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Strategic planning and school management: full of sound and fury, signifying nothing?

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Abstract *Strategic planning, in the form of school improvement planning, has become the dominant approach to school management in English schools. This has evolved from earlier forms of strategic planning and has significant inherent weaknesses that undermine the extent to which school improvement planning can contribute to the effective management of schools. The development of school improvement planning is examined in this article and its weaknesses analysed. Implied models of school management and leadership, the legacy of school effectiveness and improvement research and the role of the school principal are considered. Based on this analysis, an alternative approach to planning in schools and to school organisation and a more flexible approach to school organisation and leadership is proposed that is grounded in a shorter planning time scale and the development of structures that facilitate involvement, cooperation and collaboration.*

Introduction

Fair is foul and foul is fair (*Macbeth*, Act I, Scene I).

This article will develop a critique of one aspect of school management that has emerged in a large number of countries in a variety of different forms over the last two decades, namely strategic planning. It will deal largely with one approach to strategic planning, namely that found in schools in England. Strategic planning, in the context of English school management, has come to encapsulate a range of activities associated with planning that are now required of staff in schools. It is now embodied in current educational policy that departments, faculties, curriculum areas and even individuals in schools will be expected to derive their own plans from the overall strategic plan for their school (e.g. DfES, 2001). Such planning has come to be the main legitimate approach to planning and its use has become the most acceptable way for schools to prepare for their future. The key issue, therefore, is how far does it enable schools to be well managed or is strategic planning simply:

. . . a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing (*Macbeth*, Act V, Scene V).

In seeking to answer this question the concept of strategy which underpins strategic planning will be examined. The forms in which strategic planning has been adopted in schools in England will then be considered. The conceptual

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assumptions and the fallacies that underpin them will then be explored and the barriers to the implementation of strategic planning considered. It will then be established whether or not strategic planning can work in schools. The conclusion will suggest an alternative approach to planning that is not based on conflict, competition and hierarchical management.

Strategy and strategic planning

> What bloody man is this? (*Macbeth*, Act I, Scene II).

In part, the answer to the question posed in the Introduction can be found embedded in the very concept of strategy itself. As Whipp (1998) points out, the term strategy has military origins and is derived from the Greek word for generalship. Its meaning evolved to encompass a coherent set of actions, the plan, usually concealed from the enemy, intended to achieve a specific military objective. The strategy was to be implemented by using a series of tactics, immediate measures conducted in the presence of the opposition. Strategy and the development of strategic planning now constitute an important weapon in the armoury of the modern manager. Strategy and planning have became inextricably linked.

At its simplest strategic planning may be understood as an approach to establishing the long-term future of an organisation and then moving that organisation in an appropriate direction to achieve the future state to which its members, or at least its key members, aspire. As Schendel and Hofer (1979, p. 11) note, strategic planning is concerned with:

> . . . the entrepreneurial work of the organisation, with organisational renewal and growth, . . . with developing and utilising the strategy . . . to guide the organisation's operations.

Quinn (1980) emphasises the interconnectedness between strategy, planning and the future development of the organisation. He defines strategic planning as the integration of an organisation's major goals, policies and actions into a cohesive whole. Thus, strategic planning is:

> . . . a list of actions so ordered as to attain over a particular time period, certain desired objectives derived from a careful analysis of the internal and external factors likely to affect the organisation, which will move the organisation from where it is now to where it wants to be (Puffitt *et al.*, 1992, p. 5).

Strategic planning, based on an analysis of available information, is something an organisation uses in order to establish its position in the world of competitive rivalry. It is what makes a firm unique, a winner or a survivor and is intended to give an organisation a competitive advantage over its rivals (Thomas, 1993). Strategic planning, therefore, can best be understood as matching the activities of an organisation to its environment and to its resource capabilities (Johnson and Scholes, 1989). It has been argued that, in schools, developing strategy is a key management process, which draws together institutional values and goals and provides a framework for the quality of

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provision and the deployment of resources (Preedy *et al.*, 1997). How far is this the case?

Strategy, planning and schools

Art thou but a false creation . . . ? (*Macbeth*, Act II, Scene II).

Planning in schools over the last two decades has been categorised in a number of ways. For example, Wallace (1994) argues that, at both regional and national level, frameworks for planning have been produced based on cycles of review, planning and implementation. At institutional level MacGilchrist *et al.* (1995) claimed that four different types of school plans could be identified:

(1) the rhetorical, which had no credence within the school;

(2) the singular, produced by the principal alone;

(3) the co-operative, produced by a group of staff and focusing on finance and staff development; and

(4) the corporate produced by the staff working together and focusing across an agreed range of the school's priorities.

Neither of these typologies, however, takes into the account either the real nature of planning in schools or the extent to which such plans are determined by external factors. It can be argued, for example, that planning in English schools has been largely determined by policy and other environmental pressures external to the school and that such planning has taken at least four different forms, each of which may be regarded as strategic although each has a different emphasis:

(1) Before the Education Reform Act (DES, 1988) planning, in so far as it related to schools, was largely the province of local education authorities (LEAs). It consisted of staffing and resource management, allocating pupils to schools, seeking to match available places to projected pupil numbers, building and maintenance and, latterly, in-service provision. Planning at this level had little direct impact on the curriculum or upon the processes of teaching and learning and it carried with it very little accountability. Indeed most schools were seldom troubled by the need to consider events in the long or even the medium term (Bell, 1998).

(2) With the increased devolution of responsibility for resource management to schools and the attempts to create an educational market place based on competition for pupil numbers, came the second form of planning, school development planning. which was the first systematic attempt to establish strategic planning in schools. While no legislation was introduced to require schools to have a development plan, the Education Act 1987 (DES, 1987) did place a responsibility upon principals to define the aims and objectives of the school, to monitor and review the achievement of those aims and objectives and to manage staff development. The Education Reform Act (DES, 1988) gave a

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further impetus to the deployment of strategic planning for school development. It linked the introduction of local financial management of schools, the delivery of the new national curriculum and new patterns of accountability to the school development plan which thus became central to each school's resource management process. At the same time, schools had to respond to the publication of league tables of examination and test results and provide an annual report to parents on the progress of the school. School development plans seemed to provide a way of coping both with this accountability and with the resource management aspects of these new demands.

This view was reinforced in 1989 when the Department of Education and Science (DES) commissioned a research project to provide guidance for schools on development planning. The two booklets that resulted from this project were distributed to all schools. The emphasis in the first of these booklets was on staff in schools identifying and justifying their own priorities for change and demonstrating that, by marshalling resources appropriately, the changes had been successfully implemented (Hargreaves *et al.*, 1989). By the time the second booklet appeared the focus had changed somewhat. The purpose of school development plans was now to assist schools to introduce changes successfully, so that the quality of teaching and standards of learning were improved (Hargreaves and Hopkins, 1991). Plans were to consist of a statement about key areas for development set in the context of the school's aims and values, its existing achievements and national and LEA policies and initiatives. A year later, school development plans became one of the focal points of the new national inspection framework. Inspectors from the Office for Standards in Education (OfSTED) were required to make a judgement about the management of the schools through the quality of the school development plan, its usefulness as an instrument of change and development, its realism and the achievement of priorities set (OfSTED, 1992). Largely as a result of their incorporation into the inspection process, development plans became the vehicle by which schools specified which improvements in teaching and/or learning were to be brought about. Their main function, however, was to provide a mechanism through which both parents and the OfSTED inspectors could hold staff in schools accountable for priority setting and the meeting of those priorities (Bell and Rhodes, 1996).

(3) At the same time, the original link between a development or strategic plan and the competitive nature of the environment remained as funding followed pupil numbers, schools were encouraged to recruit as many pupils as possible and parents were exhorted to exercise choice over the schools to which they sent their children. It was not merely coincidental that the emergence of development planning coincided with the political intention of the New Right to subject schools and colleges to the exigencies of the marketplace (Bell, 1998). Schools, some seduced by the

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charms of grant maintained status, were encouraged to adopt a more business-focused approach to their activities and to consider how they might market themselves more effectively, recruit pupils more aggressively and generate funding to support both core and extra-curricular activities. Thus, some schools were subjected to the third type of planning, business planning. This was often led, or at least encouraged, by boards of governors whose members were keen to introduce a more business-like approach to school management. It was certainly financially driven and supported by the OfSTED inspection framework (OfSTED, 1992) that collected evidence on value for money:

> The need for greater financial planning has created what many schools now regard as a Business Plan. The importance of linking developments with financial planning cannot be over-estimated ... A business plan may be regarded as a fully costed development plan ... and ... give a clear outline of developments over a long time scale ... (Blows, 1994, pp. 1-4).

The business plan, therefore, was intended to provide a rationale for resources deployed to meet both school development and individual needs.

(4) This emphasis on strategic planning in schools continued under the new Labour government after May 1997. The interpretation and use made of strategic planning by New Labour, in so far as it impacted on schools, was, however, different from that of the outgoing Conservative administration. For New Labour, the purpose of school-based strategic planning was to ensure that schools play a major role in furthering the government's economic agenda to provide a workforce with appropriate skills and social agenda to produce good citizens (Bell, 1998):

> As well as securing our economic future, learning ... helps make ours a civilised society ... and promotes active citizenship. Learning enables people to play a full part in their community. It strengthens the family, the neighbourhood and consequently the nation (DfEE, 1998, p. 7).

Improving pupil and teacher performance was to be central to both these agendas. This was made clear from the outset:

> From September 1998, each school will be required to have challenging targets for improvement. The use in school of reliable and consistent performance analysis enables ... Principals to monitor the performance of classroom teachers (DfEE, 1997, p. 26).

Principals were central to this process of strategic planning. They were to lead and manage their school's improvement by using pupil data to set targets for even better performance while being subject to inspection and the publication of inspection reports. This improvement in performance is concentrated on literacy and numeracy and is expressed in terms of national targets. Specific targets that inform the strategic planning in individual schools are set in conjunction with LEAs but must move towards those set nationally.

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As this target driven approach to educational planning has been pursued by New Labour, a significant change has occurred in the nature of development planning itself. Schools are no longer expected simply to produce general development plans that focus on any aspect of the school's work that might be identified as a priority at that time. It is no longer sufficient for staff in schools to set their own targets and to be accountable for achieving them. School targets must derived from national ones for similar schools. The plans into which these targets are incorporated must focus on strategies for bringing about curriculum change that will lead to improvements in pupil performance. All schools are now experiencing the fourth and most tightly focused form of strategic planning, school improvement planning, with its emphasis on the curriculum and the improvement of pupil attainment.

Plans to meet specific school improvement targets for pupil performance are now required. Much of the pedagogy that underpins these plans is expected to conform to centrally determined guidelines about teaching, especially in literacy and numeracy. LEAs are required to provide a range of support and guidance to help their schools achieve the improvement targets set (DfEE, 1997). This is underpinned by close management of teacher performance, the introduction of performance-related pay and the introduction of a new pay scale for advanced skills teachers. In addition, teachers now have to have their own targets for development set out in a personal performance plan. This improvement planning is predicated on the belief that the setting of targets provides a powerful way for schools to raise standards (Hopkins and Harris, 1998). Strategic planning as encapsulated in the School Improvement Plan has now become the focus of OfSTED inspections, a mechanism for LEA monitoring and the vehicle for school improvement (Handscomb, 2001).

Thus, the emphasis in strategic planning has shifted away from resource management, general accountability and enabling schools to take control of their own development to a specific concern with the curriculum and an explicit accountability for pupil attainment and for the deployment of resources to achieve improvement targets for pupil performance. The purpose of planning in schools has now become that of ensuring that schools implement the initiatives that are devolved to them by central government. The responsibility of principals is now firmly focused on the search for enhanced school success through strategic planning to improve both institutional and individual test and examination scores, coupled with the management of teacher performance. Success or failure will be determined not by the operation of market forces but by the extent to which schools meet these predetermined performance targets. Strategic planning for improvement in schools, therefore, is perceived as central both to the implementation of the government's educational policy and to the success of its wider economic and social agenda. But is this confidence in the efficacy of this

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form of strategic planning justified and who controls the strategic agenda?

School improvement as strategic planning in schools: three fallacies

> What is't you do?
>
> A deed without a name (*Macbeth*, Act IV, Scene I).

The edifice of strategic planning in schools is based on three sets of fallacies that undermine its efficacy as a management technique for use in educational institutions. These take the form of erroneous assumptions about the nature of leadership and management in schools, about planning as a management technique and about definitions of school effectiveness.

1 The leadership fallacy

This derives from the conceptualisations of leadership and management upon which strategic planning in schools is predicated. The principal is presented as the locus of management expertise and the individual who carries the burden of responsibility for planning. Thus, principalship is located within a hierarchical view of school management in which the principal is the solitary, heroic and accountable leader who personifies and exemplifies the totality of leadership skills and managerial competences (Bolman and Deal, 1991). This is, as Grace (1995, p. 313) argues:

> ... a hierarchical form of executive leadership driven by the vision of the self-managed market orientated school.

Such has been the emphasis on the centrality of the role of the principal they are required to be:

> ... critical, transformative, visionary, educative, empowering, liberating, personally ethical, organisationally ethical, responsible (Grace, 1995, pp. 156-7).

If this list constitutes a description of the qualities of a principal teacher, it also identifies a person who must seriously be considered for canonisation as an educational saint (Grace, 1995). This is the myth of the hero-innovator reborn. It requires principals, perhaps supported by senior staff, to formulate a vision for the school and then translate this into action. Leadership involves the embodiment and articulation of this vision and its communication to others in the form of a strategic plan.

As Southworth (1999) has pointed out, this model of leadership is based on a concern for control, efficiency, performance of staff and measurable pupil outcomes. It is firmly rooted in the view that education is an integral part of social capital:

> Learning is the key to prosperity ... Investment in human capital will be the foundation of success in the knowledge economy (DfEE, 1998, p. 7).

This is a technical-rationalist approach to education that gives no consideration to benefits of education other than economic utility (Bottery, 2000). There is no

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notion of education as intrinsically good or aesthetically valuable. This rationale does not emphasise, or even include, the ethical dimensions of leadership and management that should inform the totality of school organisation. In fact, matters related to the school as a social and moral organisation, living with others in a diverse community and wider issues of social justice are largely ignored in the quest for a narrowly defined form of improvement. Thus the social and the moral are subordinate to the economic in the forms of leadership and management upon which strategic planning in our schools is now predicated.

The presentation of such forms of leadership and management as an appropriate way to conduct the planning process does not recognise the part played by individual teachers in implementing strategies for improvement and fails to acknowledge the very real dilemmas that confront senior staff in schools. Central to these dilemmas is the extent to which successful planning in schools should be a collective rather than an individual responsibility and must take place at the three levels of management within the institution. There is a failure here to recognise that the vision and the mission at the strategic level are derived from overarching values and beliefs held not only by the principal but by the whole staff. Similarly, the realisation of plans based on them requires a commitment from and the involvement of staff at the organisational and operational levels. If at the strategic level of school management, planning involves translating the vision into broad aims and long-term plans, then it is at the organisational level that the strategic view is converted into medium-term objectives supported by the allocation of appropriate resources and the delegation of responsibility for decision making, implementation, review and evaluation. Here rests much of the managerial responsibility for translating strategy into actions that may produce significant school improvement and the collegial responsibility for supporting and developing colleagues to improve their own performance and enhance the learning of their pupils.

In turn, the implementation of these medium-term plans requires them to be further sub-divided into the totality of the delegated tasks that have to be carried out at the operational level. Here resources are utilised, tasks completed, activities co-ordinated and monitored. It is at this level, in the classroom, where a collegial framework is most necessary and where those tasks that may bring about improvements in pupil achievement must be carried out. Thus, accountability, resource deployment and management and the responsibility for improvement are located here as much as at the previous two levels. The three levels of management, strategic, organisational and operational, must work in harmony towards a common purpose if strategic planning is to be successful. This will only happen if all members of the school community share the vision and if values are largely communal. Each level depends on the other two. To emphasise one and ignore the others is fundamentally to misunderstand the nature of schools as organisations. Principals cannot manage schools alone nor can they carry the burden of motivating others to achieve objectives and complete tasks without significant support from

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colleagues. Principals and their staff must move towards inclusive forms of management and leadership that are collegial rather than hierarchical, holistic rather than fragmented and instrumental. The fundamental flaw in this conceptualisation of strategic planning is that it leads to the over-emphasis on the role of the principal and, at the same time, is based on a narrowly conceptualised perception of leadership itself.

2 The predictive fallacy

This concerns the conceptualisation of strategic planning itself. The essential purpose of strategic planning is to scan the environment in which the school operates, forecast the future for the school and then deploy resources in order to meet the predicted situation (Whipp, 1998). Strategic decisions, therefore, evolve from analysis through planning to the achieving of objectives. Thus, strategic planning is predicated on being able to predict the future of the school's environment. It assumes that realistic organisational objectives can be identified. It requires the ability to plan effectively and to exercise sufficient control or influence over the organisation and its environment to ensure that planned outcomes can be achieved by the deployment and redeployment of available resources. Thus, strategic planning in schools, if it is to succeed, must be based on an analysis of both the present situation and possible future states. Such planning presupposes that senior staff in schools have the capacity to control the environment and not be controlled by it. Strategic planning demands that principals and teachers to be proactive to the extent that they do not take the external environment should be immutable but seek to influence and shape it by deploying resources to create change.

To achieve this it must be assumed that schools can be managed so as to respond in a rational way to environmental factors and that organisationally acceptable means and desired ends can be rationally linked. This implies that planning and implementation are orderly and sequential and that schools can be shaped and controlled in such a way as to avoid the unintended consequences of change while realising strategic objectives. Mintzberg (1994) has drawn attention to the mistake of assuming that means and ends can be linked in this way, that significant changes in the environment can be predicted and that organisations can make rational choices about ways in which to respond to their environments. Quinn (1980) and Pettigrew (1973) have exploded the myth that strategic planning evolves in a neat linear progression from analysis to implementation. The rationality of their plans and the inherent power of their positions will be insufficient for senior managers to ensure that those plans can be successfully implemented (Quinn, 1993). This is, at least in part, because decisions and choices are often not made by a careful matching of means to ends. As March and Olsen (1979) argue from their analysis of decision making in education, the linking of solutions to problems is frequently the result of oversight, accident, flight or loose association, none of which is either rational or strategic.

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Furthermore, to treat organisational activity as a rational response to an analysis of the environment is to assume that there is a range of actions which match environmental circumstances and from which rational choices can be made. The fallacious nature of this position was noted by Puffitt *et al.* (1992), who pointed out that in most circumstances there are only a very limited number of options available to staff in schools, and by March and Olsen (1979), who demonstrated that, although organisations do act within environmentally constrained boundaries, a similar environmental situation may produce different organisational response and the same organisational action may produce different environmental outcomes at different times. Thus the planning model which underpins school development is defective because it is insufficiently responsive both to short- and long-term changes in the environment.

3 The effectiveness fallacy

The current approach to strategic planning is derived from conceptualisations embedded in its ideological antecedents, namely school effectiveness. As Slee and Weiner (1998, pp. 1-2) point out:

> The effective schooling research, in conjunction with . . . the school improvement movement has been adopted by policy-makers pursuant to the resolution of . . . the alleged crises in state education.

It is here, then, that the agenda for strategic planning in schools is set and its parameters defined. The problem is that the discourse of effective schooling and school improvement overstates what planning can achieve. This discourse is largely based on an extremely narrow set of criteria against which to identify the effect of schools on pupil performance and tends to reduce learning to limited, discrete, assessable and comparable segments of academic knowledge; witness the emphasis on literacy, numeracy and little else in the current strategic targets which are set for schools (Slee and Weiner, 1998). This is an extremely value-laden approach for, as Beare (2001, p. 5) argues, once you have educational provision focused on:

> . . . literacy and numeracy testing, competition among schools, rewards for schools with demonstrably good outcomes . . . and a kind of excellence based on beating your peers . . . there [is] not much enthusiasm for sentiment, human kindness . . . respecting the worth of every person.

Such reductionism makes simplistic assumptions about the nature and purposes of education. The strategic planning based on it suffers from an impoverished, mechanistic and narrow view of what counts as educational achievement, ignores the impact of context and disregards the effects of differential funding, school selection policies and, above all, social and economic disadvantage (Gray and Wilcox, 1995).

In taking this stance, the school effectiveness discourse labels entire schools as good or bad after measuring them against conformity to disconnected criteria and brands entire institutions as failing or even pathological (Teddlie

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and Reynolds, 2000) when the anticipated conformity is not observed. This is an inappropriate level of analysis. Identifying schools as good or bad, in effect treating them as units of analysis in themselves, is problematic because the dominant organisational entity within schools is the classroom and the main point of reference is either the age stage or the subject. This aspect of the school effectiveness discourse fails to recognise that it is not necessarily the difference between schools that affects achievement most significantly but the differences within them (Lingard *et al.*, 1998). Even inspection reports confirm that in many failing schools, examples of good practice can be found. The sources of differential achievement within schools must be carefully considered (Gamoran and Berends, 1987). School planning, if it is to contribute to sound school management, must pay far more attention to intra-school differences and less to inter-school comparisons through league tables and other differential performance indicators.

Perhaps the most significant weakness of all in the school effectiveness discourse is the fundamental vacuum at its very core. It lacks any clear conceptual rationale that links the characteristics that commonly describe an effective school with a dynamic model of school leadership and management in such a way that it might be possible to explain the relationships between those characteristics and improved pupil performance. As Ouston (1998) has pointed out, the precise nature of the relationship between an effective principal, the classroom performance of an individual teacher and the learning of a particular child is largely ignored in the school effectiveness literature. New Labour policy in this regard rests largely on exhortation and a battery of tactics, the precise outcomes of which are, at best, indeterminate. A form of planning must be developed that makes planning possible in a complex and unpredictable environment. Planning for school improvement, therefore, should rest on a much more fundamental understanding of the nature of schools, the main features of appropriate management and leadership in those schools and of the world in which schools exist, than is the case at present.

Planning for the future – can strategic planning work in schools?

> Stay you imperfect speakers, tell me more. Say from whence you owe this strange intelligence (*Macbeth*, Act I, Scene III).

The world view on which much strategic planning is predicated is based on the Newtonian paradigm that presents the environment as a place of order, simplicity and conformity, where everything operates according to specific, knowable and predetermined rules. The world is perceived as an orderly place where the whole is equal to, but no greater than, the sum of its parts. This, in turn, means that all activities are predictable and controllable. The search for truth from such a world view is a search for the rules that order that world. Gaining knowledge is based on the identification of the discrete components that make up the whole. Learning, therefore, is rooted in deductive logic and dissection, so that the parts can be isolated and understood. In a hierarchically

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controlled organisation this is an individualistic process that proceeds in a linear way through analysis and the construction of generalisations based on empirical evidence. The atomism, fragmentation and concern with predictability and control which shape this approach to strategic planning produce an underlying set of cognitive processes that are reductive, reactive and unable to cope with rapid change and uncertainty. This is because the cognitive processes which underpin this form of planning are rigid, inflexible and exclusive. Its outcomes, therefore, are merely the disjointed acquisition of disconnected elements of knowledge and the limited acquisition of context specific competences.

Thus, strategic planning is reduced to the identification, by a small group of senior managers, of long term-goals and the one way to achieve them, the implementation of which rests with the majority who had no part in its formulation. Strategic planning, as it exists in most contemporary organisations including schools, therefore, is based on the monopolisation of power by a few and social relationships derived from modes of activity which are rooted in conflict, competition, hierarchy and social control as the prime determinants of social order. In an unpredictable, rapidly changing environment strategic planning of this sort is unhelpful as a way of enabling schools to prepare for the future. Such planning is not conducive to the sound management of groups of well qualified, motivated professional teachers whose predominant concern is the welfare of the pupils in their care. It inhibits creativity and imaginative thinking. It fails to employ much of the talent in the organisation and it cannot readily take account of forces emanating from the external environment in a period of rapid and extensive change (Zohar, 1997). Such an approach to change through strategic planning in education is overly prescriptive and is based on the assumption that there is only one way to achieve improvement. It has taken the fun, the excitement and the creativity from what many of us do and has limited the horizons that we can offer to the children in our care by producing a narrow, examination-based curriculum.

In schools the link between strategic planning and school management is made even more problematic by the operation of the very policy mechanisms that are meant to serve those working within educational institutions. The implementation of educational policies which seek to define the nature, scope and direction of such planning and which, ultimately, determine the strategies available for the implementation, make it difficult, if not impossible, for managers in schools to predict or exercise control over the future. The most important example of this is the breakdown in the Government's own strategic planning which has led to a failure to achieve an adequate level of teacher recruitment and supply (TES, 2001). If principals are to manage schools successfully it must be possible for principals to recruit and retain a suitability qualified and motivated staff. If it is impossible for the government and its agencies to implement its own strategic policies, how can those responsible for school management be expected to plan strategically?

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Thus the formulation and implementation of school improvement plans is constrained by the very policy context that shapes planning in schools and evaluates the success of that planning. It is based on an inadequate model which is linear and two-dimensional (Forshaw, 1998). As a result, the planning process focuses on either the immediate or the small scale while concentrating on maintenance functions rather than on considering alternatives and developing independent solutions to difficult, long-term problems. So complex has the world become that it can be argued that those responsible for strategic planning in schools have little chance of knowing sufficient about the environment even if they wished to do so. Making accurate predictions on which to base planning becomes an almost impossible task. The rate and impact of technological change, the extent of social change, the speed of political change and the global influences on local environments combine to make it impossible for schools to have a complete understanding of their environments. This, in turn, means that the knowledge base on which school improvement planning can be based is totally inadequate (Davies, 1998). Strategic planning as a management technique for staff in schools, therefore, is deeply flawed; it is based on inappropriate assumptions about the nature and purpose of education and is founded on an ill-conceived model of schools as organisations and the management of those schools. It is unlikely, then, to make a useful contribution to the processes of school management. It is, indeed, full of sound and fury that has little significance. As Wheatley (1999, p. 38) has argued:

> For many years . . . we have invested in the planning process derived from Newtonian beliefs. How many schools made significant and consistent progress because of elaborate and costly strategic plans? . . . Instead of the ability to analyse and predict, we need to be better, faster learners from what has just happened. Agility and intelligence are required . . . .

Does this mean that all attempts to develop insights into the future should be abandoned? Clearly not since schools, like other organisations, cannot be left to drift aimlessly on a turbulent sea of change. How then, might the future be addressed?

Planning in schools: a way forward

> I . . . wish the estate o' the world were now undone (*Macbeth*, Act V, Scene V).

As Handy (1995) has argued, we are faced with an unpredictable world in which the only certainty is uncertainty. Such an environment requires an approach to planning which can be based not on a set of immutable, externally imposed targets but on reaching agreement on a series of short-term objectives derived from negotiated and shared common values (Bell, 1999). It needs to take into account the nature of the questions that may be asked about the future while recognising that the answers to them may be either unknown or unknowable. It has to be recognised that in coping with the new future, important information may not be available, important alternatives may be ignored and important possible outcomes neglected. The capacity to retain a

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distinct separation between means and ends and to rely on the linear relationship between them is greatly reduced in this new environment. Thus, plans will not be made and implemented. Rather, they will be made and remade endlessly as the school proceeds through a process of successive approximation to agreed objectives derived from policy, both of which may change before being achieved. Lindblom (1959) termed this approach to policy formulation and planning the "science of muddling through" while Pinchot (1985) called it intrapreneurship and Wallace (1994) saw it as rationalistic flexibility based on pragmatic contingency.

This approach to planning is an extremely sophisticated form of responding to unknown and perhaps unknowable organisational futures. It locates the capacity to respond rapidly to changing situations within an agreed view of what might be possible based on a series of incremental responses to external change. It requires a coherent sense of purpose that does not rest on the fruitless pursuit of vision or targets (Hargreaves, 1994). In order for such an approach to planning to succeed, however, there must be an agreement within the school about basic values and broadly acceptable means which are not rooted in the traditional hierarchical management model with its rule-bound inflexibilities and emphasis on the separation of functions. Work relationships must move towards being less hierarchical, more multi-functional and holistic based on a wider distribution of power within the organisation. Whole school perspectives must be developed. These are too important to be left to a small group of staff, however senior. It will then be seen that there are many ways of getting things done, each of which may be equally legitimate, and that co-operation, responsiveness, flexibility and partnership must replace our present inflexible structures. This is a most difficult but a most exciting challenge.

To succeed in the reformulation of planning at school level will require a different mindset, perhaps similar to that based on the distinction between connected and separated modes of knowing developed through an investigation into problem solving by women in management positions in schools (Tarule, 1998). Separated knowing is Newtonian. It seeks objectivity, is abstract, adversarial, critical, exclusive and detached from personal relationships. It is inherent in strategic planning. As Wheatley (1999, p. 7) suggests, however:

> There is no objective reality out there waiting to reveal its secrets. There is only what we create through our engagement with others and events.

If this is the case, then the world for which we all seek to plan is neither predictable nor controllable. Rather, it is the product of our shared understandings and interactions with our environment. It is from this starting point that planning must evolve. Such planning should be based on connected knowing, a collaborative process of looking for what is right through sharing rather than competition and by accepting the validity of a range of different perspectives. Meanings are constructed and developed through reasoning with others and through narratives rather than analysis. These take place within

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inclusive and communal relationships, the foundation of which is a commonality of experiences, not a defence of differences. Knowledge, therefore, is distributed, shared and circulated throughout the school, not located in the office of the principal teacher or a cadre of senior staff. Such connected knowledge and the processes inherent within it, provide a foundation on which flexible yet inclusive policy formulation based on different but shared values and perspectives can be developed.

The emphasis will be on holistic relationships and policies which focus on integration rather than fragmentation, recognise that the sum is greater than the parts and celebrate the imaginative and the experimental. The mode of discourse will shift from debate to a dialogue which focuses on finding out rather than knowing, on questions not answers, which proceeds through listening not criticising, sharing rather than winning and losing and exploring new possibilities not defending established positions. The cognitive processes which support this approach are such that they enable each individual to make a distinctive contribution within a flexible framework rather than expecting a series of limited contributions, the sum of which make up the predetermined whole. Issues will be addressed, re-interpreted, re-addressed and redefined in the light of communal understandings and common knowledge. Planning, therefore, will become a shared, incremental and flexible process that is based on the creation, monitoring and continual adjustment of plans for the short. medium and longer term (Wallace, 1994). Planning may be updated whenever new information comes to light or unpredicted circumstances occur. Such information and circumstances may have different implications for different aspects of the school organisation. This may mean that parts of the school may change at different rates from each other, one department developing while another is stable, thus limiting innovation fatigue. Management of the three levels of school organisation will also change. At the strategic level there will be much more emphasis on the collaborative revision of the overall plan. At the organisational level there will be far more opportunities for differential implementation of aspects of the plan between parts of the school and a greater concern for collegial support while at the operational level the plan will be reviewed frequently in the light of continually changing circumstances and resource constraints. Schools may thus become loosely coupled in the sense that freedom and autonomy allows for such different rates of development within the overall framework of the institution (Marion, 1999).

Such an approach to strategic planning is far removed from the bureaucratic, linear, rational, positivist methods rooted in the unequal distribution of power and a belief in the sanctity of order and control on which the deployment of strategic planning in schools is based. It requires a new form of leadership predicated on openness, collaboration and power sharing where flexibility, creativity, imagination and responsiveness can flourish and genuine accountability for school improvement can exist. If this can be achieved then planning for school improvement may be successfully linked to good management practices, such that educational purposes based on the

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experiences of the wider membership of the school can shape the school planning processes and not the other way round. Indeed, it may even be possible for staff in schools to eliminate the sound and fury of planning and to replace the nothingness with something much more positive so that we can all say to policy makers, beware for:

> Birnham Wood be come to Dunsinane (*Macbeth*, Act V, Scene VII).

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