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ABSTRACT

The central need in education is to recognize that many of the gains in pupil achievement, as measured in test scores, may not be sustainable if educators continue to be fixated on short-term outcomes and plans. This paper addresses the key concerns of how educators sustain and develop schools through the deployment of effective planning strategies. It establishes a model for researching the characteristics of the strategically focused school and presents a conceptual framework to examine how school leaders can move away from a planning framework that emphasize only short-term target-setting and to an effective strategic approach. It examines early evidence from research on what dimensions are critical in establishing a strategically focused school within a medium-term time frame. It concludes by outlining possible characteristic of strategically focused schools. The paper is the first part of a research project in the United Kingdom focusing on strategy and strategic leadership in schools. While indicators from the research will be used to illuminate the framework of the conceptual model, the full results will be the subject of later papers. (Contains 34 references.) (Author)

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Brent Davies

April 2003

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Rethinking Strategy and Strategic Leadership in Schools:

Developing the Strategically Focused School

**Paper Presented to the American Educational
Research Association Annual Conference
Chicago 21st-25th April 2003
(Session: 66.013)**

Abstract:

This paper builds a conceptual framework to examine how school leaders can move away from a planning framework that emphasises only short-term target setting and move to an effective strategic approach. It examines early evidence from research on what dimensions are critical in establishing a strategically focused school within a medium-term time-frame. It concludes by outlining possible characteristics of strategically focussed schools.



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Developing the Strategically Focused School

This paper builds a conceptual framework to establish a model for researching the characteristics of the strategically focused school. This is the first part of a National College for School Leadership¹ (NCSL) research project focusing on strategy and strategic leadership in schools. While indicators from the research will be used to illuminate the framework of the conceptual model, the full results will be the subject of later papers.

What is Strategy?

Strategy as a concept can be, and often is, misunderstood in the way it is commonly used. Strategy is seen as a 'good' concept, being so often erroneously attached to many leadership and management activities. For example, as part of the research project, the Ofsted² database was searched for the latest 100 reports on primary schools for mentions of strategy and planning. This is one typical statement in an Ofsted report:

'From this informed base, good strategic planning is undertaken. The school improvement plan is comprehensive and has a clear focus on raising standards for Years 1 and 2 and sustaining standards for Year 6. Currently, the plan does not run for more than a year.' (Ofsted 2002)

The problem with the Ofsted quotation is that it is about the short-term agenda of target-setting and the statement 'Currently, the plan does not run for more than a year.' betrays the lack of understanding of the longer-term direction-setting nature of strategy. How does this idea check against concepts of strategy? One concept is that strategy is about the broad major dimensions of the organisation and another would be that it deals with the medium to longer term. It is possible to consider that strategic activity deals with broad aggregated data, and operational activity with the disaggregated detail of the shorter-term. Davies and Ellison (2003) use 1-2 years for the shorter-term action planning, 3-5 years for the strategic medium-term and 5-10 years for the futures-thinking longer term. Clearly, the interpretation used in this Ofsted report is at variance with these concepts as it focuses on shorter-term standards-raising agendas. What else apart from scope, in terms of broad aggregated data and time scale, are the concepts we associate with strategy? Traditionally, strategy has always been associated with the idea of direction setting for the organisation. It is necessary to understand the history of the organisation and its current situation to be able to attempt to set the direction of the organisation. This is articulated by Mintzberg (1995) in defining strategic thinking as 'seeing ahead', 'seeing behind', 'seeing above',

'seeing below', 'seeing beside', 'seeing beyond', and significantly 'seeing it through'.

Strategy instead of being associated with a linear plan might usefully be thought of instead as a perspective, as a way of looking at things. Such a view would bring together the idea of broader direction setting over the medium-term to create a strategic orientation. In other words, strategy provides the template against which to set shorter-term planning and activities. Having established some of the elements in a conceptualisation of strategy, the paper will now establish a three-part model for developing a strategically focused school.

A Model for Creating a Strategically Focused School

One of the challenges facing schools in the UK is that they are confronted by a central government agenda that focuses on short-term targets and achievements. While in themselves these shorter-term improvement agendas may be beneficial, they may totally dominate a school's activities. The danger is that schools will orient their teaching and organisational processes to achieve these targets but will neglect the activities and processes they need to build sustainability; to make them successful in the longer term.

As a result of researching schools that are strategically oriented and sustainable in the longer-term, three dimensions have become apparent. First, there are strategic processes evident within the school; second these processes work through strategic approaches; third, these processes and approaches help to establish characteristics of a strategically focused school. This paper will examine these three dimensions in detail but a brief description will initially be given.

Initially, the strategic processes evident in strategically focused schools manifest themselves in four domains: conceptualisation processes; people and development processes; implementation processes; strategic articulation processes. These four factors work together and while they will be described separately, they should be considered as part of an integrated process.

Next, these strategic processes work through different strategic approaches to build a strategically focused school. The four strategic approaches that will be discussed are the rational or traditional approach of strategic planning; the flexible and reflective approach of emergent strategy; the devolved or decentralised approach of strategic intrapreneurship; and the building of strategic intent.

Finally, there is the establishment of a strategic focus for the school, and this in part involves the development of the strategic architecture of the school, which enables the school to focus on the longer-term key elements of the school's development. This is one of the characteristics of a strategically focused school that will be discussed later in this paper.

The model in this paper focuses on the importance not only of creating strategy but also of addressing the two crucial factors that, if neglected, can lead to the failure of strategy. These factors are the ability to translate strategy into action and second to align the organisation and the individuals within it to achieving that strategy. While the paper argues that strategic processes work through different strategic approaches to build a strategically focused school, it would be simplistic to think of this as a straightforward linear process. Rather, it is an iterative process with a feed-back loop operating continuously. Strategic leadership is at the centre of this activity in developing the successful school in the long term, as can be seen in the following figure:

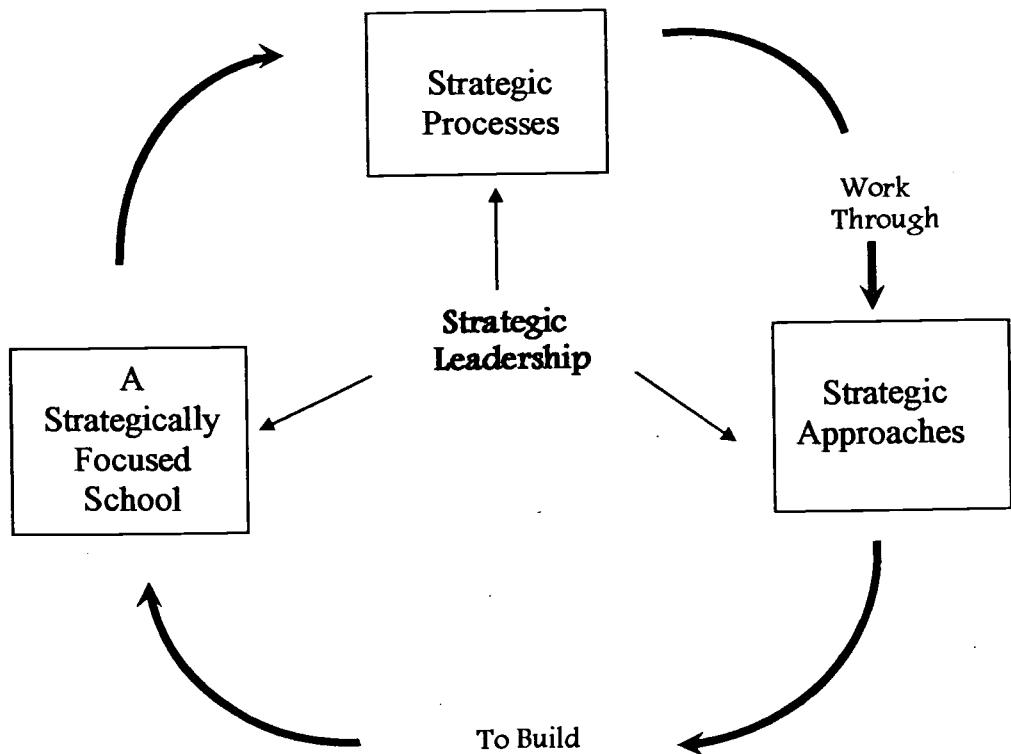


Figure 1: A model for developing a strategically focused school

Strategic Leadership

In figure 1, strategic leadership is the central activity that facilitates and drives the strategic cycle. The nature of strategic leadership will be briefly looked at before the paper moves on to discuss strategic processes and approaches. In any consideration of strategic leadership, it is important to consider whether we are talking about an individual strategic leader or a wider group of people who contribute strategic leadership insights and perceptions to organisational decision-making. This paper considers strategic leadership to involve a number of individuals, throughout the school, who have strategic leadership abilities and who contribute to the process.

Strategic leaders have a coherent and perceptive map of the existing state or position of the organisation and are able to envisage how that map needs to change and develop into the future. They use this knowledge to build a vision of where the organisation needs to be. However, to turn that vision into reality, they need to be able to communicate the map and vision to others so as to engage them in the process of shaping the future direction of the organisation. They achieve this collaboration by working to build engagement, capability and alignment. Engagement is about the process of motivating all staff in the school to believe in the purpose and need for change and development so that it is meaningful to them. Capability is about building the skills and understanding to both comprehend the necessary developments and have the ability to put new approaches and systems into practice. Alignment is the difficult challenge of bringing together both individuals and organisational perspectives to work in a focused directional way to achieve agreed objectives.

An interesting consideration is whether the ability to utilise strategic leadership abilities in an organisation is dependent on the stage of leadership development in the individual or on the stage of the life cycle of the organisation. Do leaders develop administrative and managerial skills first and when they are comfortable with their skill level take on the challenge of deploying more directional changing strategic skills? Similarly, do leaders have to ensure the organisation is working effectively and maximising its outputs in the current paradigm before they can think of operating in a different way? Such a mode of operating might be thought of as sequential strategic development. Does strategic activity only follow operational activity or, as Davies (2003) suggests, can it be part of a 'twin-track' parallel approach that uses the double s-curve as a means of concurrently managing the known and developing the new? This is illustrated in the figure 2:

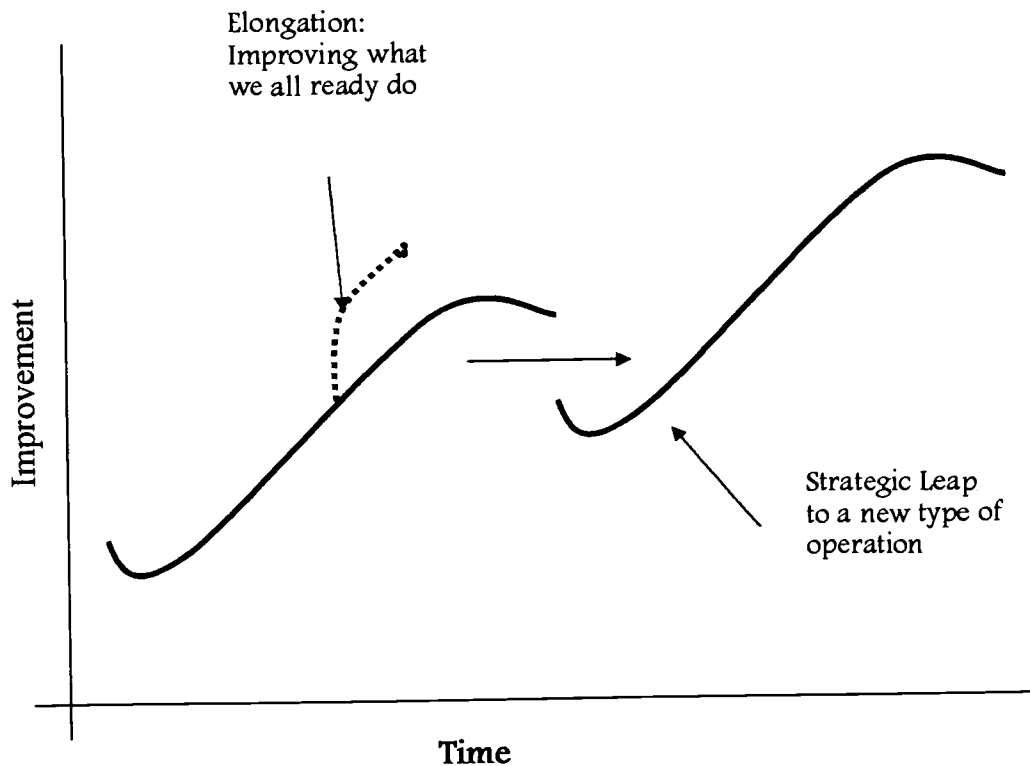


Figure 2: Sequential and parallel development approaches (Davies 2003)

This figure suggests that strategic leaders operate a twin-track approach. Concurrently they attempt to extend the effectiveness of the current way of working by extending the existing s-curve through improvements in practice while at the same time building the capability and capacity to move to a significantly new way of working by making a strategic leap. These two activities combine the management task of ‘doing things better’ and the leadership task of ‘doing things differently’. (See Davies 2003, Davies B & Davies BJ 2003, Barker, 2003, and Wise 2003). When to start ‘doing things differently’ leads to the critical factor of strategic timing. The research would suggest that outstanding strategic leaders operate a concurrent approach.

Another characteristic of strategic leaders is that they are strategically opportunistic. It is important to distinguish between opportunistic leaders who may or may not take the opportunities that arise, such as bidding for a particular government initiative, and those who are strategically opportunistic. Being strategically opportunistic involves developing the major directional thrusts for the school and configuring them to be in a position to take

on specific opportunities that fit that configuration as they arise. It also involves the concept of abandonment, giving up some activities to accommodate the new ones. A key characteristic of strategic leaders could be the intuition and judgement which enable them to choose the optimum time to make changes. Such an ability is what can be described as strategic timing. A final characteristic may well be that leaders are optimists as well as opportunists in that they are positive about the future.

Strategic Processes

The initial concept formulation, emanating from the NCSL research project, was to provide a framework for identifying categories of strategic processes in a set of semi-structured interviews with school leaders. Using a deductive coding approach (Miles & Huberman 2001), four broad categories were used:

- i) conceptualisation processes;
- ii) people interaction and development processes;
- iii) articulation processes;
- iv) implementation processes.

Each of these four categories provided a start list that was added to as the research developed. Each of these categories will now be examined.

1. Conceptualisation processes

In researching the development of strategy in schools, a key factor that has emerged is that individuals within the school have to engage in a fundamental rethinking of the way the school operates and the way it needs to operate in the future. The next significant step is how to meet the gap of moving from the present state to the desired future state. The research suggests that the leaders in strategically focused schools engage in a three-staged personal and organisation conceptualisation. This process starts with reflection, and being reflective enables the leader(s) to develop strategic thinking within themselves and the school, and in doing so, to build new mental models of how to operate. The reflection processes are built on the leader's ability to make sense of the internal and external environment. Headteachers in the research made the point of making time to 'see' in these

different ways to understand what to do. This process obviously creates the ability to think differently and strategically as Garratt (1995, p. 2) describes:

'Strategic Thinking' is the process by which an organisation's direction-givers can rise above the daily managerial processes and crises to gain different perspectives of the internal and external dynamics causing change in their environment and thereby giving more effective direction to their organisation. Such perspectives should be both future-oriented and historically understood.

The advantage of creating a new mental model is that mental models make sense of complex reality and provide a framework to explain key concepts to others in the organisation. An example of this conceptualisation process would be building a new understanding within the whole community of what learning is and how to develop optimal approaches and conditions that will maximise children's learning.

2. People interaction and development processes:

In building strategic capability, the most significant resource, that of human capital, is of fundamental importance (Grundy 1998, Gratton 2000). The research interviewees articulated a process that was based on strategic conversations which built participation and motivation within their school to improve strategic capability.

These four stages of development can be conveniently displayed sequentially in figure 3 but it is more probable that they work in an iterative way.

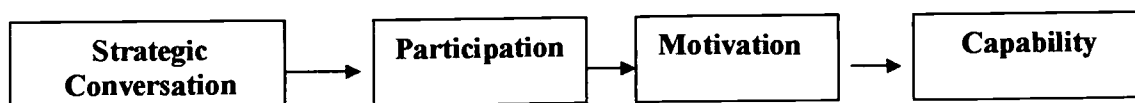


Figure 3: People interaction and development processes.

These four stages can be more fully described as:

a) Strategic conversations. As described by Hirschhorn, (1997 pp.123-4), van der Heijden (1996, pp.41-2), and Davies (2002 p.21) developing strategic conversations and dialogue involves discussions about holistic whole-school issues and the trends that face the school over the next few years as well as the shorter-term operational issues. These strategic conversations enable people to develop a strategic perspective of what the school might become. Without such conversations, however tentative they might at first be, the future will, literally, not be articulated. Such conversations are difficult because short-term accountability demands mean that there is a danger that meetings and discussions focus just on immediate issues. Leaders have to split business and future developments into separate meetings and ensure that attention is focussed on the larger- and longer-term agendas as well as the immediate ones. Also, the importance of the day-to-day interactions cannot be neglected as they can contribute to stimulating discussions and ideas. It is this process that develops scenarios and strategic thinking to lead the school forward.

b) Strategic Participation. By definition, the conversations lead to greater knowledge and participation in discussions. It can be a difficult and slow process from the previous state of being concerned only with the short term to the new state of being involved in the broader and longer-term strategic issues. It can be a process of reculturing (Fullen 1993, Hargreaves 1994, Stoll, Fink & Earl, 2002) the organisation. The process of greater awareness and participation in discussion is a key way which develops the ability of the organisation to build leadership in depth. The key ability here is to build involvement in the longer-term development of the school. Strategic organisations use the abilities and talents of wider staff groupings to involve all in building and committing to the strategic direction of the school. One of the research schools uses staff groups that cut across roles in the school (teachers, learning support staff, administrative and premises staff) to take on a major future-orientated change issue. The aim is to build capacity and participation in reaching strategies and solutions for the school's development.

c) Strategic motivation. Developing a strategic cause in which individuals are motivated to contribute leads to an improved commitment and effort. Gratton (2000, pp.19-20) advocates developing 'emotional capabilities', 'trust-building capabilities' and capabilities to build a 'psychological contract' as means of engaging and motivating staff. Building a commitment to values and long-term ambitions provides individuals with a vision and sense of direction that allows them to put short-term problems and challenges into context.

This can be the key to seeing long-term activities sustained. Covey's (1989) 'keeping the end in mind' is as important in the long term as it is in the short because it is a vital strategic activity in driving through the immediate situation in order to achieve long-term goals.

d) Building capability. The strategic conversation and enhanced participation build greater personal and organisational capability and capacity. Given that the major resource of any organisation is the quality of its human capital then enhancing that quality is a major organisational focus. It is useful to differentiate between capability and capacity. Capacity can be considered the resource level that is available at any given moment to achieve an objective. Capability is that mix of skills and competencies possessed by the people in the organisation which is needed to achieve the task. The right number of people may not, at a particular juncture, have the right skills. However, when they do, then it can be said that both capacity and capability are present. Boisot (1998, p.5) states that 'we shall use the term capability to depict a strategic skill in the application and integration of competencies'. A useful discussion of capability is provided by Stalk, Evans & Schulman (1992). These definitions come out of the business literature, while much of the educational literature uses the word 'capacity' as an overall term to mean capability and capacity (see: Stoll & Myers 1998, Harris 2002). The challenge for strategic organisations is not merely getting more people but getting the right people or developing the existing staff to develop new skills and competencies. Establishing in a greater number of staff the broader skills set necessary to build sustainability and renewal and not just the ability to cope with current operational needs is a major task of strategically successful schools.

3. Articulation Processes

Articulation of strategy can take place in three main ways:

i) Oral. How do those in leadership positions articulate the key messages to staff about values, vision and the direction of the school? One of our case study heads reported, 'Once a half-term I do a brief focused presentation to all staff (teaching & support) about the direction and challenges facing the school to build a strategic view and language to extend their operational knowledge.' He went on to say, '... This provides the cornerstone for all the informal strategic conversations to take place between colleagues and myself and between colleagues themselves'. How meetings of staff are conducted is significant in

building a strategic perspective. Do they start with a celebration of learning or a discussion of future policy or are those items tacked onto the end of the administrative items?

'Walking the talk' is vitally important with strategy if the culture is to change.

ii) Written. The written documentation needs to be of two-types. First, there needs to be a separate dimension or section to the planning documentation in the school that addresses not only the school improvement/school development issues but the broader strategic development issues and challenges over the medium to long term. Davies and Ellison (2003) specify that there should be a strategic intent statement as well as a strategic plan in a section of the overall school plan which is separate from the operation or action-planning element. Second, individuals in the school should be conversant with the strategic as well as the operational plan and it should not just be a document on the shelf in the headteachers' office. If an external visitor talks to a member of staff about how his or her work is guided by the plan, and there is not a coherent answer, then the plan may be useful as an external audit document but not as a piece of writing that affects practice in the school. Written documentation should be a guide for action not just a formal record if it is to affect the strategic direction of the school.

iii) Structural. How do the organisational structures in the school reflect its strategic objectives as well as current managerial needs? Wise (2003) reports:

The separation of the 'Operational Management Team' from the 'Strategic Policy Team' has proved to be a great success. Too often Senior Management Teams become bogged down in operational matters with little or no time to discuss important strategic issues. The separation of strategic and operational functions has resulted in a separation of the urgent from the important. No longer does the urgent drive out the important; both are now catered for. In addition, the various groups provide a unique 'time horizon' management structure with: i) Operational Management Team' focusing on the next 0-12 months, ii) School Development Plan Team' focusing on the next 6-24 months and iii) Research and Development Plan Team' focusing on the next 2-5 years. (Wise 2003, p.117)

Similar structural arrangements that articulate the strategic focus of the school are reported by headteachers in our research project:

'..... we have six cross-school change teams. They consist of teaching and non-teaching staff and there are about 20 members in each team. They are each tasked with one significant area of strategic development each year. It is part of the organisational structure and aims to get all staff to be involved in creative thinking directed at the medium-term future of the school.'

Another headteacher reported, 'We have restructured the governing body committee framework to have a strategic committee looking at where KS1 & 2 should be in five years' time'. These examples of strategic structures highlight the significant factor that articulation must be an integrated approach. The documentation must not be seen in isolation from how leaders talk and discuss strategic issues or from the organisational structures they set up to facilitate the development of a strategically focused school.

4. Implementation processes

The challenge of implementing strategy involves four key tasks: translating strategy into action; aligning the individual and the organisation to the new strategy; deciding between sequential and parallel implementation approaches; finally the issue of strategic timing.

a) Translating strategy into action. Although this sounds an obvious activity, it is sometimes one of the most difficult to do. Whereas discussing and writing plans cause some organisational tensions, the implementation can produce significant tensions and resistance to change. The deployment of the conceptual processes in point 1 above may assist the process. However, successful strategic organisations pay similar amounts of attention to how strategies are to be implemented as well as to what those strategies are. Three key points (adapted from Gratton 2000, pp120-130) are critical here:

- i) keep the process simple;
- ii) measure success through the richness of the strategic conversations;
- iii) focus on the few themes that will make a real difference.

b) Alignment. One of the key challenges in this implementation process is aligning both individual and organisational values, culture and ways of working to the new strategy. This alignment requires both initial and ongoing attention from the strategic leaders in the organisation to 'cement' the new way of working into the organisation practice and culture. Pietersen (2002, p.54) forcefully argues:

'You'll need the ability to align every element of your entire organisation - measurement and reward systems, organizational structures and processes, your corporate culture, and the skills and motivation of your people - behind your strategic focus. This is a monumental leadership challenge; without success here, no strategy can succeed.'

Thus realigning both the corporate and individual 'mind set' to the new direction of the organisation and be committed to it needs extensive staff development and training.

c) Sequential & Parallel implementation approaches. One way of considering organisational development is that schools, for example, move from one phase of their development to another in a sequential way. A common (Marsh 2000) argument is that once the improvements in the current operation have been achieved, the leadership in the school has the both the courage and the experience to take more fundamental strategic moves. Another and alternative approach is to consider a twin-track approach. This was illustrated earlier in figure 2.

d) Strategic timing. The leadership challenge of when to make a significant strategic change is as critical to success as choosing the right strategic change to make. The issue of timing can rest on leadership intuition as much as on rational analysis. When individuals in the organisation are ready for change, when the organisation needs the change and when the external constraints and conditions force the change all have to be balanced one against the other. As figure 2 shows, the leader's skill, his or her critical strategic judgement, lies in knowing when to make the leap to a new way of operating. Such judgement is manifested in not only knowing what and knowing how but also knowing when (Boal & Hooijberg 2001) and, equally importantly, knowing what not to do (Kaplan & Norton 2001).

Strategic Approaches

There are numerous categorisations of strategy (see: Volberda & Elfring). The one that has been used in this research project is a conceptual framework by Boisot, (1995) who identifies four types of strategic approach. These are:

Strategic Planning. The traditional 'planning school' approach (see Mintzberg, Ahlstrand & Lampel, 1998) assumes that the future can be predicted and that linear, rational, pro-active plans can be drawn up. This is a situation in which although there is significant change, it is not overwhelming and there is a clear understanding of what to do. In a school setting, it assumes you know where you want to go, how to manage the journey and what the desired outcomes are. This certainty would apply to part of a typical school's activities. For example, at any given time, one can know student numbers, and plot the students as they

grow older and move through the school; or one can estimate teachers' salary costs as they move up the incremental scale. While strategy is, in the terms of this paper, associated with the medium term (3-5 years), the basic principles of strategic planning have been used for shorter-term school development planning (SDP) or school improvement planning (SIP). However, while SDP and SIP use the predictable nature of targets and managing the journey to achieve them, they deal with detail and not the broad aggregated data of a true strategic approach and they also operate in a much shorter time-frame.

Emergent Strategy. As the name suggests, this strategic approach is one that emerges through practice. Organisations faced with significant but not overwhelming change and with little initial understanding of how to react, work through a policy of trial and error. As successes become apparent they are replicated, whereas failures are not. Over a period of time a portfolio of successful approaches is built up that becomes a coherent pattern for future behaviour and hence a strategic approach emerges. In a school setting, this strategy resonates with many initiatives that are forced on schools by central government. With little time fully to implement the changes, many schools work through an emergent strategy of learning by doing. Whittington (2001, p. 4) summarises this as ‘.. seeing strategy best as an emergent process of learning and adaptation’.

Decentralised or Distributed Strategy. This is what Boisot (1995) calls intrapreneurship, a situation where the central leadership and management of an organisation set down a very limited number of planning frameworks and leave the detail planning to the sub-units within the organisation. Typically such planning would occur in an environment of rapid or turbulent change. In this environment the central leadership of the organisation cannot understand in detail the rapidly changing context in which it operates. To lead and manage in such a framework requires the ability to lay down the key values and operating targets and then decentralise the organisation and implementation to the sub-units. In schools, this delegation would represent a situation in which school leaders leave a great deal of the planning to the curricular or Key Stage³ sub-groups.

Strategic Intent. This form of strategy is very useful in a period of considerable change or turbulence. The planning framework is one in which, although the senior leadership is able to articulate what major strategic shifts or changes it wishes to make, it is unsure of how to operationalise these ideas. In brief it knows where it wants to go but not how to get there. Determining the intent may be dependent on leadership intuition (see: Parikh 1994,

Klein 2003) as well as leadership analysis. The key to deploying this form of strategic approach is to set targets in the form of strategic intents that stretch the organisation to perform in significantly different or increased levels. It then engages in a series of capability- and capacity-building measures to 'leverage up' the organisation to produce at the higher level. The intent is the glue that binds the organisation together as it focuses on how to achieve this new strategic outcome. Work by Hamel & Prahalad (1994) and Davies (2003) illustrates the significance of this approach.

The mistake from reviewing these four types of strategic approach is to think schools use one strategic approach to the exclusion of all others. In practice a school may use a portfolio of strategic approaches in differing circumstances. Strategic planning may be the preferred approach when there is full knowledge and a time frame that facilitates it. However, given a need to implement a significant change at short notice with little prior knowledge of the area, then the strategic approach needs to be built up drawing on the experience of implementing the change; thus an emergent strategy would be evident. When the school is attempting to build a major cultural and organisational change by developing the capacity to achieve a significant shift in performance it would build a series of strategic intents. All these approaches could be used concurrently in response to the challenges and possibilities which face schools, so deploying a portfolio of strategic approaches would be the appropriate response.

Characteristics of a Strategically Focused School

The initial research discussions and findings from the case study schools have started to isolate features that strategically focused schools display. These are considered below.

1. They build in sustainability.

The first and most important characteristic of a strategically focused school is that it builds in sustainability to its processes. While many schools have effective school development or improvement plans, these are by their very nature short-term. While they may contribute to short-term effectiveness, they do not necessarily ensure the longer-term success or viability of the school. Similarly having longer-term plans would be pointless if the immediate viability of the school was threatened.. What is needed is a balance which is represented in figure 3:

Operational Processes & Planning (SDP & Target Setting)	Effective	Functionally successful in the short-term but not sustainable long-term	Successful and sustainable in both the short-term and long-term
	Ineffective	Failure inevitable both in the short and long-term	Short-term crises will prevent longer-term sustainability
		Ineffective	Effective
Strategic Processes & Planning			

Figure 3: Short-term viability and long-term sustainability. (Davies B J, 2003)

In figure 3 the desirable position is in the right hand quartile where both short-term target setting and operational plans are complimented with the medium- to longer-term strategic plans. While many initiatives from government such as literacy and numeracy have short-term targets, there is concern as to whether these are sustainable by simply working harder to achieve increased results in one-dimensional tests. There needs to be a set of strategic sustainable objectives in the planning process.

2. They develop set strategic measures to assess their success.

For an individual on a diet the maxim may be 'you are what you eat'. The organisational equivalent of this may be 'you are what you measure'. While all schools have ways of measuring if short-term goals such as Key Stage and examination targets are realised, how many have strategic medium-term goals and the measurement techniques to judge whether they are reached? Initial research evidence suggests that strategically focused schools have medium-term broader education measures of success as well as short-term goals susceptible to measurement by the raw numbers demanded by many agencies.

3. They are restless not complacent.

There is a strong correlation between individual characteristics of the leader and the collective nature of the school team. While not dismissing current approaches and strengths, strategically focused schools are constantly looking for the next development idea or phase and they realise what is good enough for now will not remain so. They are forward looking and futures orientated. They see the future as affording better opportunities; they see change as desirable not undesirable; they see challenges rather than problems. In brief, they are improvers not maintainers. They see a constant need to keep up to date and draw in ideas on how they may challenge current patterns and do things differently in the future.

4. They are networked: locally, regionally, nationally and internationally.

Our research shows that strategically focused schools invest considerable time and energy in building and sustaining networks. These are not confined just to benchmarking current practice but are forums for ideas where visioning and future-oriented dialogues are facilitated. They are constantly seeking new ways of thinking and working and they seek to build their own solutions from a wide range of sources. In summary, they are outward looking and believe how ever good they are that they can never be good enough and need to make strategic alliances and networks with other people and organisations to develop broad sets of ideas and knowledge capital.

5. They use sophisticated multi-approach planning processes.

The planning approaches in this paper have been analysed and a perspective established that schools do not use one approach or another but use a portfolio that combines all four main approaches so that depending on circumstance and context the school will utilise a sophisticated multi-planning approach. This is a key attribute as planning should serve the organisation and not the reverse. It also allows the school to cope with complexity and rapid change.

6. They build the strategic architecture of the school.

The term 'strategic architecture' means that a school needs to identify the main pillars of its existence and build a strategic map of the current situation and how those key pillars will develop into the future. Davies (2003, in press) outlines the following strategic architecture of the school:

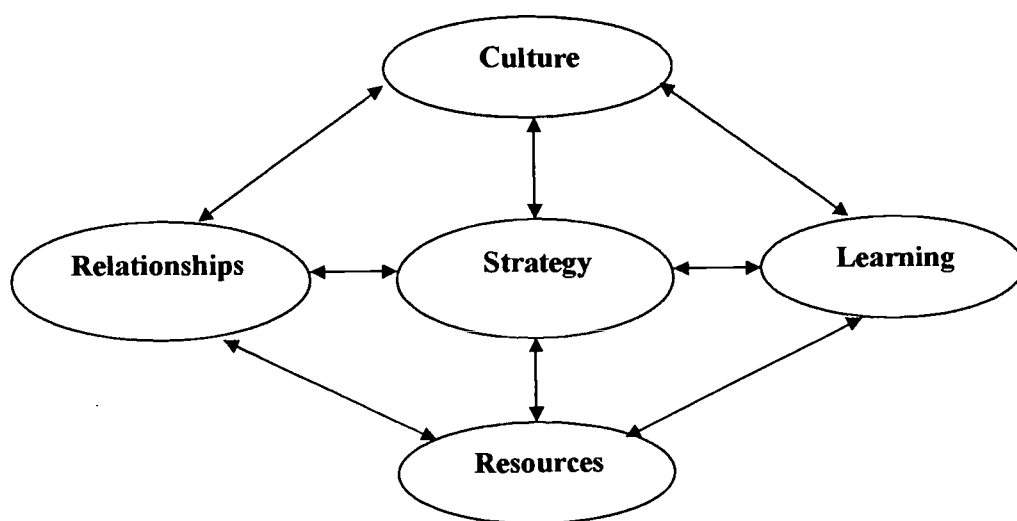


Figure 4: The strategic architecture of the school

The significance of the strategic architecture is that it outlines the main features of the school and focuses attention on them and projects them five years into the future. The challenge then is to adopt strategic approaches that will assist the school to move from the current to the future strategic position. For a more detailed analysis of the architecture of the school, Davies (2003) provides an analysis of the strategic activities and processes, using a balanced score card approach (Kaplan and Norton, 1996 & 2001, Niven 2002) that is necessary to turn strategy into action.

8. They are strategically opportunistic.

They position themselves to be able to build the right capability to take advantage of future opportunities. It is possible to consider positioning as a key to enabling the school to be strategically opportunistic. There is a significant difference between schools who simply respond to happenstance (i.e. they bid for initiatives as they come along) and being strategically opportunistic. Strategically opportunistic schools position themselves to make a choice between alternative opportunities choose the one(s) that fits their strategic direction and development framework.

9. They deploy strategic timing and abandonment.

When to make a strategic shift and what to give up are difficult and challenging decisions. Strategically focused organisations give equal attention to ‘when to change’ as to ‘what to change’. This dual focus is linked to the double s-curve (see figure 2) and when to make the strategic leap to a new way of operating. The danger of taking on too many new initiatives is that the organisation loses focus and overburdens the leadership capacity of the school. Key to maintaining focus and operating within capacity is the concept of abandonment. The schools make clear decisions to undertake the difficult challenge of abandoning some areas of development and activity to create organisational capacity to undertake the new challenge, which involves a constant process of focusing on priorities and making strategic choices.

10. They develop and sustain strategic leadership.

The linking theme in this paper is that of strategic leadership. Initially it flagged the idea that we need to focus not just on the leader but also on leadership in the school. Strategically focused schools develop leadership in depth which is sometimes called ‘distributed leadership’. How this type of leadership is maintained and enhanced is a feature of strategically focused schools.

Conclusion

This paper has addressed the key concern of how we sustain and develop schools through the deployment of effective planning strategies. The central need in the education service is to recognise that many of the gains in pupil achievement as measured in test scores may not be sustainable if we continue to be fixated on short-term outcomes and plans. There is a need to switch the focus onto two critical areas. First, in order to achieve sustainable development it is necessary to have more effective strategic medium-term planning. Second, it is vital if school development and improvement are to be sustainable, to focus equal attention on the planning processes of concepts such as strategic conversations, participation and motivation as well as to the formal documentation of planning.

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¹ The National College for School Leadership is a UK Government funded establishment tasked with developing leadership and management in English schools see www.ncsl.org.uk

² Ofsted is the Office for Standards in Education a government organisation responsible for inspecting schools.

³ Key Stage(s) are the age groups that undertake an assessment at specific times, thus Key Stage I take their test at age seven, Key Stage 2 at age eleven, Key Stage 3 at age fourteen and Key Stage 4 at age sixteen.



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