Competencies and attributes of an effective senior leader

Case study: Primary
Case study: Primary Bankside Junior School

Sally is a member of the senior leadership team (SLT) at Bankside School, a large junior school, where she leads literacy and teaches a class. With 17 years' teaching experience, she recently became a specialist leader of education (SLE) through the local teaching school alliance.

Her understanding of herself as a leader and a learner has been developed by:

− having a varied career path
− engaging in regular and relevant professional development
− observing and analysing other people's leadership
− supporting others and helping them to develop
− focusing on some key leadership attributes, eg developing resilience

Having a varied career path

Since training as a teacher, Sally has been highly motivated and keen to do well, first as a classroom teacher and then by taking on additional responsibilities and moving into leadership roles. While always ambitious do well as a teacher, she hadn’t set out to become a school leader. As she gained more experience, however, she wanted to develop further by taking on new and challenging responsibilities.

Over the 17 years she has been in the profession, Sally has taught in five schools in three countries and led three subjects. Her school-wide responsibilities have included being art and science co-ordinator, Key Stage 1 leader and literacy leader. She has been involved in outreach in three other schools. Thus, she is someone with a rich and varied experience, as is shown in the summary of her career path (Table 1).

Table 1: Summary of Sally’s career path

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place</th>
<th>School</th>
<th>Service</th>
<th>Teaching</th>
<th>Leadership and management</th>
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<tr>
<td>New Zealand</td>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>Year 4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wales</td>
<td>Special</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>Key Stage 2</td>
<td>Art, Key Stage 2, shadowing literacy</td>
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<td>Infant</td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>Year 1</td>
<td>Science, art</td>
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<tr>
<td>Outer London</td>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>Year 1, Year 2</td>
<td>Science, art, Key Stage 1</td>
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<td>Outer London</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>5 years</td>
<td>Year 6, Year 4</td>
<td>Literacy, SLT ECAW* lead teacher in three other schools.</td>
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*Every Child a Writer project
The understanding of herself as a learner stems from her own school education in New Zealand, where she considered herself to be just an average student. She wasn’t particularly engaged in school until the age of 17, when she was taught English by an inspirational teacher. He raised her self-esteem and ignited a love of language, literature and learning that is still very much alight.

Coming from a farming family, teaching was not an obvious career, but she did volunteer work in a local primary school and found that she “loved it”. She trained to teach as a primary teacher in New Zealand, and taught there for two years before moving to west Wales, where she found it very difficult to find a post. She had to be really determined: “I went round schools with my CV and was really pushy. I had to be”.

Sally got a job in a special school for two years teaching Key Stage 2 children with severe disabilities and had school-wide responsibility for art and SATs, as well as being the deputy literacy co-ordinator. In such a new context and so early in her career, both the teaching and management roles were very challenging. She had not only taken on management responsibilities early in her career but in a context and type of school different from those of her experience and training. She coped by learning from other colleagues, asking for help and being fortified by the belief that others had in her. Her professional attributes of self-awareness, resilience and emotional maturity helped enormously. Her high levels of self-awareness meant she really understood what her strengths were and when she needed to ask for help. She was also in touch with her “emotional triggers” so could manage her behaviour very effectively. Sally has always been optimistic and “calm under pressure” and so very reliable in a crisis. She is also able to resolve conflicts in a calm, restrained way with appropriate levels of empathy.

Although Sally found the role hard, she enjoyed the experience and gained a deep insight into the absolute foundations of learning: “How the children learned was really fascinating and very inspiring”.

She then moved to London where she has worked in three schools: an infant for four years, a primary for three and she is now in her fifth year in a junior school. These three schools served very different communities. The first school was sited in the middle of a notorious housing estate with people from different cultures leading similar lives. In the community were many refugee families, including professional families who had been through traumatic experiences and now had to “put up with people smashing windows and setting cars on fire”. It was a challenging area for children to live and many started their schooling at the age of four or five with limited social and educational skills. Sally found the environment extremely challenging. On her first day, for example, there was a fight between two mothers in the classroom: “They were literally pulling each other’s hair out”. This was a real shock to Sally.

She was responsible for art and science in the school and teaching Year 1 pupils. During the four years she would be the first to say she learned a huge amount both about teaching skills such as literacy and numeracy, as well as supporting children from socially deprived backgrounds. She loved her responsibility for art across the school and saw this as a great opportunity to celebrate the different cultural backgrounds of pupils as well as channelling their creativity. Co-ordinating the subject across the school required Sally to work with more experienced teachers whose strengths were not in art. This was a great opportunity to build her relationship management skills and take time to build trust while keeping her eye on what she wanted to achieve. She found the science responsibility more challenging, partly because her own subject knowledge, whilst good, she felt wasn’t strong enough to be the school lead. Her confidence was knocked a bit but, in characteristic style, she tackled the problem by attending training courses, linking with teachers in other local schools and drawing on support from local authority personnel.
Early on in her career someone had said to her that some of her biggest challenges in leadership would be personnel ones. At the time, she hadn’t had any particular difficulties with colleagues and so couldn’t predict the impact that such difficulties, if they arose, might have on her. Sally certainly faced this in this London school in both art and science. In art, one particular teacher didn’t want to follow the creative display themes that Sally thought had been agreed at a team meeting. The teacher continued to do his own thing, which was becoming increasingly difficult as the school was approaching some major cultural celebrations. Sally had spoken to her already and realised she had to confront this because all previous discussions had led nowhere. She was very cautious about opening up discussions again. She decided she wanted to try one more time informally and looked for an opportunity. This came one afternoon at the end of the school day when she went to the teacher’s classroom to return some equipment. She opened up a general discussion about the art curriculum. What followed between the two teachers was an animated, professional discussion about the teaching of art and the use of display for both celebration and learning. It was clear to Sally she hadn’t really taken enough time to listen to colleagues’ concerns and perspectives so she could take their ideas on board. This led her to revisit the previous team discussion through a team workshop where all members had time to present their ideas and then revise the scheme of work for art together as a team.

The other example was even more challenging. During science sessions, a very experienced teacher in Year 2 regularly brought a pupil to her class who wouldn’t behave himself. The boy was generally well behaved, though unpredictable, in school and didn’t want to “do science”. After the first occasion, when Sally had raised the incident with the teacher, the teacher had replied “You’re in charge of science so it’s your responsibility not mine,” and he hadn’t wanted to discuss it further. Each time an incident occurred Sally had opened up a discussion with the teacher afterwards but without reaching any satisfactory conclusion. His view was that he needed support with the lessons as science wasn’t his subject, the pupil was behaving badly and she was the “expert”. After four such incidents, she decided to discuss the matter with her then assistant head, who was also her line manager and had worked with the teacher for some years. She gave Sally some insights into his strengths and they talked about how Sally could link these to science teaching. The assistant head offered to mediate a discussion between the two of them and after some reflection Sally agreed to this. She knew that the teacher in question had great respect for the assistant head. In the discussion, the teacher agreed that he needed to find solutions to the boy’s poor behaviour and he couldn’t keep removing him from the lesson. Sally agreed to work with the teacher to plan science lessons that he was confident he could teach.

She found this incident had stretched her resilience significantly and shaken her confidence a bit. She had always prided herself in the way she could develop strong relationships with colleagues, but she could see a common theme in these two experiences. She really needed to empathise more and to look at issues from the perspective of others to understand more clearly the obstacles and what motivated her colleagues.

When reflecting on the experience in this school she realises she had to demonstrate significant resilience. She also found it had been a great opportunity to develop her ability to adapt to working in unfamiliar contexts. For Sally that was about thinking carefully how to use both her teaching and leadership skills in ways that were appropriate to the context and also to identify skills she needed to develop further, including both supporting and challenging staff, being able to look for opportunities to benefit of all pupils, and building relationships with key stakeholders such as parents, and the governing body.

Her next position was at a primary school in a less challenging area and with a headteacher whom she greatly respected. As in the infant school, she was responsible for art and science and also became the Key Stage 1 co-ordinator. With this formal role of Key Stage 1 co-ordinator, it was here that her leadership skills and expertise really developed. She learned a huge amount from the headteacher both through discussions and debates about school issues, but also by observing how the headteacher led the school. Whether in pupil assemblies, chairing a staff meeting, talking to parents or how he conducted himself around the school, Sally watched how the headteacher behaved and reflected on what she could learn in relation to her own leadership. She also learned a lot from professional development, particularly her participation on Leading from the Middle. With a school-based coach, challenging learning materials and a stimulating peer group to learn with, Sally felt she was able to tackle some of the aspects of leadership, such as holding others to account and maximising her influence, that had been lacking to date. When there was a change of headteacher, Sally decided that it was time for her to move too.
When her ex-headteacher heard that she was about to accept a job in the independent sector, he persuaded her to apply for a post as literacy leader at Bankside School, his new school. This is a large, four-form entry junior school with a pupil roll of approximately 450. It is in an affluent catchment near her home. Sally was offered the job, and accepted it because she was convinced that it would be a very positive challenge and one in which her passion for literacy would be developed. As an assistant head she also became a member of the senior leadership team (SLT) and so could contribute to whole-school strategy and gain broader leadership experience of whole-school issues.

She found the pupils a delight:

It was like something out of the ‘Famous Five’ – they were so polite and there were no fights in the playground.

But the job itself proved to be a great challenge. There were so many changes for her. She moved from teaching Year 1 to Year 6; she became a member of an SLT for the first time; and she was leading English right across the school. There was resentment of her appointment because the previous English co-ordinator had been well regarded and highly effective. Sally was associated with an influx of the new headteacher’s “favourites” from his former school. She quickly realised this was going to be a steep learning curve for her.

Initially, she met with some resistance, for example, teachers not valuing her ideas and certainly not implementing her suggestions. She realised she needed to take time to understand the school context, find out about staff strengths and establish her credibility. She also needed to draw on her experience but not by mentioning “in my last school, I...”.

She had been an outstanding teacher in her previous school and wanted to use her classroom expertise to demonstrate credibility with her peers. That was with Year 1 pupils, however, and she had no experience in Year 6. She drew on support from one of her friends who taught Year 5 in a primary school and spent time carefully preparing her lessons. She also worked hard to build relationships with other Year 6 teachers at the school. One in particular wanted help with her classroom displays as she was looking for innovative ways to display pupils’ work. With her expertise in art, Sally was able to help and so get to know the teacher. As her confidence grew, she was able to teach outstanding lessons. Modelling excellence in teaching certainly helped Sally gain credibility with other teachers.

She had to temper her natural style to want to “change things quickly” and manage her own expectations. She used this time to clarify what she thought the strengths and school improvement priorities were in relation to her responsibilities and also to look at the school through the “eyes of a newcomer”. The SLT members certainly found her reflections helpful when discussing topics such as pupil attendance and links with parents.

Gradually she won people round with her strong interpersonal skills and ability to build relationships. She listened carefully to colleagues and acted on their concerns. Indeed, over time, some of the people who had been most resistant to her when she first came to the school became her greatest allies. Her headteacher says:

Sally has increasingly adopted a collegiate approach and the development of teamworking is key to her leadership approach. I’ve witnessed colleagues embark upon a voyage of discovery with the many initiatives she has implemented.

The variety of Sally’s experiences has given a depth to her understanding of how to influence and inspire others and has amply demonstrated her adaptability through the layering of leadership strategies (Day, 2011).
Taking up the senior leadership role

Having responsibility for English across the whole school was a significant challenge for Sally. She identified some clear strengths in the school – behaviour in lessons was excellent, the curriculum was creative and there were pockets of outstanding teaching. The quality of some English teaching was, however, only satisfactory. Sometimes teaching techniques needed improving and sometimes it was a teacher’s subject specialism that needed addressing. Sally drew on her own experiences to think about how to lead the team of 17 teachers across the school who taught English.

Sally had been very discerning about her own subject specialist professional development, and over the years had sought to deepen her literacy expertise by attending conferences and workshops with leading lights in her field such as Alan Peat, Geoff Dean, Ruth Miskin and Ros Wilson. She prefers to hear them speak rather than getting their ideas secondhand through local authority courses. She thinks through their often opposing ideas and then tries out new ideas with a rationale to underpin her practice before leading others in change. She is passionate about English and the teaching of it, so keeping her subject knowledge up to date has always been an important part of her professional leadership. As a senior leader she now has to help others develop their expertise to both improve their teaching and also to fully understand the rationale behind the improvements she plans.

She organised a programme of subject-specialist development and linked this to the team’s training sessions and individual performance management objectives so that some activities they did as a team and others were for specific individuals. She also introduced subject-specialist slots into the regular departmental meetings. Topics were as broad as phonics, poetry and creative writing.

As far as teaching skills are concerned, when she first taught Year 1 pupils in England, she was uncomfortable with how formal and structured the children’s learning had to be: “I felt so sorry for them”. She attended a course on Foundation Stage to Year 1 transition, which had an enormous impact in giving her the confidence to implement significant changes.

Owing to this course, I changed the school’s approach to teaching literacy in Year 1, allowing children to maintain their independence in learning and ensuring that learning experiences built on the practical approaches and structured play in Reception.

She wanted to make this approach part of the culture of her team, particularly since she felt pupils, whilst making good progress, had the potential to progress at a faster rate. She worked with two teachers who demonstrated outstanding features in their lessons to plan a programme of peer lesson observation, mentoring and workshops to consider different teaching techniques.

This mixture of activities motivated and inspired the majority of team members as Sally thought it would since it connected with one of the reasons why colleagues had become teachers in the first place – their love of a subject and their desire to teach.

She worked with two team members whose teaching was satisfactory. She felt it was her responsibility to help them improve, although she found this really hard. One teacher, for example, didn’t accept that her teaching was satisfactory, saying that she had always “taught like this and it’s never been a problem”. Sally organised team-teaching sessions with a colleague in the same year group, had regular mentoring sessions with her and provided support for her planning and assessment of pupils’ work. When her teaching was good, Sally made sure she provided positive feedback and praise, and gradually over several months, the teaching improved and became consistently rated good. The other teacher was very challenging: she was reaching the end of her career and resented a younger person coming in and “telling her what to do”. Sally had some really difficult conversations with the teacher, some ending in stalemate. She knew that this was one of the toughest parts of leadership,
but her tenacity and resilience stood her good stead. She also took advice from the headteacher and other SLT colleagues on approaches and techniques to use. Her relentless focus on pupils and their learning eventually brought some results, and the teacher had a group of pupils whose creative writing was rated outstanding. Sally nurtured this with the teacher and suggested that some of the writing should be shared with the whole school through an assembly. This was arranged for a day when a local author was coming to the school. He was asked to read a selection of the writing out in assembly. The pride emanating from both teacher and pupils was palpable. Sally followed this up by asking the teacher to help her introduce an Every Child a Writer project in the school. They worked together successfully, with the teacher using the experience in her own classroom.

An Ofsted inspection that followed this work commented that:

... pupils’ achievement is outstanding because they make good progress and their attainment is high... Year 6 national test results are consistently above average.... Pupils make equally good progress in developing their reading, writing and numeracy skills... They are keen learners and are inspired by the school’s innovative and creative curriculum.

Sally was pleased with the contribution her team had made to this outcome and with the judgement that teaching was good overall with some outstanding features. The Ofsted report acknowledged the role teacher mentors were playing in improving the quality of teaching. However, in terms of delivering continuous improvement, she considers there is more work to do in enabling English teaching to be more consistently outstanding so that pupils make even more progress.

Sally has learned a great deal from being part of the SLT at Bankside School. In particular, she is able to see the big picture of the school, and thus to be strategic in how she acts. Her headteacher has a lot of drive, is very enthusiastic and acts decisively. Although these are very positive attributes, Sally sees that this sometimes has a negative effect in terms of the amount of stress on staff. She finds that her role on the SLT is to encourage reflection:

I’m sure they think I’m stupid or something because I’m always saying, ‘but why?’ or ‘I don’t understand’. What I’m really doing is slowing things down so that new initiatives and decisions are well thought-through and have a really clear rationale.

She strongly believes in giving people lead-in time so that change happens more smoothly and without causing staff undue stress. Her headteacher says:

The biggest change in Sally has been her realisation that there are many paths to reach the same goal. She encourages independent thinking and working styles to consolidate and crystallise the strength of commitment to a vision, as opposed to creating barriers to school improvement.

Sally enjoys being part of the SLT and the contribution she is expected to make to discussing the strategic direction of the school. She likes looking ahead, creating opportunities and planning for the medium to long term. Through this process she has learned about the wider curriculum and other aspects of school life, including governance and whole-school accountability. She has also been left in charge when the head has been out of school, and while she knows he is only “a mobile phone call” away, having the responsibility has given her a taste of headship.

Using her influencing skills with a broader audience, such as parents and the community, has been interesting. Her previous work with parents related to their individual sons and daughters, but now it’s about school policy and whole-school issues and she talks to them in groups rather than as individuals. Communicating effectively to different audiences has been part of her professional development within performance management. Sally thinks she is making good progress with this though has asked the head for more opportunities to present to the whole governing body.
Engaging in relevant professional development: leadership learning

Sally has always taken her professional development seriously. The first year of teaching in London was an enormous learning curve for her. She had to get to grips with an unfamiliar curriculum and challenging pupils and community. Sally gained a great deal from the courses that she did with a higher education institution in order to gain qualified teacher status (QTS) as an overseas-trained teacher:

Going to the university was really helpful because it was like a reality check, seeing the big picture. Prior to that, I’d been in a little bubble trying to cope by myself. The lecturer was really good: calm and reassuring and realistic.

She enjoyed meeting people from countries throughout the world and they were united in their confusion over the plethora of acronyms and abbreviations that were used in schools. The process of gaining QTS helped her understanding of the English education system and became a milestone of achievement. Her confidence grew as a result of feeling that she was fully recognised in the English education system. She gained Chartered London Teacher status five years later.

The National College course, Leading from the Middle, which she undertook five years ago when she was a Key Stage 1 co-ordinator of a primary school, was very significant:

It was a revelation! I hadn’t thought of myself as a leader. I was just a teacher. I’d have an idea, research it, go to the headteacher, and then bring it in. I hadn’t realised that was leadership.

The aspect that she remembers clearly was how as a leader she should vary her style according to whom she was working with and what she wanted to achieve, ie to consider different personality types. Although she didn’t feel comfortable about stereotyping people in that way, the course taught her to think about the different approaches she should use with different people according to what she was trying to achieve. It also helped her to reflect on her own communication.

We [New Zealanders] tend to be very direct. It made me think before I approached people, to take more care in what I said, and how I said it.

The response to her presentation about her school improvement project on Leading from the Middle was very affirming. She spoke about how she had introduced a new phonics-based approach to literacy throughout Key Stage 1 and Year 3, which was a challenge especially as she wasn’t the English co-ordinator: “I had to tread very carefully”. Seeing her achievements through the eyes of an outsider improved her confidence: “It made me think, yes, I have done something here”.

She had indeed made a significant contribution to school improvement. Reading had a higher profile; parents were reading with their children; teachers were really excited; and standards had improved.
Observing and learning from others’ leadership

Sally has learned a great deal about leadership from informally watching how other leaders work and by thinking about what she would like to implement in her own style.

Values, vision and determination

In her first London school, she worked with a teacher with a very strong character who wasn’t afraid to speak up. Sally saw how she commanded respect and trust because “she really knew her stuff” and was firmly grounded in what she thought was right for the children. She had a fearlessness that Sally, as a rather confused overseas-trained teacher, admired. She became an important professional role-model for Sally and this aided her socialisation into the school culture (Cherubini, 2009). This experience has been valuable in her mentoring and coaching of new teachers.

Now, it is clear that Sally is a values-driven leader who has a strong vision: “If something’s not quite right, I will not stay with it”. She isn’t afraid to take risks. Indeed, this has sometimes led to her being a rebel. For instance, having been trained thoroughly in New Zealand’s cutting-edge literacy pedagogy, she disagreed with much of England’s literacy hour orthodoxy. She confesses to complying with its rigid format only when being observed: the rest of the time, “I did my own thing,” because she felt it was right for her pupils.

This attitude has helped her in school improvement challenges. For instance, having introduced the National Primary Framework into school, she could see that it was not really working. Pupils’ results, though good, were plateauing and teachers were becoming bored and over-dependent on prescribed ideas. She introduced a very creative approach to planning, just giving teachers learning objectives and then giving them the freedom to decide how to meet them. They now work with the children’s interests to make learning purposeful, related the wider world and other areas of the curriculum: ice-age goats’ skulls are being revealed in the playground; Greek battles are being animated and filmed. The headteacher considers that pupils and the staff are happier as a result, and has evidence that levels of achievement are rising.

Always keen to resolve problems, Sally saw that there was a need for different sorts of text (instructions, stories, persuasive letters) to be taught consistently throughout the school. She worked with teachers to build this into planning and introduce assessment criteria for the children to use so that they could see their next steps in writing different sorts of texts. These were related to the assessing pupil progress (APP) criteria. The success in the creative approach to literacy is now spreading to the teaching of mathematics.

Trust

From her headteacher, Sally has learned about the power of trust and belief in people. Over the years the head has distributed his leadership (Harris, 2008) and set her ambitious challenges that were outside her comfort zone and which to her surprise she succeeded in.

His trust in my capacity to do the job gave me belief in myself and made me try even harder so as not to disappoint him.

This strategy has worked for Sally as well. She helped the two colleagues who were deemed satisfactory become much more effective:

I observed them and pointed out all the really good things that they were doing: ‘You’re doing this and this and this – it’s fantastic’. Then we discussed what would make their children learn even more and made suggestions, ‘This is what you might need to do,’ and left it at that. I trusted them to implement those ideas, and they did.
It made a huge difference. This reinforces the findings of research on the importance of trust and distributed leadership (Louis, 2007).

On the other hand, her headteacher has taught her “never to assume”, a lesson that she learned early on when she found that nobody was implementing the strategies she had trained the staff to use at an in-service training (Inset) session. She now sees the importance of giving people structure and lead-in time to implement change. Her headteacher says:

Sally’s ability to see the bigger picture and to produce a clear road map for colleagues encourages faith in what she is doing.

**Emotional intelligence**

Sally has a great deal of emotional intelligence that is seen in her successful interpersonal skills. She is somebody who has learned a great deal from watching and listening to others. As an overseas-trained teacher, she is very sensitive to cultural differences. She was used to speaking very directly as someone from New Zealand, but soon became aware of the subtleties of how different people use language in England: they don’t always mean what they say.

She reads situations and cultures quickly and accurately so that she can adapt her leadership style. Her success as a leading teacher for the Every Child a Writer project (DfES, 2009) was very much down to her being able to get a handle on different personalities and contexts quickly. She had to think on her feet and be creative:

I could see that the assessment documents that they were using weren’t accurately evaluating the children – they were over-inflating pupils’ levels, which was why they got a nasty shock when they did SATs.

The school was very opposed to the idea of APP, but Sally thought that it was really what was needed. She won staff and the SLT over by using the approach herself and introducing APP-style sheets gradually so that her colleagues could appreciate their value.

**Supporting others to develop**

As well as the work she did at Bankside to support the development of her team members – both individuals and the team – Sally has an opportunity to work beyond the school to support others to develop.

Sally was asked to be a leading teacher in the Every Child a Writer project (DfES, 2009), which required her to help raise the writing achievement of specific children in Years 3 and 4 in three other schools. It was a challenge and again Sally benefited from the belief that others had in her. It required thorough analytical skills and personalised approaches. One teacher was very enthusiastic and confident but was pitching the work too high, so her strategy was to celebrate his high expectations before modelling planning:

I’d say, ‘Hey, that’s a great idea! I’ll pinch that for my Year 6 children, but for your Year 4 children, let’s see how we can break it down’. He got the idea really quickly.

Another teacher was very fragile. Her headteacher expected her to write very detailed plans, which sapped her energy for teaching:

She kept crying, and saying ‘They don’t think I’m a good teacher,’ but I kept pointing out all the really good things that she was doing and how much she knew. We would plan together, which showed her that she was coming up with all the wonderful ideas and that she could do it. I gave her the ammo to stop spending so much time writing things down, that it was counterproductive.
Sally raised the teacher’s self-esteem and with that her teaching became more effective. The headteacher says:

Trust and not being judgemental are core to Sally’s values. The respect that colleagues have for her advice is testimony to those values.

She is an example of what Day et al describe as ‘values-led contingency leadership’ (Day et al, 2001, p39).

Developing resilience

Throughout her career, Sally has shown a great deal of resilience and adaptability. In her first post in New Zealand, she was left to sink or swim and so she “just got on with it”. When she was teaching in the special school, she faced enormous challenges, not least having to drive pupils with complex disabilities in a minibus around Welsh country lanes.

What is striking about Sally is that she maintains her resilience by being true to what she believes is right. Her priority is always the children. When she’s worried she writes lists. She finds the act of writing problems down objectifies them and helps her to stop worrying.

I say to myself, I’ve managed before and it’s been okay. Worrying about things doesn’t help. It’s pointless.

As a mother of school-age children, Sally is concerned to achieve a reasonable work-life balance. She manages by working just four days a week, or rather getting paid for four because she uses her day off to catch up: “I sneak into school and hide myself away so that I can get on with paperwork”. This means that she can devote weekends to her family. She leaves school by 5.10pm in order to pick her children up from the childminder and devotes time to them until they’re asleep. Then she’ll often do some school work.

Her weekly yoga class is very important to her:

Just having that hour is great. It helps me focus on what is really important and to understand my place in the world. The teacher is great but very hippy: she’ll say, ‘Tonight I’d like you to dedicate yourself to patience. People who test your patience are teaching you resilience.’ I’m thinking, ‘for God’s sake [rolls eyes]’! But at the end of the hour I think, ‘You’re right. They can’t help it.’ When I miss the class I really notice my shoulders creeping up with the tension.

She is also able to say “no”. She took a break from her role in the Every Child a Writer project when she realised that her own class was suffering from her being out of school so much.

Sally is driven first and foremost by wanting to do the best for the children in her care. It seems that for her teaching is “a form of human flourishing connected to the Aristotelian virtue of eudaimonia, a kind of happiness” (Bullough Jr & Pinnegar, 2009, p241). She says, “I love my job and don’t regret a minute of the last 17 years”.

What next?

Bankside has recently become an academy so Sally knows this will bring new and different responsibilities to the leadership team. She is looking forward to the freedoms this will bring, particularly in relation to curriculum initiatives. Sally has also recently been appointed an SLE and is looking forward to working with a wider range of teachers across the teaching school alliance. This will help her develop partnership skills and learn how to lead in a collaborative context. She sees the system changing rapidly and is keen to be part of school-to-school working. She will take the lead in looking at teaching phonics across Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2, building on outstanding practice within the alliance and particularly supporting trainee teachers who need to demonstrate competence in these skills.

She has also been reflecting on headship – is it for her? She isn’t sure. She would relish the autonomy and scope the job would bring, but wants to maintain a good balance between family and professional life. Across the teaching school alliance of 20 schools there is a range of leadership roles including head of school and job-share headteachers. She is going to take advantage of this to look at these approaches in greater depth.
References


DfES, 2009, Implementing Every Child a Writer: The National Strategies: Primary, Nottingham, Department for Children, Schools and Families

Harris, A, 2008, Distributed school leadership, Abingdon, Routledge

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