitled to anything. I’m a grafter and I put a shift in. I’m not afraid to get my hands dirty and I will go into battle if need be. I would hate...the biggest insult you could ever give me is workshy. He loves the Union him you know? These things just get on under my skin so I’m very opinionated about them today. But I think that’s from the background, from being in Worksop. A lot of...9 out of 10 people in Worksop would tell you the opposite, we love Labour, my grandad was a miner, the other one was a miner and I think the same they got ill-treated. Arthur Scargill backed us up, and all the rest of it; and I don’t see it that way. I turn it on its head. Totally on its head and that is the origins really of making you, right, what are your values? My value is a work ethic not work shyness. My values are justice, yeah I want justice but you know what I mean? That was the starting point for me as a young lad...*

AL: So how do you lead people whose opinions are at variance with yours? Don’t have your background, don’t have your attitude, they want to help the kids, to do the best they can.

LEE: *If you're the leader, it's as Alex Ferguson said, I'm not changing, you've got to change, I'm a leader. I'm not going to change. I'll be fair with you, if you don't like it go and work somewhere else. Fergie didn't do bad did he? ...and he had a similar attitude.*

AL: Some people might say that's quite a brutal attitude to...why don't you take a more nurturing, developmental approach to your staff?

LEE: *You can't...if somebody is so opposed to you, you can't spend time trying to talk them round, you can try in the first instance; but how long are you going to spend on it, wasting your time, you've got kids to teach. You've got things to sort. Don't bother.*

AL: So really the staff have to sign up to your values?

LEE: *100%. Yeah.*

Advantages of this like-mindedness among the staff is that collaboration is much easier to achieve and the staff are united and working with a common purpose. Disadvantages include the limited pool of talent from which to draw upon and the very high levels of investment undertaken. Other disadvantages might be a lack of challenge from within, as everyone is so like-minded; and a lack of awareness as to what is taking place elsewhere. However, like-mindedness does not mean a close-minded approach to education and schooling; and Lee confidently handles both of these topics.

Challenge

AL: So the people in your Trust, then, for the most part are like-minded?

LEE: *Yes, 100%. But they do challenge... they will say "Lee have you considered XYZ? We're going to hit a brick wall here." Jamie being my number 2 is the main one who does that. But the other Principals, I've got a very good participative leadership style, so I'll go into leadership at Principal level and say what do you think to this? We'd be open about it, it's not a dictatorship. I'm leading as a Principal, alongside them as a Principal but I'm also dual role CEO so...*

AL: So, if you introduce a new policy do you put it out for consultation?

LEE: *Yes. Every time.*

AL: What kind of feedback do you get?

LEE: *Mixed. Honest, very honest feedback, the leaders we've got are very honest they'll tell you if...a recent example is...I've got a view on teaching... So, I said I want it [independent writing] weekly because the kids need to do it weekly. Forget teachers here, the kids need weekly. Put it out to my leaders and I got some opposition, "No, bi-weekly. We want it bi-weekly". At the end of the day what we decided was, I went with them. I said, okay, I'll go bi-weekly but don't you dare let the standards slip. I'm watching. If that standard slips its going weekly. And do you know what, it hasn't slipped, the standard is pretty good.*

AL: Bi-weekly, you mean fortnightly?

LEE: *Fortnightly, yeah. But if I wanted my own way and stamped my feet I would have had it weekly. But I had enough leaders around me saying... leaders I respected more importantly, no I think bi-weekly, we can do this bi-weekly and I went with them. Touch wood...so far so good. Not a problem, yeah. That's just a simple example of how we operate. I have got a view and on that occasion I didn't stamp it through because too many of the leaders were telling me, "no, we think bi-weekly".*

Lee's "participative leadership style" is born out of a crucible of deep thinking and frustrating experience. The frustration was leading a county council school out of special measures to a "Good" Ofsted rating only to then '...fall out with the governing body.' This led to a head teacher post at Bowbridge primary school, Newark, which according to Lee '...was the worst performing school in Nottinghamshire in 2011, 2010; the DfE had it on its radar.'

AL: You go to Bowbridge, its obviously in a poor way, how did you turn it around?

LEE: *Teaching; lead by example. I could teach, model teaching, standards, expectations, you know? These job shares were going out the door at 4 minutes past 12. Pull them up; you're not doing that anymore. Everybody else who's not performing, get them on the*

Improvement Plan, show them how to teach, show them you can't just write people off. Show them, give them a chance, a lot of them left. Bring in new blood. Get a culture.

AL: That must have been difficult?

LEE: *Very! I was rocking in the chair the first 2 years at night, no word of a lie, that's the effect the job has on you at times.*

AL: What do you mean rocking in the chair, you were just so tired?

LEE: *Not so much, I've got a chair in the room; my wife said she would often catch me just sitting staring, thinking, obviously I was thinking but it was a tough place. You had to... any cost.*

AL: Did you have any help? Was there anybody you could turn to for advice?

LEE: *Not really, no, I was on my own if I'm honest. Yeah. It's a tough place. It makes you hard, you put yourself through the mill or I did. Now, I don't think that would ever happen in our Trust set up now... but in my Trust where I'm the CEO I'm right beside... You go down, they go down; you die, I die. That's a far better mentality than working for the County Council... I think we've got a far better set up, outlook, camaraderie, teamwork.*

This is the **tough** part of “*tough love*.” For staff who were encouraged to leave and develop their career elsewhere; however, thankfully, “...*they've been fine ever since*.” Tough, also, for Lee; although many may regard it to be self-inflicted as he chose to go down this road. But, for Lee and his colleagues, it is all about the children. And when you visit The Forge Trust schools it is hard not to be impressed. And when Lee reels off statistics concerning the performance of The Forge Trust schools...

AL: But the first school you took on, was that Parkgate, it changed its name to Parkgate?

LEE: *Yeah fantastic! That's the biggest...that's probably the thing I'm...as well as being proud of Donald Bailey and everything we achieve there, in terms of the map, that's my proudest achievement. I mean that was underperforming for 20 years and it had a deficit*

budget, massive deficit budget. They've got two hundred grand in reserves, they've got class sizes of 17 throughout the board, they've got 2 or 3 doing MAs...

Superb! A brilliant young head teacher in Mark Nunn, that I'm proud to have helped develop; he's got his own mind but I've mentored him... although he's got his own mind, agrees on the main things to do with the Trust, how we run schools, agrees on the philosophy of managing the staff, agrees on the teaching philosophy.

When we took it over they had 190 pupils on role, today they've got 330 and growing. The place is really rocking. The results at Parkgate were well below the national average, progress measures were poor, today they're above the national average, massive upward trend every year and outcomes are better, so outcomes are an evidence base and I would guess the other one is the...you go and look round the place, it was a poor building, let's say, to put it politely. We've invested some of the money we've been able to save; we've invested it back in the buildings.

Donald Bailey again failing, bottom results wise in 2011, now... we're the best performing school in Newark year on year, 3 and 4 year averages and we haven't been the best in attainment yet, we've been up there but this year projections are a bit like a crystal ball but our projections are based on evidence. This year we'll hit 80% combined attainment when the national average is 67, so... We've no reason it shouldn't because we've already done mocks if you like with last papers and it was 80 odd. So there's no reason it won't come in. So results are obviously up...

The participative leadership style of The Forge Trust does address a perceived disadvantage of like-mindedness lacking *challenge* as the school principals do embrace challenge. Indeed, the success of this trust is evident to see and, on a regular basis, it receives offers, recommendations and requests to join – and these are regularly turned down; although, shortly, a seventh school will become a member. A second topic of disadvantage that has been identified is that of like-mindedness entailing a close-minded approach – but Lee's response is “research.”

Research

AL: So how do you develop your staff then in terms of professional development, what would you look for, what would you provide for them?

LEE: *Research.*

AL: Who does the research?

LEE: *Leaders mainly and teachers; and develop the young teachers and get 2 or 3 in each school, MAs for example, that's one way which you know I do. But there are other routes as well, other courses we sign up for... You don't want your...you don't want too many steady teachers.*

AL: What do you mean by steady teacher?

LEE: *Not interested in research because a lot of them aren't. We don't want them. They're not going to push boundaries especially in the hardest schools which you know we have... We need the best teachers. So if you've got a school full of Steady Eddie's that's not going to...you're not going to get the results. You're not going to get the impact for the kids. Somebody bringing in... policies getting changed, made better and better and better, you go stale.*

Lee's enthusiasm for research derives partly from his own successful MA Education Studies with Bishop Grosseteste University, Lincoln. He encourages and develops this through staff sponsorship for MA studies and the aforementioned *CTeach* course with the Chartered College of Teaching. He wants his staff to embrace research and scholarship and Lee leads by example. And his desire is for research and scholarship to inform teaching – and, as a trust leader, he retains an active interest in teaching.

LEE: *...I can still teach thankfully, touch wood, otherwise the day I lose that ability to have a view on teaching them I'm totally reliant on other people as a top leader. You don't want to be that; you want to have a view so you know what's going off. And one of the recent things was writing, independent writing, and I have a view from being a teacher that if you give kids a content to write, be simplistic about it. Give them an interesting context, they'll write, you've obviously got to teach them in English lessons by modelling their writing. Shared writing is the biggest impact for me anyway, shared writing. And the marking and feedback, if its diagnostic and builds on previous learning, it's still important despite what they're saying about workload. You can't get rid of that for me, if you want top writers, but the issue was 'do we write once a week or twice a week?' Because from a workload point of view*

diagnostic marking takes time and what if you've got 20 of these books to mark? Well, I as a teacher didn't even blink; I did it with 17-20 kids and more...

Ultimately, it is about pedagogy and what transpires in the classroom and the structures that are in place to support good pedagogic practices and as Stoll (2015: 21) puts it:

Pedagogy is at the core and leadership and professional development are there to ensure that pedagogy is great. But great pedagogy also challenges and inspires leadership and professional development to new heights (Stoll 2015: 21).

Stoll uses the term *self-improving school system* and claims that pedagogy, leadership and professional development lie at the heart of a successful system. There are many examples of good pedagogic practices across The Forge Trust and this is supported by a senior leadership that is willing to invest heavily. They do so with regard to pedagogy as evidenced by the small class sizes and for the staff with respect to MA courses, *CTeach* and the like. It can be described as a *competitive-collaborative model*. The trust bears a *competitive* hallmark with respect to recruiting and retaining high quality staff; and it is *collaborative* through its like-mindedness and levels of investment.

The notion that The Forge Trust perceives itself to be a *self-improving school system* can be summed up by Lee's response to my question inviting comparison between a multi-academy trust and local authority schools.

LEE: *When push comes to shove you're on your own. They'll all help you; they'll (local authority) give you this and that but at the end of the day if results fail whose head is on the block? Now in a Trust set up what we actually say in our Trust is listen there shouldn't be one head around the table who's sitting with their head in their hands one year; because if that happened we've all got to look at ourselves. All of us; because we share everything. So this school shouldn't be that much different to that one in theory because we share everything. We share staff across the Trust. We've got network meetings in core subjects and other subjects as well now. So from a CEO point of view if a head has got their head in their hands, so have I. Take a look in the mirror, does that happen at the local authority level?*

So, let us follow Lee's advice and look at two local authorities that are trying to close the attainment gap through educational practices. This takes us back to the land of my heart: Scotland - and to the areas in which I grew up: the city of Glasgow and the shire of Renfrew.

Afterword

When undertaking the original research with the Ad Astra Primary Partnership it soon became self-evident that these schools were ‘...pursu[ing] issues and change initiatives that are relevant to their own setting and context’ (Hammersley-Fletcher et al 2015: 5) i.e. poverty and underachievement. I soon surmised that the role of the researcher was to use a process that enabled the Ad Astra schools to quickly become better informed about their current progress; and I deemed this research process to be that of *professional conversations*. These conversations derive from the work of Stenhouse (1975: 157) who was concerned ‘...with the development of a self-critical subjective perspective [and] not with an aspiration towards an unattainable objectivity.’ To illustrate:

The Sir Donald Bailey Academy was addressing the area of “Poverty of Language” and had identified 4 strands for developing “Speaking and Listening” – one of which is “Awareness of Audience.” During a professional conversation one of the teachers spoke of how she helped to prepare pupils for presenting at school assemblies through paired discussions in the classroom. It seemed to the lead researcher that the pupils’ awareness of audience could be developed by the teacher adopting the “snowballing” technique advocated by Noel Entwistle for higher education; but now widely prevalent in the literature of education (e.g. Atkins et al 2002; Jones 2007; Wahyuni 2013). The classroom teacher was open and receptive (self-critical) in her thinking (subjective perspective) and commented that she had enjoyed the conversation and would use this technique with her pupils.

(Luby with Farrar 2016: 18)

As it is a two-way conversation then there is a *process* of sharing. If the researcher has information or an experience that will be of help to the teacher, then it should be shared. It is *research for transformation* and not research as knowledge. With the latter, ‘the disinterested, objective researcher is in pursuit of knowledge – and this is exemplified through the writing of journal papers and academic books’ (Luby 2016a: 3). But in the immediacy of this conversation with a classroom teacher who is preparing her children for presenting at school assemblies; then the prime concern of this researcher is transformation. Why?

From an educational perspective, the relationship between research and teaching is not merely acquisition of knowledge – rather, as expressed by Pring (2000:14), ‘... education refers to that learning which in some way *transforms* (emphasis added) how people see and

value things, how they understand and make sense of experience, how they can identify and solve key problems...’ Imparting and sharing information about the “snowballing” technique was to help her recognise that I value her strategy of paired discussions; that a similar experience can assist her with this problem.

At the very least, it is an attempt to empathise with the classroom teacher. From a *modern* perspective, Dadds (2005: 31) admonishes researchers that ‘...we must remember that we are... stepping into others’ lives – and our actions must make sense to them... we need to move... into an empathetic perspective’. And so, there is a need to empathise with the classroom teacher and share her concerns. Further, from a *classic* perspective and drawing upon Aristotle, Bernstein (1983: 147) states that:

The person with understanding does not know and judge as one who stands apart and unaffected; but rather, as one united by a specific bond with the other, thinks with the other and undergoes the situation with the other.

Therefore, empathy is a necessary attribute if one is to gain genuine understanding and it is helpful to achieve this “specific bond” or “fellowship” (Luby, 2016a) if one is or has been a practising classroom teacher. This view of research as transformation is also found outside of the discipline of education as evidenced by Brew (2001: 25) who identified four modes of researchers’ thinking with regard to research; and the last of which is “research is interpreted as a personal journey of discovery, possibly leading to transformation.”

Dialogue capturing the process of transformation

This transformative process involves much tacit, implicit and experiential knowledge and, as Sharples (2013), points out, ‘It is important to remember that there is a huge amount of experiential knowledge that is not captured by research...’ Indeed, I only have to think of three friends with lengthy careers in teaching – between them they have more than 100 years of experiential knowledge and, until now, none of it has been captured by research (Luby, 2016a). However, they can certainly talk about their processes of transformation from beginning teachers to experienced, successful teachers and senior leaders. And dialogue provides a key to unlocking and capturing this process of transformation. Drawing upon the works of such as Lieberman & Miller (2001) and Richardson (1997); Tillema and Orland-Barak (2006: 594) discuss a reflective view on the nature of professional knowledge which

‘... regards professionals’ construction of shared knowledge as an exchange of individual personal, implicit knowledge that becomes explicit (less tacit) through social exchange and dialogue thus distributed as professional knowledge.’ The above illustration from The Sir Donald Bailey Academy is such an example.

The conversations were intended to be relaxed, casual and a two-way process but with the large majority of the talking coming from the conversation partner. A brief look at the transcripts indicates that the latter intention was achieved and weaknesses with respect to the first intention are the fault of the writer alone. There were no pre-prepared questions for the conversations but if partners asked beforehand about topics, then they were informed that pedagogy, professional development and leadership (Stoll, 2015) were of interest.

During the conversations, opportunities were sought for cumulative talk and exploratory talk. In order to empathise with a conversation partner it is useful to engage with cumulative talk which entails ‘...build[ing] positively but uncritically on what the other has said’ (Mercer 1995: 104). In the above conversation with Lee Hessey, for instance, he makes a controversial statement that for some teachers, ‘it’s just a number for them, it’s just a job, they’re pulling a wage, pinching money...’. I countered with the comment about the 11 Chartered Teachers in the Scottish school who were doing likewise. This was to reassure Lee and let him know that I understood his point and empathised with his disappointment regarding some teacher colleagues.

Also sought were opportunities for exploratory talk that involves ‘...engag[ing] critically but constructively with each other’s ideas’ (Mercer 1995: 104). Shortly after the above extract from the conversation with Lee, I criticise Lee’s stance by claiming ‘But that can’t be typical... you’re seeing a school that’s struggling; other people turn around and say, “well, what about all the good schools out there that you don’t see?” My criticism is that Lee’s view of the teaching profession may be somewhat jaundiced since as CEO of The Forge Trust he is more aware of struggling schools than he is of good or outstanding schools. Lee takes this in his stride and comments:

...teachers who’ve left Donald Bailey to go elsewhere for example, where it hasn’t worked out for them, they’ve been absolutely fine elsewhere; but I wouldn’t have wanted them for too long because they didn’t have the ingredients that I wanted for our children at Donald Bailey. So, generally speaking, I think the acceptable level

that's out there isn't high enough but its good enough for the profession at the minute because we've got a teacher shortage.

This Afterword draws attention to the desire of Lawrence Stenhouse for the development of a practitioner's self-critical subjective perspective. Such development can take place in isolation – through scholarship for example – but I affirm the contention of Reason & Rowan (1981: 242) that this self-critical subjective perspective can be enhanced and strengthened to become '...inter-subjectively valid knowledge which is beyond the limitations of one knower'.⁵ A professional conversation is one means of achieving this.

⁵ As quoted in Dadds (2005:32)

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