Policy Impact and Policy Process in Transforming Urban Schools: A Single School Case Study of the London Challenge

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Contextualization

In late 2002, 'The London Challenge' was launched as a UK government policy response to a problem with educational standards in the capital city's secondary schooling. There was too much variation in attainment between schools, which had caused a crisis in confidence with state secondary education in London. The policy response was designed to intervene in this situation. Much success has been claimed for the London Challenge. More recently, in 2007, its policy approach was adopted by ministers to deal with standards in schools in two other urban areas in England that are considered to be similarly problematic at secondary level; this expansion of the policy is known as the 'City Challenge', which now includes London, Manchester and 'The Black Country' (part of the West Midlands conurbation).

Yet, there has been only one large-scale evaluation of the impact of the London Challenge available in the public domain. This was performed in 2006 by Ofsted and it dealt only with key performance indicators for schools, such as GCSE results; whilst these are good general measures, they do not evaluate factors that might have influenced success. Also, part of the data which was used in the Ofsted report to demonstrate the success of this policy response pre-dated the London Challenge policy by more than three years. Therefore, there are questions to ask about the impact of the London Challenge.

Abstract: *School improvement research shows that sustained improvements in schools take time to achieve. Have education policies which pre-date the London Challenge had some effect on the rises in standards that we see now? What about other effects on policy as it is implemented, such as the role of the practitioner in the policy process? Where best to direct public resources is a key question for policy-makers; it is argued in this paper that more investigation of the London Challenge's impact is required to identify more precisely which elements of the policy have had most positive outcomes. Such information will help to direct any expansion of the policy more effectively.*

This paper addresses these questions by describing a small scale study, situated in one inner London comprehensive secondary school which was undertaken as an Institution Focused Study – a component of the doctorate in education programme. Because the study is small-scale, the findings have limited validity. Nevertheless, the study is a start in the process of testing the impact of the London Challenge on individual London schools. The study concludes that policy in education should consider carefully the mediating role of practitioners, especially school leaders, in the policy process since this is where much of the potential for transformative power in schools resides.

Introduction

The London Challenge Policy

The Policy Problem

The London Challenge policy was a response to a problem in London's education system (DfES, 2003, p 4). It was premised on concerns about variations in standards of academic performance between secondary schools in London, particularly in inner London. Its stated policy intention was to reduce the gap between the highest and lowest performing schools by providing a strategy which would support those schools with the most intractable under-attainment to raise standards, thus eradicating variations in attainment.

Concerns about standards in urban education had existed for many years. Educational performance in areas of social disadvantage lagged behind that of the national average and, especially, it lagged behind that of areas that were more affluent (Smith in Barber and Dann, 1996, p 40). A decade before the London Challenge was launched, in 1993, Ofsted produced a report entitled 'Access and Achievement in Urban Education' (Ofsted, 1993). The data revealed what appeared to be a pattern of related social disadvantage and educational under-attainment.

The London Challenge drew attention to the fact that this gap in attainment between schools still prevailed (DfES, 2003, p 4), despite previous policy initiatives and investment in education (which included the highest sustained growth in funding in real terms for schools in twenty years (Timmins, 2001, p 599). It seemed to be a structural problem that had persisted over time since the beginning of the twentieth century (Bentley, 1998, pp 76-79; Giddens, 2002; Halsey, 2000, p 218; Miliband in Katwala *et al*, 2005). The government's concern at the turn of the twenty-first century was how to overcome this problem. The foreword to the London Challenge policy makes it clear that there was both an economic and a social imperative to change the situation.

However, for London, finding a solution is not easy. London is a large and very complex global city with a vast range of social, political, demographic and economic dynamics that affect its character (Hall, 2007, pp 5-8) in shifting and changing patterns, rather like a kaleidoscope. With regard to secondary schooling there is a particular problem. Transport across the city is extensive and so children can travel easily to schools outside their neighbourhood. Also, affluence can buy educational advantage; incomes amongst citizens in London vary enormously (Hall, 2007, pp 463-464). Because they have the financial means to select where they live, more affluent families have more school choice. Those that have the wealth to do so exercise "risk management" (Ball, 2003, pp 21-25) moving to areas where schools are reputed to be good, creating a rise in property prices and thus selecting out those families with less economic advantages. The result is a deepening of disadvantage for neighbourhoods where social exclusion prevails and where educating young people in such circumstances is more challenging (Leaton, Gray and Whitty in Brighouse and Fullick, 2007, p 100).

This leads to increasing social polarisation. Communities become more homogeneous and isolated from each other. School intakes become socio-economically slanted since attainment is so closely related to social advantage (Katwala *et al,* 2005, p 38; West, 2007, p 283). Thus secondary school choice becomes more and more inequitable (Gewirtz in Ahier, 1996, p 309; Lupton, 2006, p 5), social polarisation continues to increase (Whitty, 2002, pp 83-4) and parents and carers continue to face concerns over secondary school choice (DfES, 2003, p 4).

By 2002, policy intervention in the London situation was seen to be absolutely essential. The government believed that a specific education policy tailored to the needs of the capital city was needed. Thus, the London Challenge was launched in 2003.

Policy Intervention – 'The London Challenge: Transforming London Secondary Schools'

The policy text sets out a tri-partite approach to intervention in London secondary education which identifies three priorities for action. Priority One, "Transforming Key Areas", deals with areas of inner London which are deemed to have the most comprehensive under-attainment. It is worth noting that these boroughs are exemplars of the problems London faces with social polarisation, containing pockets of significant socio-economic disadvantage adjacent to areas of high affluence. Priority Two, "The Keys to Success", is directed at those schools scattered throughout the London education authorities that have had intractable problems with raising standards of attainment. Many of these schools are in 'Special Measures' or have experienced ongoing low results. ('Special Measures' is a judgement made by Ofsted that a school requires significant, direct intervention by Her Majesty's Inspectors. This is done through an ongoing, regular programme of re-inspection accompanied by measures that have been put in place to help the school improve.) Priority Three, "A Better Deal for London", addresses the whole of London. A range of separate, current political and educational themes are woven together in the form of policy solutions in various different combinations targeted at each priority area.

The policy's proposals draw upon a range of strategies, many of which pre-date the London Challenge. These include:

- Developing school specialism
- Extended schools provision
- The City Technology Colleges programme – which had recently become the Academies programme
- The improvement of school leadership
- The improvement of teacher recruitment in London through TeachFirst
- The improvement of teachers' professional development
- The Excellence in Cities programme which was launched in 1998 to support urban schools in challenging circumstances
- Provision for 'gifted and talented' pupils
- Provision of housing loans for 'key workers'
- Workforce re-modelling
- Free London travel for school age children

The London Challenge re-configures these initiatives in different ways to provide a strategy for dealing with each of the three Key Priority areas.

Intensive provision is made for schools within the five local authorities of inner London which the government believes need most support. This includes direct intervention through consultancy support, the establishment of academies, private finance investment, recruitment of the best teachers, leadership development and extended services to provide resources for community regeneration linked to secondary schools. A more tailored approach is taken for Priority Two 'Keys to Success Schools'. It is built upon a school improvement model of "pressure and support" (DfES, 2003, p 5; Fullan, 2001, p 91) and it suggests the use of combinations of these strategies selected as appropriate for different schools. The remainder of the provision is open to every secondary school, teacher and pupil across London at need.

The result is that in the policy text, there is a sense of 'bricolage' (Bowe *et al,* 1992, p 14) – a latticing of current initiatives into a new framework that presents itself as a new reform and a policy that is tailored to the needs of London. Whilst one can argue that the policy text itself does not present new initiatives and that it combines together many pre-existing separate policies that were not specific to urban settings, this does not necessarily preclude the success of the over-arching strategy. How successful has the London Challenge been?

Interrogating the Success of the London Challenge

Measures of Success

In December 2006, Ofsted published a report on improvements in urban education in which the London Challenge featured prominently as a success. Improved exam results at GCSE level, improved school attendance figures and improved inspection reports were the principal measures in secondary schools across London by which this success was judged:

- Standards in London schools have risen faster than in similar schools nationally
- 89 per cent of London secondary schools have made improvements in the numbers of pupils achieving 5+ A* - C compared with 73 per cent of schools nationally
- In 2005/6, inspectors graded a significantly higher proportion of London secondary schools as good or better for overall effectiveness, leadership and management and quality of teaching than secondary schools nationally

(Ofsted, 2006)

This is encouraging data on the positive impact of the London Challenge. However, to use this report as sole evidence for the success of the London Challenge is problematic. The investigation carried out by Ofsted was not purely concerned with the London Challenge policy. It was focused on improvements in school standards in London from 2000 to 2006. Data that is used in the Ofsted report traces improvements from 1997 – 2006, which is a nine year period. The London Challenge was launched in 2003. Whilst the establishment of the London Challenge was a significant moment, can it be claimed that the improvements we have undoubtedly seen in London education between 2000 and 2006 are due mainly to the London Challenge?

There are two important questions to consider. The first question is about the complexity of educational change and the interdependence of education policies. How has pre-existing education policy contributed to the impact of the London Challenge?

Pre-Existing Education Policy and its Relationship to the London Challenge

The London Challenge is a strategy that is built from a number of pre-existing education policies and initiatives. These include:

- the establishment of a National College of School Leadership (NCSL) in 2000 following a pledge to improve support for school leadership by the new prime minister in 1998 (NCSL, 2007)
- the establishment of the London Leadership Centre (now the London Centre for Leadership in Learning) in 2001
- the commitment to 'joined-up' provision in public services in complex, disadvantaged urban areas through Extended Schools (DfES, 2002; Dyson *et al,* 2002)
- the commitment to increased specialisation by schools in 2001 (DfEE, 2004)
- the commitment to improved professional development for teachers in 2001 (DfEE, 2001) and

- the creation of TeachFirst in 2001, an initiative borrowed from the USA that was first planned separately in 2001 – 2002 (Brighouse, in Brighouse and Fullick, 2007, p 81; TeachFirst, 2007).

The London Challenge was still a relatively young strategy when the Ofsted report was produced in 2006. Three years of policy implementation is a short period of time in which to assess the impact of an education policy with confidence. School improvement research shows that a recognised time-lag exists between achieving success in structural, more qualitative areas of work such as setting the shared vision, values and goals of a school and getting communal support for them and between the associated improvements in attainment one is looking for (MacGilchrist, 2003, p 21). Furthermore, the headline results for improving schools are often subject to inconsistency over a period of time, even though the general trend might be upwards (MacGilchrist, 2003, p 17). The improvement relationship between the London Challenge and other education policies is therefore complex. One needs to ask how possible it is to disentangle evidence of the impact of the London Challenge from that of other policies, especially when the policy text includes initiatives that pre-date the London Challenge.

The second question is about another element of complexity in educational improvement, which is that school change is dependent on many factors. Critical to school improvement is the role of the practitioner, in this case the teachers and school leaders whose task it is to carry out school change. How important is the influence of practitioners on the impact of the London Challenge policy? It is clear that they have a key role in the policy process. How has this affected the implementation of the London Challenge? In its implementation, has there been any change to the original strategy outlined in the policy text?

The Role of Practitioners in the Policy Process of the London Challenge

Practitioners in education are agents of policy implementation and they have considerable influence over the success or otherwise of the components of any policy. They subject policy to interpretation thereby generating new policy (Bowe *et al,* 1992, p 14, 22). Thus a policy is distorted by the exercise of power at practitioner level.

The London Challenge is a policy intervention which was directed at all London maintained secondary schools. London has over three hundred and ninety maintained secondary schools involving the work of many teachers. The nature of secondary education in London means that the structure of work is based on a multitude of human interactions between large networks of people. Because of this, workers at the lowest level of the policy-making chain, such as practitioners in schools, can have a significant impact on policy formation.

In particular, headteachers have a very influential position (Brighouse in Brighouse and Fullick, 2007, p 83). Working within a myriad of different initiatives, they are required to exercise individual judgements about the relevance of policy proposals to their own school's situation (Day in Harris *et al,* 2003, p 42; Harris in Harris *et al*, 2003, p 14). Through their implementation of the London Challenge, headteachers will have subjected the policy to their interpretation, discretion and autonomy, influencing the nature of the policy itself by deciding which elements to include in school improvement planning and to what degree. This part of the policy-making process in public service sectors is termed by Michael Lipsky 'street-level bureaucracy' (Lipsky, 1980, pp xi-xv in Hill, 1997, p 389).

Teachers and school leaders in this way are like 'street-level bureaucrats'. They interpret policy based on their own histories, experiences, values and purposes within a field of practice that differs widely depending on social and economic context. A recursive relationship exists between a policy text, its context of formation and the ongoing context of practice. Policy continues to be made after text production has been completed (Bowe *at al*

1992, p 14). This is because policy is changed by the exercise of power at practitioner level. This is evident in the London Challenge. It has happened in several ways.

Firstly, in its implementation, the London Challenge has gone further than the strategy outlined in the policy text. It has offered more investment in leadership development, teachers' professional development and initiatives to attract the best teachers to the most challenging schools. For schools in challenging circumstances, having the capacity for change is critical and the capacity for change is dependent on good, effective practitioners. This view has been argued within school improvement research for many years (Hopkins in Harris *et al,* 2003, pp 55-71; MacGilchrist, 2003, pp 9-11). Over the past four years, the programmes available which are focused on the development of practice have increased, drawing in Consultant Leaders from successful London schools, offering more urban leadership programmes, supporting the setting up of the London Centre for Leadership in Learning at the Institute of Education, opening up the London Challenge strategy to primary schools and expanding the very successful TeachFirst scheme. It is these elements of the strategy that some believe to have been particularly successful (Riley and Emery, 2007, p 183).

Secondly, the appointment of Professor Tim Brighouse to lead the strategy has given the implementation of the London Challenge a particular direction. As with any senior leadership appointment, it has been a key factor in the development of the London Challenge following its launch. Brighouse shaped the implementation around a focus on improved practice, changing the nature of the policy itself (Brighouse in Brighouse and Fullick, 2007, pp 71-94). Brighouse divided his work into four key areas, all focused on the quality of practice: the London teacher; the London school leader; the London school; and the London student. Recognising the significance of high quality in professional practice in education as the key to improving standards was a shift away from the substance of the policy text of the London Challenge which focused more on structures.

Thirdly, from the very beginning, Brighouse promoted the improvement of practice, establishing collaboration and professional development networks between schools. One of the driving forces behind his work has been the aim for London schools to 'crack the cycle of disadvantage' (Brighouse in Brighouse and Fullick, 2007, p 79). Actively seeking to address what he has previously referred to as 'the atomisation' (Brighouse, 2002, pp 5-6) of the system caused by quasi-marketisation and competition, Brighouse set about securing support from disparate groups with competing interests and modelling collaboration by visiting schools and taking a very close personal interest in the teachers and school leaders themselves. He established Independent-State School Partnerships and federations of schools in different parts of London along the lines of the collegiate system he outlined in the Caroline Benn, Brian Simon Memorial Lecture in 2002. Other key individuals such as Sir John Rowling, a former successful headteacher in schools of challenge, joined him in this work undertaking other projects such as the "Performance Collaboratives" project, which brings 55 schools in London together to share strategies for raising standards of performance at Key Stage 4.

These shifts are indicative of the power of practitioners in taking on policy and affecting its work by where they place their emphasis on different policy proposals in the text. Lipsky believes that because of the nature of education, where the structure of work is based on human interaction within an enormous public institution, street-level bureaucrats (workers at the lowest level of the policy-making chain such as teachers and school leaders) have a major impact on continuing policy formation. Practitioners, by subjecting policy to interpretation, can change the strategies by which the outcomes they seek are achieved. Is this true of the London Challenge at school level?

Findings from the Field of Practice

The results of a case study undertaken in one London comprehensive, secondary school suggest that it is true that practitioners – especially school leaders – have had a key role in the successful implementation of the London Challenge policy.

Method

The empirical research enquiry referred to here is a single school case study of the impact of the London Challenge. The methodology was mixed method. It included documentary analysis of school records and practitioner interviews. Research methods were both quantitative – analysing data on school key performance indicators for example – and qualitative – using interviews and interpreting school policies and other documents. Interviews are the principal means of collecting data in this study and such qualitative research methods best suit a theoretical framework of interpretivism (Brown and Dowling, 1998, p 82; Cresswell, 2003, p 20; Crotty, 1998, pp 14-17). This places the mode of enquiry in an epistemological context of 'constructionism' (Crotty, 1998, pp 8-9) – termed by some as 'constructivism' (Robson, 2002, pp 27-28). This is the most appropriate context for enquiry into a subject area which requires the researcher to pay attention to the interpretations of practitioners in the field. Practitioners interact with the external world in a dialectical relationship, constructing both individual and collective meaning influenced by their own historical, cultural and social experiences (Crotty, 1998, pp 42-52). Interpretivism requires a method of research which aims to get behind these layers of meaning. Hence the interviews carried out for this research enquiry were semi-structured. They allow respondents much more flexibility of response and can open up their preferences, values, attitudes and beliefs to closer analysis (Cohen and Manion, 1994, p 272). In semi-structured interviews, pre-determined questions can be modified, omitted or added to as the interviewer deems appropriate (Robson, 2002, p 270).

The interview questions flowed directly from the main research question. The design of the questions was fundamental to the validity of the research (Robson, 2002, p 228). Continuity of data collection across each interview is essential to support reliability. Six questions were set (some sub-sectioned) that were designed to explore the respondents' views about the impact on their school of different elements of the London Challenge policy and their influence on the improvements which had happened at the school. It was important to discover whether respondents attributed this impact to the London Challenge policy itself or whether felt there were other causal factors such as school leadership intervention.

The interviews were of a representative sample of teaching staff drawn from a variety of positions within the school from classroom teacher to headteacher. The sample of practitioners contained a full cross-section of experience in teaching. They included:

1. Five classroom teachers with between one and fifteen years of teaching experience in London
2. Two middle leaders – a Head of Year and a Head of Faculty
3. Three senior leaders with between seven and fifteen years of teaching experience in London
4. The headteacher who had twelve years of experience as a London headteacher and a track record of success in improving challenging schools.

The spread of teaching subjects amongst the respondents aimed to cover all faculty areas within the school. The gender balance was representative including six men and five women. The balance of ethnicity was also representative. A full account of the ethical framework for this research, which follows BERA guidelines, is available in the main report of

the study (Ogden, 2008). However, it is important to highlight that since the school in which the study was undertaken was the researcher's own institution, there were ethical and political considerations. Researcher bias and respondent bias were possible, especially because of the power relationship between the researcher and interview respondents; the researcher was a deputy headteacher in the school at the time with a key responsibility in school improvement.

Key Characteristics and Context of the School

The school is an urban secondary school with inner city characteristics, educating 2000 pupils aged between 11 and 18 years old. The school is a mixed gender, comprehensive school. The school's community is relatively diverse in relation to ethnicity. Free school meals take-up varies between 23 and 24 per cent overall which is well above the national average. The school has a high number of pupils with special educational needs – 36 per cent - and it provides a designated special provision (DSP) unit for pupils with moderate learning difficulties, mobility difficulties and visual impairment. The school's wider community from which it draws its intake generally experiences relative socio-economic difficulty and social exclusion. The community is a very mobile community with high levels of unemployment.

The school experienced significant challenges with the quality of its provision in the 1990's. In 2000, the school was placed in 'Special Measures' by Ofsted as a result of an inspection by Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) following an Ofsted report in 1999 which had identified serious weaknesses (Ofsted Report 1999). A new headteacher was appointed at the time and the school's improvement dates from this point.

The strategy for improvement by the new headteacher was founded on a theoretical knowledge of school effectiveness and improvement research as well as on successful practical experience in other inner city schools and a Local Authority in London. Such knowledge and experience is essential in school improvement (Hopkins in Harris *et al*, 2003: 68-69). The school has a rigorous data-driven approach to its planning and interventions demonstrated in the documents viewed. For example, all improvement plans are informed by data analysis on attainment, achievement and attendance at both whole school and departmental / year team level. Performance management is closely linked to targets within the improvement plans. There is a robust 'distributed leadership' structure for directing, managing and leading change at all levels and for holding people to account for their work (Harris in Harris *et al*, 2003). The headteacher's focus on teaching, learning and the establishment of a professional learning community informed by data are also known to be effective strategies in the literature on school improvement (Chapman in Harris *et al,* 2003; MacGilchrist *et al,* 2004; Mortimore, 1998).

Findings from the Interviews

The interviews revealed interesting perspectives from practitioners about the impact of the London Challenge policy on their own school.

Pre-Existing Education Policies and Internal Leadership Decisions

Firstly, there was agreement among the interview respondents about how far the London Challenge was the cause of improvement at the school and how far this was due to decisions on strategy and policy made by the headteacher. Improvements at the school were already visible before the launch of the London Challenge. Respondents felt that these improvements were to do with the vision and strategy of leadership at the school and the choice of policy initiatives to raise standards.

> HT: *"Even without the London Challenge, we would have made improvements because I think that our analysis of the problems of the school five years ago were correct, the structure, the policies, the processes and importantly the people who were appointed in order to drive the school forward, have made the difference."*

Successes at the school were attributed by most interview respondents to the headteacher's good strategic planning, to the selection and implementation of the right policies, processes and structures for the school and to the appointment and development of effective practitioners rather than to the London Challenge itself.

> SLT1: *"If I'm being brutally honest, I don't think standards at __(name of this school)__ have risen to a great extent because of the London Challenge. I think standards have risen because the quality of teachers that have been appointed and the way those teachers have developed has improved over the last five years. … I think the school improvement comes from the classroom and I think it really is as simple as that. And I think in many cases the quality of teaching has improved because of what goes on in the school in terms of training for staff and promoting for staff and looking after their well-being and I think that would have happened with or without all of the other (London Challenge) initiatives"*

Evidence from practitioner interviews is sparse in support of any direct impact by the London Challenge to support the school's improvement. However, this does not mean that the policy has had no impact at all. Policy creation and implementation is 'fuzzy' and complex – it does not happen 'obediently', in a 'linear fashion', progressing from creation to implementation in a clear way (Bell and Stevenson, 2006, p 23). Is it conceivable that practitioners are influenced by education policy without them perceiving that they are? A set of similar case studies on the impact of the London Challenge upon a cross-section of other case study schools would help to answer this question.

The Role of the Practitioner in the Policy Process

Secondly, what is evident from the interviews with practitioners is that whilst an explicit policy strategy like the London Challenge may support schools in making improvements, it is the leadership within a school that the practitioners believe makes the difference rather than the policy itself. Distilling what is relevant and important for a school from the 'policy noise' within which education practitioners have to work is a critical role for a headteacher and his or her senior leadership team. Theoretical knowledge, an informed understanding of the school's community and practical experience help those people in these positions to exercise good judgement. It is a similar process to that described by Lipsky as 'street-level bureaucracy'; the implementation of policy in a way which extracts what practitioners perceive to be important for influencing their work.

> AST1: *"From a personal point of view, I fear it (the London Challenge) has very little impact at __(name of this school)__. …I've always felt very much that it's come from within. So it comes from the head, from the deputy heads and from the staff that are here really wanting to make a difference. And I think it comes from the character of the people that are here rather than from outside influence."*

The view which emerged most strongly from interview participants is the view that, in this way, school leaders have the critical role in school improvement – policy alone will not achieve this.

> SLT2: "*I think it's, it's all about the leadership and how you use those resources that creates the impact, raising standards. And that's about, actually I think it's primarily about, leadership and then disseminating information and guiding, supporting professionals in the organisation*."

The respondents felt that where leadership is strong then practice is effective, even though the wider socio-political and economic barriers for some schools in London add considerably to the challenge. Moral courage, experience, professional knowledge and the ability to 'hold one's nerve' in the leadership of improvement play an important part in the process. But in particular, it is the focus on effective practice and setting a clear direction for a school's improvement which the interview participants believe to be vital. The decisions made by a school's leadership team, the quality of its leaders and teachers and the choices made by a headteacher are of fundamental importance.

> HT: "*There's a dialectic here. You have to have a vision, you have to have a plan and a good analysis, you know, analysis, vision and a way forward. Then you need to appoint people who can translate that into action on a day-to-day basis and over a period of time. People who see the wood from the trees as well as deal with issues on a daily basis. That in turn helps you realise the vision which in turn attracts more highly effective people at different levels both in terms of leadership as well newly qualified teachers or teachers who have just finished their teacher training and so on and so forth. You get into a virtuous cycle which has a major impact on standards and expectations within the organisation.*"

Thus it can be seen that it is the choice of policy levers from all those available to a headteacher and how appropriate those choices are that is essential in a school's journey towards improvement. How headteachers, with their senior leadership teams, mediate policies such as the London Challenge within their schools is therefore of pivotal importance.

Conclusion

The Impact of the London Challenge and the Ongoing Debate

School leaders are therefore critical within the education policy process. Prioritising within the context of competing internal and external demands (Fullan, 2001, pp 3-4) is an essential skill for school leaders. In the midst of considerable 'policy noise' from within what sometimes can seem like a soup of different education initiatives and ideas, and a constant stream of policies (Kingdon, 2003), school leaders have to distinguish priorities for their own schools. Making such decisions is a significant part of the role of a headteacher, who needs to crystallise the issues and interpret them for staff, pupils and parents.

In this way, school leaders and especially the headteacher, have a fundamental influence on the impact of the London Challenge. By the decisions they make, school leaders mediate education policy and thus they have a key role in any education policy's success. This provides school leaders with enormous power over the success of policies like the London Challenge. This power comes from the fact that they must, as part of their job, exercise discretion in the choices they make because of the need to prioritise within an environment of competing pressures. It also comes from the autonomy that was given to school leaders through Local Management of Schools (LMS) in 1992, which enhances the power and responsibilities of this position in relation to policy implementation.

Lipsky's argument about the importance of practitioners in the policy-making process is very relevant to the London Challenge. One can see the importance of the practitioner role in the policy process clearly from the interviews at the case study school in this enquiry. The

headteacher and senior leadership team of the school and the discretion that they used in making judgements about policy implementation were viewed by those interviewed to be central to any impact that the London Challenge might have had.

One might contend the terminology that Lipsky uses in relation to education – the term 'bureaucrat' is perhaps more characteristic of an administrative role rather than the kind of practice-based, informed professional role that exists in education. Nevertheless, Lipsky's description of the set of skills that street-level bureaucrats exercise in their implementation of policy is like those required of the reflective practitioner (Hammersley, 1995, p 133) or the 'critical professional' (Barnett, 1997). As street-level bureaucrats, reflective practitioners or critical professionals, school leaders clearly have a fundamental role in policy implementation.

More investigation is required into the mediating influence of school leaders in the policy process and its significance in the implementation of the London Challenge. The success of an education policy like the London Challenge may be determined by how far school leaders are engaged by policy-makers because it is possible for the nature of an education policy to be fundamentally changed by practitioner involvement. Lipsky and Hudson both argue that such engagement of practitioners is centrally important in public service policy and that little attention is paid to it in policy studies (Hudson in Hill, 1993; Lipsky in Hill, 1993).

This study has provided some useful directions for further enquiry. Firstly, undertaking some further case studies of improving schools that have been targeted for specific support by the London Challenge team in Priority Areas One and Two would be useful to cross-check the findings of the empirical research referred to in this paper. It would be important to see whether practitioners have different perceptions in schools that have been more directly targeted for external intervention. Secondly, if the influence of the practitioner and especially school leaders has been identified as so significant in the policy process, more exploration is needed of the importance of this role in policy-making for urban schooling. Interviews of those involved in the creation and implementation of the London Challenge at an academic, consultancy and ministerial level would reveal useful data concerning the rationale behind the structure of the policy text and perceptions of the role of the practitioner in the policy process.

Having a policy framework and a strategy for education to deal with urban complexity in schooling is important. We cannot ignore the wealth of information that we now have on educational attainment and related socio-economic disadvantage and the growing evidence from school improvement literature and policy about what works. With such extensive data available, we are in a strong position to intervene effectively; further, it could be argued that this creates a moral obligation (Brighouse in Brighouse and Fullick, 2007) and a practical imperative (Fullick in Brighouse and Fullick, 2007, p 304) to do so. The question is where best to target limited resources and a better knowledge of the policy process at the point of interface with practitioners might help to enlighten this.

Policy texts alone do not animate the dynamics for change; practitioners hold mediating power in policy implementation. Recognising the role of school leaders as mediators of policy is therefore important in planning the expansion of the London Challenge to other cities across the country. Investing in school leaders and engaging them in the policy process more effectively might be an important consideration in planning any future implementation of this policy.

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