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Creaby, Fiona (2016) **From the inside, out: what does 'business' really mean in schools?**

The Voice – The National Association of School Business Management, 13:47-48 Sept 2016

From the inside, out: what does 'business' really mean in schools?

Reflecting back over the last two decades, there have been a variety of strategies and policies in education that have influenced autonomy and accountability at local school level. These changes have influenced the evolution of an increasingly diversified education workforce featuring a variety of roles, responsibilities and functions to realise, facilitate and support learning in schools.

The National College for Teaching and Leadership (NCTL) led the way with leadership development programmes aimed specifically at those leading, managing and administering support services in schools. This continues, with programmes delivered by national providers steered by consultation from across the education sector, and is in addition to the vast amount of work done by NASBM and professional associations nationally, and globally to raise the profile of business management in education.

But importantly, this evolution and growth has come from within the heart of the profession itself through the hard work of dedicated SBM practitioners, and support of committed advocates, education specialists, headteachers, governors, academics and researchers. Through ongoing collaboration, many resources have been developed to support this continued growth, including competency frameworks, the development of national professional standards, and the construction of ethical and values-driven codes of practice.

However, the wider systemic context that schools sit within cannot be forgotten. As we continue to move through turbulent and ambiguous times in education as globalisation brings about rapid change, initiatives from education policy and changing expectations from wider society continue to influence how schools can go about realising and facilitating learning. This has many implications for school communities and the whole education workforce, and those who support, educate, develop and advocate practitioners and schools.

In 'Perfect Partners or Uneasy Bedfellows?', a recent research article by Charlotte Woods and colleagues (Woods, et al.) at Manchester University in 2013¹, school business management was cited as an important yet often neglected area of discussion in this systemic evolution of the wider education field. The role of business management in education is an increasingly important area of school life, yet there is growing concern around the potential for a proliferation of corporate 'business' cultures in schools that are set apart from educational values. Hence, there is a danger of 'business' becoming a rhetorical discourse in education. And, as Karen Starr² noted in her research in business management in the Australian state school system, 'business' can too easily become a 'dirty word' in education. Certainly, it appears that there are many strong

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assumptions being attached to the notions of ‘business’, ‘management’ and ‘efficiency’ within education. And this is raising serious questions about competing agendas and how education values and business values are understood in schools.

So we need to ask the question, ‘what does ‘business’ actually mean in schools in the English context?’

For me, the core ‘business’ of schools is children’s learning and their development and welfare as learners and young people. However, this core business cannot be achieved without a ‘joined-up’ supportive and collaborative culture that values and develops the entire school community, along with a clear strategy in how to support and sustain that community in the present, and for the future.

The core business of learning in schools is an intricate tapestry with many interwoven threads that all work together to create a detailed landscape of learning that requires the contribution of every thread. ‘Business’ in education has to be understood as much more than a focus on productivity, efficiency and economy of resources. Yes, these notions are a crucial aspect of the management of the business of learning, but as many SBM practitioners, leaders of support services and Heads would argue, these notions are only one ‘strand’ that make up the important ‘thread’ of business management in schools.

Undeniably, as all practitioners in schools face the daily realities of making learning happen and supporting the welfare and future of every single child in their care, they are all weaving those vital threads within the tapestry and creating a landscape of learning. Indeed, strategic leadership and governance, research-active collegial teaching, and proactive management and administration – closely interwoven at all levels across the school for the same purpose – provide the best possible landscape of learning for children to develop.

What then does ‘business’ actually mean in England to schools and practitioners, and to policy makers, across the education workforce?

Is the meaning of ‘business’ being set apart from education as a functional matter based primarily on resource efficiency? Or is the core ‘business’ of schools understood as learning, with the management and leadership of that ‘business’ seen as many vital interwoven threads within the broader education tapestry? Without further exploration of these matters, the potential for division in education increases as the meaning of ‘education’ and ‘business’ competes and collides.

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Practitioners can find themselves facing powerful role expectations and assumptions that can position vital aspects of school life apart from the values understood to be at the heart of learning and education across the sector. As the tension then increases between competing values and agendas, as Woods et al question, those involved in the ‘business’ management of schools can be increasingly perceived as ‘uneasy bedfellows’ rather than as ‘perfect partners’ who contribute to vital threads of the education tapestry, helping to depict that broader landscape of learning.

Overall, it is important to explore what ‘business’ means, and how education values and business values are understood and positioned in the wider education field. As voiced by practitioners across the education workforce, and by professional associations such as NASBM as well as within research circles part of the British Educational Leadership, Management and Administration Society (BELMAS), this exploration could offer many useful insights for the development of educational leadership and management. Therefore, it is important to work together to capture the perspectives of those from across the education field, from the inside, out, to gain understanding as to what ‘business’ means within education and what implications and possibilities this could have for practitioners and the future of schools.

Footnotes

¹Woods, C., Armstrong, P, Bragg, J. and Pearson, D. (2013) Perfect Partners or Uneasy Bedfellows? Completing Understanding of the Place of Business Management within Contemporary Education Partnerships. *Educational Management Administration and Leadership*, 41(6):751-766

²Starr, K. (2014) Implications of Radically Transformational Challenges Confronting Education Business Leadership. *Business Education and Accreditation*. 6(2):99-110.