



The New Generation of School Leaders – transforming outlook, practice, and expectations

A new cadre of school leaders is emerging with the potential to shake up education policy and practice. In this article, [Karen Edge](#) reports on research into these Generation X school leaders in London, New York City and Toronto. As she explores the experiences and aspirations of this new generation of urban school leaders she reflects on implications for their professional development.

■■■ New leaders stepping up to the challenge

When education is the topic, big cities are often painted with uncomplimentary or pessimistic brushes as sites of

deprivation or challenging circumstance. While many cities struggle with notoriously high teacher and leader turnover, urban areas often remain central hubs of educational innovation and trendsetting. As potential

incubators of new educational possibility, our team is particularly interested in how and why educational practice and policy are evolving in different globally influential cities.

As our wider research and collaborative work at the Institute of Education, University of London, focuses on primary and secondary school principals/headteachers and educational reform, we became increasingly intrigued and concerned about the policy and practice discussions related to school leader shortages. For example, in London and England, leadership recruitment challenges had been linked to teacher disinterest in the role (Gronn & Lacey, 2004) and escalating principal retirement rates (Howson, 2008). In London, these shifts have meant leaders are often stepping into senior school leadership roles at younger ages than their predecessors (DCSF, 2009). In response, an array of fast-track leadership programmes are stepping in to bolster the number of leaders prepared and willing to lead in both London (e.g. Future Leaders) and New York City (e.g. The Leadership Academy).

Our interest was peaked by this new pattern of leadership career with, what appeared, to be a new

and younger cadre of leaders moving into top school-level leadership roles. We also observed these new leaders belonged to a different generation than their predecessors. As Baby Boomer leaders were departing their roles, Generation X leaders were stepping up. Could it be that Generation X leaders were bringing a different approach to their roles and/or had different experiences and aspirations for their careers? Could this new generation of leaders shake up current educational policy and practice landscapes, as their Generation X peers have been doing within the high-tech and other sectors? We were intrigued.

Upon reflection, we realised that most leadership research has been conducted on Baby Boomer leaders. We believed in the merit of examining the careers, work and aspiration of the new demographic of Generation X leaders. As we embarked on a journey to examine these new leaders, we decided to focus our early work on three Global Cities: London; New York City; and Toronto.

This article draws on evidence from our Global City Leaders Study funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC-UK) from 2011-2014.



We introduce the overall study and why we believe it is important to learn more about the new generation of school leaders. This draws on our preliminary findings from the first 60 interviews with the young, under 40-year old, school leaders in London, New York City and Toronto. Our early findings indicate some possible patterns in how young leader careers are evolving, their attitude toward leadership professional development and their aspirations for the future. Throughout the article, we nest the emerging patterns from the London leaders in the context of the findings from the other cities to highlight an initial glimpse of the present and the future.

Global cities – big potential

Global Cities was a term coined by Sassen (1991) to reflect the growing influence that certain cities were having across the globe. In turn, cities are ranked by various organisations and publications. For example, *Foreign Policy* (2008) rewards the relative standing of cities as international centres of influence on the global economy, political landscape, entertainment and cultural sector and knowledge and innovation.

In our view, Global Cities are also often the epicenters of new practice and policy advances across the education sector. While there is not currently an international ranking of educationally influential Global Cities, there are cities whose policy and practice interventions stimulate ripple effects of discussion and debate around the world. We believe that London, Toronto and New York City often serve this role. Each city has been at the centre or forefront of major international trends in educational research, policy and practice. When we designed our research in 2009, all three of the aforementioned cities were in the top ten of the overall Global Cities Index published in *Foreign Policy* (2008).

Our interest in Generation X school leaders

Through our work with colleagues in New York, Toronto and other Global Cities, we noted similar patterns of increasing numbers of younger leaders taking the helm of state-funded schools. These new

leadership career entrants mark the introduction of a new generation of school leaders at the helm of city schools. This transition also marks a generational shift in school leadership as these new leaders represent the entry of Generation X leaders, those born between 1960 and 1980.

Smola and Sutton (2002) suggested that ‘with the transition of one generation to the next into top leadership positions, organisation will be influenced by the next generation’s values’. As each generation is often described both within popular and empirical research as having a distinct set of characteristics, we are interested to see if Generation X attributes are influencing leaders and, if they are enacting leadership and their careers in different ways as a result. The new generation of leaders will influence the present and future of education practice and policy for their generation and beyond. However, little research has examined the experience or influence of this Generation X leaders.

Acknowledging national and cultural differences between generational experiences, we began by examining the characteristics most often attributed to Generation Xers and found they are recognized as having experienced the most rapidly expanding technological era (Zemke et al, 2000). Similarly, they are globally minded, techno-literate, informal and pragmatic (Zemke et al, 2000). These oft-shared traits shape GenXers’ desire for collaboration (Smola & Sutton, 2002), mobility (Duscher & Cowin, 2004), diversity and more experimental structures in organizations (Kunreuther, 2003).

We believe that these generational traits may be having an important influence on the current and future work and aspirations of school leaders. Our research aims to better understand their perspectives and inform future research, policy and practice in relation to their recruitment, development and retention.

Our research focus: Generation X school leaders

Our Global City Leaders research project starts this exploration with Generation X leaders in London, New York and Toronto. The study engages high level policy/practice leaders on our city-based Advisory Groups in

each city to advise and support the research. We also learn from city-based cohorts of 20-25 young principals and vice principals to explore the experience and aspirations of Generation X, under-40-year-old leaders.

■ ■ ■ Research approach/methodology

In order to build our preliminary understanding of Generation X leadership in Global Cities, we created a multi-pronged approach to examining the lives, leadership and aspirations of our small preliminary cohort of leaders in each city. While the full details of the annual research strategies are available on our ESRC website¹, we briefly highlight the overall strands of research here:

Policy landscape studies: In each city, we charted the evolution of both general education and leadership-related policies. We have drawn on policy and documentary analysis as well as interviews with 10-15 policy leaders in each city to develop city-based school leadership policy and programme profiles.

Network events. Participants are annually invited to join city-based focus group discussions around career trajectories and the challenges and opportunities of being a young leader. At these meetings, leaders are offered opportunities to explore data from both their own and other participating cities.

Interviews. In each city, we annually conduct between 18-24 interviews with Principals and Vice Principals. Each hour-long interview explores a range of issues relating to their own leadership experience, practice and aspirations including: leadership training, development and support; career trajectories; challenges and opportunities associated with leading in their city and being a young leader; factors influencing work/life balance; and, future career aspirations.

School-based studies. In the final year of the study, we are conducting 3 school-level studies in each city to provide a greater contextual understanding of schools in each city, the studies explore emerging issues within the interviews including school-wide approaches to



talent spotting, capacity building, career development and school improvement.

Key findings

As we move into the final year of data collection, recurring patterns are emerging from the evidence within and between the cohorts of leaders in each city. While the overall trends can be found on our ESRC website, here we highlight some of the most interesting and pressing trends amongst our small sample of Generation X leaders in London. In particular, we focus on some of the most eye-catching findings from our early data including young leaders' views on: accountability; age and leadership; leading; and managing work, life and family.

Young leaders on accountability. Leaders in our study are not intimidated by accountability, data or the seemingly relentless drive for school improvement. This isn't surprising given that this new crop of school leaders have 'grown up' in their current relatively high-stakes accountability environments. While our participating leaders can see the benefit of accountability via testing and inspection, they express concern about the influence on the lives of students, teachers and leaders. Some of our young women leaders express concerns about the challenges of timing-related issues linking inspection, their careers and family plans. One

or two leaders have discussed needing to plan their future families around inspection cycles to ensure they are in-post when OFSTED arrives. This particular set of evidence is quite concerning, as there is a group of young women leader participants who are worried that leadership and parenthood are not compatible and are removing themselves from leadership career paths or not vying for the top jobs.

Young leaders on age and leadership. Young leaders believe their age makes them more open to new ideas, innovative and able to relate to younger staff and students. Young leaders also believe their high energy levels are beneficial, if not necessary, to sustain a school leadership career in London. Negative aspects of being a young leader in London relate specifically to negative and inaccurate perceptions about their experience and/or ability and their need to work even harder than their colleagues to build credibility.

Young leaders on leading. Consistently, the most important skill for leading contemporary urban schools is described as developing staff and developing relationships. In turn, they describe themselves as collaborative in their leadership approach combined with an acute awareness of how they need to bring people together, identify individual and collective skills gaps, and work together with colleagues to deliver on



school and community-level goals.

Young leaders on managing work, life and family. The leaders in our study find themselves at an interesting point in their careers and lives. They appear to be generationally predisposed to wanting to find a work/life balance that keeps their home and work lives sustainable. In London, more so than Toronto and similar to New York, leaders feel pressured to work late and on weekends simply to keep up with the daily leadership-related tasks and responsibilities. We found more single leaders in London than in our other two cities and often, these leaders suggest it is work/life imbalance that keeps them from being able to prioritise their personal lives. Our young leaders have, for the most part, delayed having children while taking on leadership posts earlier. This presents an interesting nexus of work and family which has traditionally only existed for men leaders. Now, women leaders may often have toddlers or young school age children while serving as deputy headteachers or headteachers creating new pressures and tensions for work/life balance. Our evidence related to the desire young leaders have to find a balance that suits their own personal and professional aspirations is one of the most important concerns and challenges for the recruitment and retention of this generation of leaders. Many young leaders in New York and London have stated that if they cannot find a suitable balance, the longevity of their school leadership careers may be affected.

■ ■ ■ Implications for Generation X leader professional development

While we are still in the early phases of analysis of the entire set of interviews from the three cities, there are some interesting patterns that may have implications for the recruitment, development and retention of Generation X leaders. We highlight three observations that may prove to be insightful for those working on leadership development programmes for Generation X leaders.

Design and delivery. In particular, GenXers repeatedly critiqued a range of professional development

opportunities they had experienced as being too slow, sharing information in person that could as easily be delivered online and not maximising the opportunities for rich dialogue about problems that really matter to leaders in face-to-face settings.

Timing. Generation X leaders are often leading their schools while parenting small children or seeking life partners. Either way, the beyond school lives of young leaders are important to them and their ability to find work-life balance remains a priority. While many twilight in-school meetings and development fall within contractual teaching hours, many young leaders struggle to attend professional development opportunities that conflict with their family responsibilities. This appears to be more challenging for women leaders. Greater consideration for the life-stage of leaders in relation to the timing of leadership development opportunities may alleviate some of these tensions.

Mentoring and role models. For many Generation X leaders, mentors and role models emerged as hot topics in their interviews. For many young women leaders, few role models for leading and parenting small children exist. For leaders across cities, mentoring programmes that had been influential were often linked to fast-track leadership development programmes that tailored mentor pairing to particular skill and knowledge needs. Beyond specific programmes, Generation X leaders often wanted the freedom to select their own mentors based on existing relationships and trust. Similarly, leaders frequently sought to have access to role models who were successfully handling the less-often discussed parts of the job including work-life balance, parenting and career progression.

■ ■ ■ Final thoughts and conclusions

As we are currently heading into the final stages of analysing the within and between City patterns in our evidence, we will focus in further articles on the most pressing findings from our evidence. At the moment, there are a few red evidentiary flag that warrant deeper analysis and exploration with our research participants and Advisory Group members. These areas include:

The number of young leaders who believe they will not be in post in five years. This may cause an even more significant leadership recruitment challenge.

The number of young women leaders concerned about the possibility of being able to be a parent and a school leader. This may cause young women to remove themselves from their career paths in advance of families and promotions.

The importance of work life balance for all leaders and the ability for school leaders to find role models who can demonstrate how to achieve it and remain successful in all spheres of life and work. This has significant implications for young leaders' desire to remain in post and is starting, in some jurisdictions, to gain traction

from governments and headteacher associations as an important research and discussion point.

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The Young Global City Leaders Project

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Please follow the link for further information on the wider research including our most recent reports:

www.esrc.ac.uk/my-esrc/grants/RES-061-25-0532/read

Notes

1. Our ESRC research page: <http://www.esrc.ac.uk/my-esrc/grants/RES-061-25-0532/read>

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