Leadership of Place: Mapping the Terrain for School Leaders in Challenging Contexts – A Comparative Analysis

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Summary

This paper aims to contribute to theory, policy and practice in relation to urban leadership. The paper focuses on the concept of place: a key notion in relation to global citizenship.

In the context of urban schools and communities, three questions are examined:

- What is place and why does it matter?
- How is place defined and articulated in the literature and policy discourse?
- What are the ‘leaderly’ actions that characterise leadership of place?

In examining these questions, the paper explores the interrelationship of leadership of place to the concepts of political literacy and trust.
Introduction

The notion of place is a powerful one: the place where we are from; the place where we live; the place where we would like to be. It signifies issues about identity and belonging (or lack of it), and about roots and connections (or lack of them). In our fast moving global world, individuals and communities remain profoundly attached to place.

This exploratory paper sets out to define and explore new terrain about the context and practice of leadership. It focuses on the concept of place, examining the implications of leadership of place for school leaders in challenging areas of our cities. It also explores the concept of space is an integral part of the notion of place, signifying issues about opportunities and restrictions, safety and danger.

The paper draws on earlier work on urban school and communities, undertaken by the author through the project Leadership on the Front-line (Riley, 2007, 2008 and 2009). Working with some 80 principals and headteachers of schools in challenging contexts (in Belfast, Birmingham, Cardiff, Dublin, London, Londonderry, Liverpool, Manchester, Paris and Salford), Leadership on the Front-line examined the context for leadership, highlighting the ways in which the community context is the starting point for understanding, developing and applying urban leadership.

One conclusion from that earlier work was that school leaders needed to identify the actors, system-wide policies and relationships which operate within a school’s community and wider locality. The self-review framework Taking the Leadership Pulse - which drew on findings from the project - was one outcome from the project. It was designed to encourage school leaders to gather community information and develop an approach that is rooted in the immediate context of the school and neighbourhood, but which also takes into account the wider social and political environment.

The framework identified the four elements that influence school leaders’ ability to manage these relationships: the physical reality, the social or political reality; the emotional reality; and the spiritual reality (Riley, 2009). The physical reality encompasses the day-to-day logistics of managing a school in a challenging urban environment, in which the physical conditions can be daunting, as well as invigorating. The social and political reality is shaped by the social landscape of the school (the relationships among people), but also the reality of students' home lives which can include poverty, lack of stability
or neighbourhood tensions. An integral element of the social reality is the political reality, generated to a large degree by the attitudes and decisions of politicians.

The physical and social conditions inevitably affect the third reality, the emotional reality. Emotions can be intense in urban schools – not only for students but for staff too. The fourth reality is the spiritual and ethical reality which is about the beliefs that drive leaders. For some, this reality is linked to religious faith, for others, to a strong commitment, such as to social justice.

An important conclusion from the study was that the way in which school leaders interpret and respond to their local context; their ability to draw on the untapped resources of our cities; and their response to the daily leadership challenges is influenced by deep-rooted values and beliefs. Revisiting and strengthening those values can lead to the development of a deeper wisdom which enables school leaders to make tough decisions in support of change, even if that means taking risks.

**Approach**

This paper seeks to deepen the exploration of context and community which began in *Leadership on the Front-line* and to go beyond it. This new exploration requires an analysis of the concrete conditions within schools as organisations, as well as their external priorities and relationships with communities. It involves the investigation of such questions as:

- What is place and why does it matter?
- How is place defined and articulated in the literature and in the policy discourse?
- In challenging contexts, what are the ‘leaderly’ actions that characterise leadership of place, and what do these signify in terms of a space for learning for young people and their communities?

In order to answer these questions and contribute to theory, policy and practice, the paper draws on a range of data sources: the emerging literature and policy discourse on ‘place’; earlier research from the project *Leadership on the Front-line* (Riley, 2007, 2008 and 2009); and the perceptions of London school leaders, gained through extended exploratory interviews undertaken in 2010. Findings and analysis from these different sources are reported under the following three themes:
• **Defining place:** Why does place matter? How is it articulated in the literature and in the policy discourse?

• **Leadership of Place:** What can be learned from looking at the notion of leadership of place, particularly for schools in challenging urban contexts?

• **Implications:** What are the implications of these findings?

The paper concludes with some final reflections.

### Defining Place

Indigenous communities across the globe have fought to retain their ties to the land, or to the place of their forbearers. For the urban dweller, however, the links may be weak. In our globalising world, social transformation has promoted a climate of mobility, change and, for some, insecurity. The poor, the displaced, the refugee, the economic migrant seek respite and opportunities in other countries and locations, particularly in the cities.

City dwellers move location for a range of reasons. The upwardly mobile leave their place of birth to continue their education, or to seek advancement. Poorer members of the community are more likely to be reluctant ‘movers’, forced to relocate by socio-economic factors and political decisions. In the 1950’s, for example, many of East London’s white indigenous communities in Bethnal Green were unwilling migrants to the suburbs of London (Young and Wilmott, 1957). A similar story unfolded in Boston’s West End in the 1960’s, where members of the Italian-American community were forced to leave their tenements to make way for luxury housing (Gans, 1962).

Political priorities continue to have an impact on the poor and less powerful. In 2004, for example, Dame Shirley Porter, ex-Leader of Westminster City Council and TESCO heiress was forced to pay £12m in settlement of a legal surcharge for her key role in a scheme that sold off 500 council (publically funded) homes each year to potential Conservative voters in marginal wards. This policy (which ironically was called ‘building stable communities’) was a concerted effort to boost Conservative election prospects (BBC, 2004).

Thus place and space are not only important but also highly charged and contested issues. Space is connected to ‘history and identity’ (Dillabough and Kennelly, 2009, p.p. 6). Animals mark their territory. Gangs assert their sense of terrain through tagging: gang related graffiti. The notion of place
assumes a particular intensity in diverse multi-cultural, multi-lingual, multi-faith and highly disadvantaged urban communities, where language, culture, mobility and experience can create uncertainties, as well as differing expectations about location and identity (Putnam, 2007). Space is often associated with ‘placelessness’ - that sense of loss of identity and cultural security that can exist in our cities (Eade, 2000).

In response to this changing landscape, the notion of leadership of place is emerging as an important issue for policy-makers, practitioners and researchers alike (Collinge, Gibney, & Mabey, 2010). In the UK, the growing importance of this notion is connected to national policy aspirations to develop more integrated public services, by bringing economic development, planning, housing, regeneration, education, transport and health together on a locality basis (Benington & Harty, 2009). This policy imperative raises issues about how to develop cross-boundary and relational leadership which connect to the needs and aspirations of communities.

The notion of place has also been linked to a growing political imperative to create greater community cohesion (Cantle, 2001; Dyson & Gallannaugh, 2008; Riley, forthcoming). Place was an important element in the 2001 race riots in Bradford, Oldham and Burnley, towns characterised by a high degree of polarisation in which communities lived segregated, ‘parallel’ lives (Cantle, 2001).

Other high profile events have contributed to political concerns about community cohesion and place. Most notable among these, were the London bombings in July 2005 (also known as 7/7): a series of suicide attacks carried out during London’s rush hour by three Muslim Pakistani British men and a British citizen of Jamaican descent who had converted to Islam. Their declared motivation was opposition to Britain’s involvement in the War in Iraq (HMSO, 2006). These, and other international security related events, have led to a re-appraisal of the role of the state and the development of a strong community cohesion agenda which has emphasised the centrality of public service. Aspects of this have included the introduction of a legal duty on all maintained (publicly funded) schools in England to encourage community cohesion (Pearce, 2004), ‘by promoting equality of opportunity and inclusion for different groups of pupils within a school and promoting shared values’ (DCSF, 2007, p.6).

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1 Community cohesion has been defined as having five domains: common values; social order; social solidarity and reductions in wealth disparities; social networks and social capital; and - attachment to place (Forrest and Kearns 2001:8).
In 2008, the Labour Government announced that local authorities would receive central funding to support their work on community cohesion. The distribution of resources has been determined by an annual Place Survey, designed to measure local people’s views about the extent to which people of different backgrounds get on well with each other. The more likely residents are to say that people did not get on well, the higher the level of funding. Across London, the differences in response to this question have been significant, with less than 1 in 2 people in Barking and Dagenham believing that people get on well, compared with 3 out of 4 in Waltham Forest (Higham, 2010).

Following the 2010 election of a Coalition Government, the issue of place has become a highly contested issue, following proposals to reduce housing benefit. If implemented, these proposals will generate significant movements of population, forcing poorer families to leave their current homes and localities in search of cheaper housing elsewhere. London will be particularly hard hit, as the proposals are likely to affect 17,000 people. Concerns have been raised from many sources, including, the Mayor of London Boris Johnson who has spoken out against the possibility of 'Kosovo-style cleansing' of the poor (BBC, 2010). How extensive the changes will be is as yet unknown. However, the likely London for London is that it will become a more socially, ethnically and economically divided city in which the poor and needy will have to seek new places and spaces.

Place matters. Class, gender, ethnicity, identity all shape the way that place is experienced on a day-to-day basis. For example, recent findings from a survey of Young Londoners indicate that young people are more positive about London’s diversity than they were five years ago (Riley, 2010). Young females are more positive than their male counterparts, and while young white British people are less positive than other groups, they are significantly more positive than they were five years ago. Where they live in social housing (typically ethnically diverse), they are even more positive.

However, the study also found that Pakistani and Bangladeshi young people were less positive about London’s diversity than five years earlier. This finding

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2 Negative perceptions appear to have been linked to factors such as, low levels of education, poverty and the numbers in the local population who had been born in Pakistan.

3 These positive perceptions challenge the view of the British National Party who have argued recently that London has become a city that has been "ethnically cleansed" (Guardian, 2009), of indigenous Londoners (BNP, 2009).
raises questions for educators about place, space and identity: Do London’s Pakistani and Bangladeshi young people feel more vulnerable, more exposed to the scrutiny of others and the hostility of some? What is their sense of identity, as young Londoners?

**Leadership of Place**

To explore the complexity of these issues further, the author undertook extended interviews with three principals of secondary school in London. The issues which have emerged from this exploratory work are not only relevant to London, but also to other major cities and conurbations.

London is home to seven million people who between them speak over 300 languages. Nearly 1 in 3 of London’s residents has been born outside England, and the city has at least 50 non-indigenous communities with populations of more than 10,000. As a global city, London is not only ethnically, linguistically, racially and religiously diverse but it is also a city of culture and an economic force: a centre of innovation and international finance. As a home to migrants from across the world, it embraces the lifestyle and beliefs of citizens from across the globe (Riley, 2010). For many its diversity is to be celebrated. For some it is to be abhorred (Guardian, 2009).

Each of the three principals interviewed has been involved in aspects of the project *Leadership on the Front-line*. While the three schools they lead share the broader London context, they are distinctively different, although each serves communities with high levels of social and economic need.

The interviews focused on four themes:

- What do you mean by leadership of place?
- What’s distinctive about this place (i.e. the school’s community context) and how it has changed?
- How does your leadership adapt to this place?
- What are the ‘leaderly’ actions which characterise leadership of place?

In the following section of the paper, three short vignettes are offered, one from each of the three school leaders, which illustrate how they have sought to shape aspects of their leadership in response to their sense of place and space.
**Vignette I: Leadership of place is about giving voice to young peoples’ views**

School I is an 11-19 community school for girls in East London, with a roll of over 1400 students. The school serves a predominantly Bengali community in an area which – over many years - has been home to immigrant groups from various parts of the globe. The illustration illuminates the challenges of leading in a community which is often perceived as being at variance with mainstream British culture. In this context, one particular challenge of leadership of place is to acknowledge and give voice to differences, while at the same time working to promote social cohesion.

The political and historical context in which the principal couched her remarks was one in which ex-foreign secretary Jack Straw had argued that Muslim women who wear the veil over their face could be contributing to poorer community relations. His comments had generated anger and distress among the students in the school.

Community, demography, politics all have an impact on what you do and how you lead, and on the ethos of the school. It is important to realise how people feel about it and to recognise that the school can become a source of pride and confidence.

The articulation of leadership of place leads to a view that it is important to give students the skills to speak out, without resorting to very negative ways of expressing themselves. This is about helping them to avoid feeling alienated, disaffected or disenfranchised because this leads to resentment and negativity.

You have to deal with feelings, deal with them and work with them to make changes that are positive to society. You have to find ways of talking about cultural issues, about the British National Party (BNP). You have to talk about issues in a constructive environment. School is a safe place where people know you and the staff have training to help you.

You have to make leadership of place explicit in what you do as a leader. Every department has a community target. You have to engage with the community and the parents. You have to provide the space to learn for the community. It is particularly important to create space and opportunities for women.
Vignette 2: Leadership of place is about recognising the importance of the school as a safe space

School II is an 11-19 co-educational school in South East London which has Arts status. Over the last decade the student population has shifted from being predominantly white working-class, to becoming an ethnically diverse and mobile student body. The largest immigrant community in the past was Vietnamese, it is now Somalian, Nigerian and Nepalese. The school’s proximity to a major army barracks has brought many Ghurkha families into the locality.

If leadership of place is effective, you have to start with the children: what they bring in with them because their experience is of a place and community which can be dangerous. My thinking has changed as time has gone on. I’ve been very aware of the high level of mobility in this locality and that the only way that you can create stability is in this place, the school.

The art of leadership of place is how you enable those young people who come to live in Britain, to be who they are in British society. This is about helping them enjoy their own personal cultural experiences and history and know their own story.

Leaders need to look at the relationship of users to the place. E.g. is there graffiti or litter? Do children feel they have a vested interest? Do they refuse to use the toilets because they’re worried? Do they go past smokers? Is this an easy conformable place where children feel enabled? Are the classrooms fit for purpose? What about the materials? The environment?

We use primary colours in corridors to embolden and enliven. These are not the muted tones of institutions. We go for warmth and brightness. Cushioned Flooring. Good acoustics. It’s about creating the physical conditions that match the aspirations for relationships: experiences and outcomes.
Vignette 3: Leadership of place is about active engagement with the community

School III is an 11-16 community school for some 600 + boys in the North West of London. The school is located in an area of social and economic contrasts, and its diverse student population includes a significant number of refugees and recent immigrants to the UK, for example, from Somalia.

Leadership of place is about having diversity in the workforce, and not just at bottom end. There are other aspects of diversity. It’s in everything we do, it runs like a virus. It’s about changing expectations and perceptions – fear of foreigners.

The British Legion came to our school. They had never been to an inner city school the were so bowled over by the respect of kids – our Muslim kids, all our different groups - that they took 20 kids to the battle fields in France. You know, after the Flanders Battle was finished, the Sherpas picked up dead bodies, so the Battle could go on. They were killed by unexploded mines. So there was an army of Indians, who serviced battle.

Leadership of place is also about solving conflict in a community. It’s very difficult. If something happens in a particular community, it has an impact on all the schools. A nearby school excluded a Somali girl. This was seen as racist and all schools tarred with same brush. Part of the problem was that we didn’t know enough about the Somali population. There are different tribes who don’t get on. A Somali case worker was able to give insights and understanding about local society. We worked with other local schools to get a real dialogue going.

You need to be emotionally resilient to be a leadership of place. There are the generic qualities of leadership, the core values, but you need more. You need understanding of the community and of your own story. Everyone has a story to tell,
Some Implications

This final section highlights three themes which emerge from this preliminary work: the first relates to the notion of place as a tool or filter to explore complex issues; the second relates to the notion of political literacy; and the third to that of trust.

Leadership of place as a tool or filter for analysis

Findings from the exploratory London fieldwork indicate that leadership of place is a powerful tool for exploring leadership in challenging urban contexts. It highlights the importance of developing physical conditions within a school that take into account the socio and environmental limitations of place (e.g. safety, spaces to work) and which match the aspirations of communities. It illustrates the need for ‘leaderly’ actions which are collaborative and which seek interconnections.

Within the field of education, the notion of leadership of place is currently being explored from a range of perspectives. Glasman and Crowson (2001), for example, have focused on the concept of ‘bridging’, highlighting the ways in which schools, and their leaders, can create a ‘sense of place’ for both children and adults. Their analysis is endorsed by findings from the project Leadership on the Front-line (Riley, 2007, 2008 & 2009). Young people interviewed in that project consistently emphasised the physical and emotional aspects of the school as a place of safety which offered them a space to play, to be with their friends, to access opportunities. Leadership of place has particular implications for school leaders in challenging urban contexts (Riley & Louis, 2004).

Leadership of place and political literacy

The three illustrations included in this paper demonstrate the ways in which discussions about a major city, such as London, and its young people, cannot take place in a political vacuum. The context of our cities is often highly charged. Ideas, beliefs, aspirations and values are contested. The notion of what it means to be a Londoner is being redefined every day.

The notion of leadership of place is thus linked to that of political literacy: not just the reading of the word but also the ‘reading of the world’, as Freire (1993) puts it. This connection between leadership of place and the development of political literacy stems from the potential for schools to play
a pivotal role in creating a ‘buy in’ for young people which enables them to make sense of the place in which they are located, and recognise how they can influence and shape it (Grace, 1987; Riley, forthcoming).

**Leadership of place and trust**

The notion of leadership of place also raises important issues about social trust between schools and communities (Byrk & Scheider, 2002): both institutional trust (the expectations and norms of an organisation), as well as relational trust (the interactions between individuals) (Louis, 2007). Trust is a dynamic concept which is an essential ingredient for the cooperative action which is the foundation of social capital (Coleman, 1988 & 1990), part of the ‘invisible assets’, the untapped resources of communities (Hargreaves, 2003).

What each of the three school leaders interviewed for this paper has demonstrated, in different ways, is the centrality of their role in building trust with the young people in their school, and with communities. Building trust requires energy, commitment and focus.

**Final Reflections**

Our cities have long been centres of flux, attracting populations: displaced workers from rural areas, displaced persons from across the globe, social and economic migrants. The East End of London, for example, has been the first port of call for the Huguenots, the Irish, the Jews of Eastern Europe, arrivals from the Asian sub-continent, as well as home to long-established white working-class communities.

The concept of ‘place’, rather than that of ‘context’ encapsulates the sense of movement that characterises our cities. It signifies, as has already been mentioned, issues about identity and belonging. It raises questions for educators such as: What is it that young people think and experience within their neighbourhood? Where do they feel safe? Where do they and their families think they belong? The school as a place changes, not only because the students change but because the staff change too.

Place and space assume different meanings in each of three contexts discussed here. Each school has its own story and its own pattern. The
exploration of leadership of place is central to our understanding of global citizenship. It is about:

- giving voice to young peoples’ views (Vignette I);
- recognising the importance of the school as a safe space (Vignette 2);
  and
- active engagement with the community (Vignette 3);

To be able to think and contribute as a global citizen, young people first need to be secure in who they are, and where they come from. Having a sense of place and location - and a view that they can influence their own lives - will free them to take up their role as a global citizen.

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