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## **Leading Whom for What, Where?**

The Challenge of Leading Children's Services

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## **Crisis as a Lifestyle**

Tania's family lives on a diet of crisis. She has three children each with a different father. None of the fathers are among her three former husbands. Her fourteen-year old son is excluded from school. Her teenage daughters rarely attended school regularly. One is pregnant. Recently Tania and one of her daughters dated boys who were best friends. There is cash in the household but no obvious form of work.

Only crisis – a brush with the law, the appearance of social workers, a court appearance – brings the family together. Tania and her children have seen social workers and the police far more often than teachers. Their lives are a series of loosely connected, chaotic events that pull them this way and that. None have a plan or narrative structure to their lives. Life is something that happens to them.

Tania's family has lots of problems - domestic violence, debt, poor living conditions, feuds with their neighbours, alcohol and substance misuse. They are both perpetrators and victims of anti-social behaviour. Their reputation on their estate means they are isolated. Public services – social workers, health workers, police, housing offices, educational psychologists – come and go in their lives, staying long enough to do their job before leaving. The blizzard of visits adds to the sense of chaos rather than creating order.

The social worker attached to Tania's son spends almost three quarters of his time filling in forms and attending meetings linked to the case. About 15% of his time is spent collecting information from the family to fill in the forms and report back to case worker meetings. Only 10% of the time he has available is devoted to working directly with the boy to try to change his life. Despite Tania's prolonged interaction with multiple public services no one in the local council has a comprehensive picture of the public sector's relationship with the family and how much it is all costing.

A rough calculation however puts the direct annual cost of the services Tania's family receives at £250,000. The indirect costs of other services that are involved in her family's life – courts, police and others – is likely to be almost as much

again. The indirect economic, human and social costs will also be large. Tania's family have been the clients of social services for almost 16 years. That means perhaps £4m of public spending has been devoted to Tania's family. Yet Tania's son and daughters are looking forward to lives that are very like her own. Little has changed.

It is worth starting to think about the role played by a Director of Children's Services by looking at a family like Tania's, because remarkably most of the manuals, statutory guidance notes, plans, workforce strategies and best practice codes issued by the (then) DCSF about the job make little reference to the children and families that these services are intended to help. Families like Tania's where the risks of disadvantage being transmitted across generations is greatest are in need of the greatest help. In 2008 the Prime Minister Gordon Brown said there were 110,000 families living in chronic crisis. Many experts estimate the figure is closer to 150,000. In addition to these families that are mired in crisis, many more, perhaps double that number, are living on the brink of crisis, struggling to get by. These families often do not attract the attention of over-stretched services because their needs are less critical. Many more families are just coping, keeping their heads above water.

### **Vantage Point Matters**

What you see will determine what you pay attention to. What you see, of course, is determined by the vantage point you adopt. Directors of Children's Services have a privileged vantage point, leading integrated services serving a whole population. That strategic vantage point should afford a helicopter view of needs, resources and possible solutions. This strategic vantage point is one of the chief innovations created by the Every Child Matters agenda and it needs protecting at all costs. A DCS should have a view of all services that affect children. Not just schools or social services.

A Director of Children's Service will find themselves under enormous pressure however to relinquish this strategic viewpoint. The pressure to meet national standards and targets often drives public service executives to get involved in the trench warfare of forcing through incremental improvements to services. Strategic and integrated is one description of the role. Another might be

confusing and complicated. Directors of children's services have to be community leaders, corporate partners, political managers, media performers, and strategic commissioners. They have to safeguard children, while also reforming the services that support them, improving the quality of life for all, while transforming the life chances of the most needy. Maintaining a strategic focus amidst this bewildering range of demands is easier said than done.

There is another danger however: too much strategising. Strategic roles can become echo chambers. Senior staff can get drawn into a self-reinforcing round of devising and assessing their own strategies. They spend so much time thinking about "the system" they lose connection with the outside world. There is a huge gulf between the sometimes violent, unpredictable chaos of life in families like Tania's and the orderly rounds of committees and boards, planning cycles and strategic reviews, accountability and inspections procedures that seem – from a glance at the guidance notes issued by the (then) DCSF – to make up the work of a DCS. Strategic oversight can create the appearance of detachment as executives get trapped behind acronyms, procedures and plans that are little understood outside the system. All too easily public service systems can appear a world unto themselves, focussed on their own targets, outputs, inspection and assessment regimes rather than the ultimate outcomes they seek: the lives they seek to improve.

These are, at once, vast systems of money, buildings, services and staff, conducting thousands of lessons and interviews a week and at the same time deeply intimate, personal encounters with a myriad of children and families, living in different conditions, with different needs and aspirations. Connecting with their lives and motivations is critical but it requires what seems impossible: services that deliver intimacy at scale.

The very creation of the role – Director of Children's Services, responsible for discharging the state's responsibilities to the children and families of an entire population – is a mark of high ambitions for social reform: the embodiment of the state's commitment to guarantee opportunity for all children, in all families, to fulfil their potential. Invested in this single role is the hope that properly designed and delivered public services, from the early years through to the age of 19, can provide hope for a better future, for families and entire communities. Yet as the

hopes invested in education and state provision have risen, so too have causes for frustration and disappointment. The (then) DCSF's strategies and plans set transformational goals, to make Britain the best place in the world to grow up. Yet most of the means to achieve those goals are incremental.

Directors of Children's Services find themselves caught in the middle of these conflicting expectations of ambition and hope, frustration and disappointment, scale and intimacy, systems and people. They are responsible for carefully engineered systems of planning, assessment, provision and inspection, designed to minimise risk and improve quality. Yet family life, especially in the most deprived communities, is chaotic and unpredictable. The view from systems of accountability systems, driven by always on media, is that everything should always be under control. The view from the ground is that nothing is ever entirely under control.

So it's vital for a DCS to be reminded constantly to see life through the eyes of the families he or she is working for, to start from people as well as the systems and services that are meant to support them. There is no single vantage point to see the whole job. Not getting trapped with a single point of view is perhaps the first skill of leadership. Any effective DCS needs to see their task from above and from below, from the system as a whole and from the point of view of the families you seek to serve.

### **Education matters, community just as much**

The job of a DCS matters so much because the gains to society from improved educational performance, building human capital and cognitive skills, are impressively high. A recent OECD study found that if all developed countries matched the recent improvements in Polish educational outcomes, and boosted their average PISA scores by 25 points over 20 years, the economies of the OECD would grow by an additional \$115trillion over the course of the lifetime of the generation born in 2010. If all OECD countries managed to match the performance of the average results achieved in Finland, far and away the best performer, then the gains would be in the order of \$260trillion. In the long run investments in effective education pay.

The traditional answer is that good schools are the best way to make those investments. If we can get more children for longer into better schools, with better teachers, then outcomes, measured by the kinds of tests the OECD administers will improve. Good schooling underpins economic growth, higher productivity and incomes. The most inspiring example is Finland, which regularly figures in the top three in most subjects covered by the PISA rankings. About 96% of Finnish school students complete their education, only 2% repeat a year and only 0.5% drop out. Yet Finland only spends the average of OECD countries on education – about 6% of GDP – and Finnish children spend less time in school than their peers in other countries: school does not start till the age of seven and even then children spend at most 190 days at school, for between 4 and 7 hours, lower than many other OECD countries. The Finnish system is both highly equitable – there is no streaming or selection - and very high quality.

Innovation to improve schools is essential. But it is a long struggle. That is why policy makers and practitioners are increasingly looking elsewhere for solutions to complement and support efforts at school improvement. The most obvious place to look is where children do most of their learning and particularly their formative learning, in families.

A child's home background crucially affects their capacity and resources for learning. Economist James Heckman's work shows that children deprived of opportunities to learn in their early years are very difficult to reach as teenagers. In Harlem the poorest children arrive in school having had an average of 25-hours of independent reading behind them. The average middle class child in America has 1,700 hours and their vocabulary is twice as large. Middle class children are six times more likely to be praised than the poorest children. <sup>i</sup>The development of literacy and numeracy skills in childhood are good predictors of later educational attainment and subsequent earnings. A substantial body of research shows that children from middle class families are far more likely to develop cognitive skills – like literacy – and social and emotional capacities – for example the ability to apply oneself to work and get on with others. <sup>ii</sup> A US study found that half the educational performance gap between affluent and deprived children could be explained by the home environment. Poorer parents are likely to have fewer material resources for learning, including books and writing materials. Poverty puts people under pressure, and so the emotional stress of

living in a poor household can also have an impact on parenting and learning.<sup>iii</sup> The connections between these factors and learning is complex, but it is clear a child's ability to learn is affected by their sense of social and emotional well-being. Parental support and encouragement is vital once they attend school to deepen and extend what they learn. Sibling role models can play a critical role in shaping attitudes towards learning. That is why many argue the right approach is not to focus exclusively on schools but on how schools can work in tandem with initiatives to promote learning in families.

Families are not the sole influence. The communities that families live in also matter. Rich and poor communities have very different resources for learning. Often they provide very different environments: whether a child has access to a library and feels safe to go there after school. We are learning more about how social networks and peer influences shape behaviour.<sup>iv</sup> School may make only a limited impact on children if when they leave they go back to disinvested communities facing huge social and economic challenges. Advocates of a greater focus on community argue that schools and teachers are often asked to deal with issues that originate outside the classroom. In the US a string of studies have argued that most of the differences in performance in school tests is actually attributable to community and environmental factors.<sup>v</sup> Schools cannot give people better life chances unless the community they live and work in also improves.

Each of these positions – school, family, community as the most important focus for investment – has powerful advocates and bodies of evidence to appeal to. The disputes between these positions have sometimes been fractious. Educationalists can sometimes appear dismissive of the value of working with families that does not lead to measurable educational outcomes. Family workers can complain that schools are too rigid and professionalised, unable to recognise the importance of non-cognitive capabilities. The task of a Director of Children's Services is to bring the best of these approaches together: it's about school, family and community.

### **Service provider, community leader**

A DCS's main task is to build the collective capacity of a community to achieve public results that matter: better outcomes for children, not just measured in

terms of test scores but in terms of their sense of well being and their earnings. There are two quite different aspects to this challenge.

A DCS has to lead a system of institutions and professionals, procedures and systems, that comply with the law, minimise risk and deliver high performance. The watchwords are: perform and comply. Yet public services should never be equated with the collective capacity of a society to solve its challenges. Public services are just the most obvious form of that collective capacity takes.

A community's collective capacity to raise children comes from parents, grandparents, carers, friends, siblings, peers, social networks, communities and employers, as much as from children's centres and social workers. A community is stronger the more capable it is of meeting its challenges without needing public services. The well-springs of most civic goods are mutual self-help and support. The most important features of our lives – love, friendship, recognition, pride – can never be delivered by a service. They cannot be bought and sold. They stem from relationships. In this domain the watchwords are community capability and resilience.

Directors of Children's Services find themselves torn between these two approaches while attempting to combine them: services that perform and deliver, communities that are resilient and adaptable enough to support themselves. These require different kinds of leadership.

### **Perform and Comply**

There are many ways to achieve public policy goals: taxes, benefit transfers, laws and regulations. Commissioning and running public service programmes and agencies is chief among the tools available in children services where the state plays a vital role in funding and providing services. Taxpayer funding is transformed by public service organisations into outputs to meet the needs of children and the goals of public policy. It is vital for the credibility of public services and the support for collective provision that this is done well. There are two main aspects to this: compliance and performance.

Public servants have to be trusted to act with probity, honesty, impartiality and fairness. They should follow due process and be accountable for how they use public money. Most fundamentally they must respect the rule of law. These issues of compliance have become ever more pressing in children's services with recent scandals and in the context of increased transparency, constant media attention and parents with more voice. Children's services are under constant surveillance. There are costs to this culture of compliance. The scope for professional judgement and initiative can be reduced. Transparency can have the perverse impact of driving some decisions "underground and unrecorded" making the system formally more transparent, yet ultimately less accountable. The biggest problem however is that professionals have a strong incentive to make sure their procedures comply with regulations to protect *themselves* should something go wrong as much as to protect families. The leadership values of compliance culture should stress honesty, openness, probity, fairness and respect for due process.

Public services have also become increasingly performance focussed in the last two decades, to make public services efficient, productive and effective. That requires continual attention to service improvement to meet rising expectations for reliable quality, convenience, responsiveness, personalisation and fairness. This pursuit of performance requires customer focus, benchmarking, improvement programmes, performance measurement and rewards, staff who are better trained and managed. Sometimes, however, the goal of making public services more efficient cuts across the goal of making them more effective. Many of the services being delivered into Tania's house were efficiently delivered, within the narrow terms of the service. Yet the combined effect was to render them all ineffective. The leadership qualities to make this performance driven approach include being focussed on quality, measurement, constant improvement, external benchmarks.

### **Resilience and Adaptability**

Yet we also know the biggest influences on families and how they bring up children, and indeed on how children approach school and learn, are not public services. They are parents and siblings, friends and peers, the influences of social networks and community. Achieving better collective outcomes for a community

will mean more than providing them with better services. The fundamental question we face as a society is not what kinds of public services we need but what kinds of capabilities citizens and communities need. Two stand out.

The first is resilience. In a more uncertain, fluid, interconnected and unpredictable world, in which far off events can have a huge impact, a capacity for resilience to withstand and respond to shocks is essential for individuals and communities. Many of our most distressed and disadvantaged communities have suffered repeated bouts of economic restructuring and social dislocation. In some the ability to maintain community cohesion, belonging and shared values has been severely undermined by the collapse of most collective institutions of work, culture and religion. Resilience, however, is not enough. Our poorest communities are often resilient but at very low levels of income and ambition.

That is why the second characteristic is so vital: adaptability, to adjust to new circumstances, seize new opportunities, to mobilise resources and combine them in new ways. This task is as much about software as hardware: changing culture and outlook, belief and ambition. Adaptive communities tend to be outward looking; they make the most of their own diversity; welcome incomers and pull together around shared goals and institutions. In our poorest communities public services play a vital role as anchors. Yet even good public services cannot make a community resilient and adaptive.

Leading this kind of change in a community is also part of the job of a Director of Children's services, working with many other people, including politicians, other public services and the voluntary sector. This requires: leadership through partnership; mobilising alliances of public and voluntary sector partners around shared goals and challenges; designing programmes that encourage self-motivation and mutual self help; acting as a seed investor to use public money to leverage in other commitments from within the community and from the private sector. Animating a community is a very different task from providing a service.

Services that perform and comply encourage tasks to be broken down, ordered, into due and efficient processes, with rigorous accountability, explicit procedures and protocols. These tasks are grounded in institutions and organisations, delivered by skilled professionals. Building communities that are resilient and

adaptive requires working in partnership, finding new combinations of services and voluntary endeavour, working with incomplete information, in fluid environments, where outcomes are often difficult to measure. Communities are not made resilient and adaptive by their buildings, roads and broadband networks. Resilience and adaptability comes from culture and behaviour, which in turn come from peer-to-peer solutions and the power of social networks.

Directors of Children's Services should be constantly moving between these worlds, deploying very different kinds of leadership styles as they go. Crucially they need to work with distributed leadership teams – including people they do not employ - that combine the very diverse mix of skills required. The search for ways to bridge these two worlds will intensify in the decade to come, through shared forms of governance that bring public services and communities closer together for example through forms of participatory decision making and devolved and integrated budgeting; new forms of public service organisation in communities that draws on social enterprise models; new measures of outcome that combine public service targets and wider, softer measures of social value, well being and happiness; a new mix of skills, to combine professionals with networks of para-professionals and committed and knowledgeable locals. Creating those combinations of public services and community capability is in the long run the chief job for a Director of Children's Services. That is why they cannot just be service providers they also have to be community leaders and social innovators.

### **Public and social innovators**

Better learning outcomes and life chances stem from better (and different kinds of) schools combined with community development and family support services. Finding the combinations that work best for a community is a Director of Children's Services' chief task. Where might we look to find such a combination in action and what kind of leadership was required to create it?

One of the most impressive examples operating at scale, across an entire community is the Harlem Children's Zone in New York, which aims to transform the aspirations and achievements of more than 10,000 children living in 97 blocks in one of the most devastated urban communities in America. <sup>vi</sup>An eight-year old

boy in Harlem has a 33% chance of ending up in prison. A third of students drop out of high school. Three quarters of Harlem children cannot pass the grade exams for their age. The HCZ, inspired by community activist Geoffrey Canada, set out to mobilise family and peer support to encourage learning: to make going to college the norm and to break the culture of low aspirations. HCZ starts work with parents before their children are born. It offers pre-kindergartens, personal tutoring, dance and sports classes, food coops and social services help with housing and health issues. Five years after Canada opened his first academy a Harvard University review found the HCZ was “enormously effective at raising the achievement level of the poorest minority of children” About 97% of his Promise academy eighth-graders are performing at or above their level. The Harlem Children’s Zone has driven improvements in educational performance by linking what happens at school to what goes on outside it.

Geoffrey Canada is an exemplary social innovator and the HCZ is an exemplary social innovation. Although Canada is not a public official the way he works, leading community development, cultural renewal and service innovation all at the same time, is a potent model for Directors of Children’s Services. Even if a DCS is not a social innovator in their own right, they will need a strategy to license, fund and support social innovators in their communities, whether they are working inside or alongside the public sector.

Social innovation means meeting public needs in more effective ways by creating new services and organisations, as well as tools and platforms for self-help. The creation of mass schooling was one of the most significant social innovations of the last two centuries. Now we need a new wave of social innovation to create new forms of learning that bridge school, family and community. Creating the space and resources for these new approaches to develop will be vital. Four basic innovation strategies are available. Finding the right mix of these will be critical.

Most innovation in public services comes in form of incremental **improvement** to existing institutions: better schools, with better teachers and management, for example. There is still huge scope for this kind of improvement to deliver better value for money. Some innovation comes in the form of **reinvention**: the creation of new versions of familiar institutions, for example, new kinds schools, which offer more collaborative, problem solving forms of learning, with more

personalised approaches, in which pupils are reflective protagonists. In the US reinvention of school along these lines has come from innovative charter schools such as the High Tech High chain and the Big Picture schools. In Sweden it has come from chains such as Kunskapskollan which offer highly personalised learning. In the UK some of this reinvention is coming from academies, parent run schools, studio schools, specialist schools, as well as schools that have been remodelled through the Building Schools for the Future programme. While some of these reinvented schools reach out into their communities – extended and studio schools for example – many do not. So a further avenue for innovation is **combination**: creating new combinations of school and community based services. The HCZ is a prime example of combinatory innovation. The most radical forms of innovation are **transformative** : they find entirely new ways to meet needs. Many of the most radical innovations in learning – for example the Not School model for engaging pupils excluded from school through a virtual school and digital technologies – start in the high cost margins of the system before making their way into the mainstream. Some of the most impressive models of low cost, distributed, self-organising learning, conducted outside school are coming from social enterprises in the developing world such as Pratham and Hole in the Wall in India and CDI in Latin America. These approaches pull children to learning, often using technology as an interface, in settings that are often outside school, with lessons starting often from practical questions rather than an academic curriculum, with peer-led learning as a key ingredient.

Most innovation in well-established school systems is devoted to improvement of existing services. There is far less investment in reinvention, combination and transformation. Negotiating the space for this wider menu of approaches to innovation will be one of the biggest strategic challenges for a DCS. It involves bringing together at least four ingredients.

- Developing, creating, finding, borrowing or importing capacity to provide new services and solutions.
- Building a supportive authorising environment, locally and nationally, which manages the risks involved in innovation. Public service innovation has a vital political component, to support the case for change, which might arouse professional and public scepticism and opposition.

- Measures to guide innovation and underpin its legitimacy, to audit the limitations of standard approaches and to show the value created by new approaches. A social innovation cannot gather momentum unless it shows it solves difficult social challenges more effectively.
- Strategies for propagating successful innovation, so it spreads, usually through a mixture of demand pull, supply push and peer-to-peer sharing. Too often innovation remains trapped on location, in the pilot scheme where it started. Innovations that scale tend to be effective, simple, modular and adaptable to context. They are not rocket science.

## Conclusion

The job of being a Director of Children's Services should be daunting and inspiring in equal measure. Huge hopes and rising expectation are invested in it. It will also be a focus of frustration and anger when those hopes are disappointed. The guidance issued by the DCSF can give the impression the role is an endless round of partnership boards producing strategy documents – formal, ordered, strategic, controlled. The reality is that these are a form of scaffolding to contain an unruly, often unpredictable and sometimes ugly reality. The job will never be done. Whatever efforts a DCS puts in will almost always feel incomplete. The reality of needs and expectations is always likely to run ahead of current provision and plans. The most you can and should hope for is to gather momentum and continue to make progress.

To do that you need to avoid getting trapped in a lofty overview, cut off from the reality of how family life is lived in your community, lost in a densely connected maze of strategies and committees. The other danger is that you venture out only to get caught in the dense thicket of current services, hacking away at the undergrowth in front of you but with little sense of where you are in the bigger scheme of things.

To avoid either fate you need to make sure you continually shift your vantage point, to see what you are doing from above – the ultimate outcomes the community needs – and from below – the lives people lead and what they need to improve them. Look top down and bottom up, not just from the vantage point of services.

You will need to lead services that deliver, comply and perform. That is essential to build credibility. But to bring lasting change you will also need to lead, along with others, a process of building resilient, capable and adaptive communities.

The answer will often lie in developing better and different kinds of schools, in combination with community development and family support services. In each of these there will be scope for improvement, reinvention, combination and transformation. Most powerful will be efforts that combine innovation across all three: schools, communities and families working together.

That means you will need to see yourself as a social innovator, taking managed risks to create the new combinations of services that communities will need. And even if you yourself are not an innovator you will need ways to license, fund, develop and propagate innovation.

The job of being a DCS is one of the most important, demanding and rewarding in the service of the public. There is no reason why it should be easy.

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<sup>i</sup> See for example the extensive work of James Heckman, Chicago University, Professor of Economics, on the interactive formation of cognitive and non cognitive skills and their impact on future earnings, including:

Lessons from the Bell Curve, *Journal of Political Economic*, Vol 103, No5, Oct 1995;

The Effects of Cognitive and Noncognitive Abilities on Labor Market Outcomes and Social Behavior, *Journal of Labor Economics*, 2006, vol. 24, no. 3, with Jora Stixrud and Sergio Urzua

<sup>ii</sup> Jen Lexmond and Richard Reeves, *Building Character: Parents are the architects of a fairer society*, Demos, 2009,

<sup>iii</sup> GS Becker *A Treatise on the Family*, Harvard University Press, 1981;

GS Becker and N Tomes, *Human Capital and the Rise and Fall of Families*, *Journal of Labor Economics* Vol 4 No 3, 1986;

DM Blau, *The effect of income on child development*, *Review of Economics and Statistics*, Vol 81, No 2, 2008;

GH Elder and A Caspi, *Economic Stress in Lives, developmental perspectives* *Journal of Social Issue* Vol 44 No 4, 1988;

R Conger et al *The role of economics pressure in the lives of parents and their adolescents: the family stress model* in *Negotiating Adolescence in Times of Social Change*, Cambridge University Press,.

<sup>iv</sup> Nicholas Christakis and James Fowler, *Connected*, 2010

<sup>v</sup> Coleman et al *Equality of Educational Opportunity*, Washington DC: US Government Printing Office; Roland Fryer and Steven Levitt, *Understanding the Black-White Test Score Gap in the First Two Years of School* *The Review of Economics and Statistics*, 2004

<sup>vi</sup> Will Dobbie and Roland G. Fryer, Jr, *Are High-Quality Schools Enough to Close the Achievement Gap? Evidence from a Bold Social Experiment in Harlem*, Harvard University Working Paper, April 2009.

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Also see <http://www.hcz.org>; and <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2009/aug/05/harlem-poverty-children-schools>, The Guardian, August 5<sup>th</sup>, 2009, Jenni Russell;