School business leadership: Current issues and future prospects

The profession of school business leadership, the means by which schools are led and managed financially and organisationally, has become a central issue in education (Woods, 2014). In this Special Issue, we present research articles and reflections on the growth of the community of school business leaders (SBL). In doing so, we explore the evolution of this relatively recently established cohort of the school workforce and place it in the context of structural reform to school systems in England and elsewhere.

Our contributors are also concerned with the incumbents of the SBL role, including their working lives, their professional trajectories, the factors that have facilitated their growing profile, and the challenges to their development both individually and as a collective cohort within the school workforce. While the articles are mostly located within the English context, the issues raised speak to broader debates about how schools and the systems in which they are situated are led, managed and governed.

Marking the 25th anniversary of the National Bursars’ Association (forerunner of the National Association of School Business Management, which in 2017 became the Institute of School Business Leadership), Management in Education is the first academic journal to bring together a collection of articles and key authors on this relatively new and growing area of the education-leadership field. The ongoing structural reforms to the school system in England, characterised by the growth of the academies programme and the simultaneous dismantling of local-authority educational services, have resulted in a fragmented school system (West and Wolfe, 2019). Against this backdrop, the SBL function has become central for schools adapting to a new reality, in which they have increased organisational and financial autonomy and responsibility (Woods, 2014). SBLs are at the forefront of reforms to the management of schools, and yet little scholarly attention has been paid to the community of individuals that fulfils those functions. In this special issue we illuminate their contribution by taking a closer look at the working lives and professional practices of SBLs thereby drawing attention to the individuals that make up this significant cohort of the school workforce.

The theme of the status of school business professionals is highlighted by Fiona Creaby. Despite increased acknowledgement that the profession plays a vital role in schools, limited attention has been given to the challenges that it faces and how its development can be supported, alongside a longstanding theme around barriers to strategic participation in schools. The fragmentation of school systems in England has highlighted the need for increased collaboration and knowledge exchange between schools, professional bodies, policy makers and scholars. Creaby argues for coherent and robust research and wider knowledge exchange to explore the contribution and development of school business leaders, which would increase recognition of their contribution to school standards and improve consistency in a profession that recruits its members from such diverse working backgrounds and experiences.

Paul Armstrong also focuses on the professional development of school business leaders, but this article reports on research into the informal ways in which SBLs learn ‘on the job’. Drawing on empirical data from a qualitative inquiry into the working lives and practices of SBLs in the English school system, Armstrong argues, with Evans (2019), that professional development must be understood as a multi-dimensional concept constituting both formal and informal processes. It is with the latter with which this article is concerned, exploring the aspects of professional development that are implicit and often concealed within the everyday interactions and routines of working life and may therefore be unrecognised and unappreciated as developmental. Understanding the circumstances in which such learning occurs, both individually and collaboratively, is crucial to enabling SBLs to maintain professional growth.

Such professional growth might lead SBLs to seek progression to broader senior-leadership responsibilities in a school or across a group or schools, and this is the subject of Josephine Marchant’s article. The research conducted by Marchant contributes new understanding of the opportunities and constraints for SBLs who aspire to positions in school leadership. Several factors impact on professionalisation, in terms of career structure and progression: the ways in which the SBL role in all its diverse forms is perceived by colleagues; its potential to contribute to school effectiveness; the cultural paradigm in which SBLs operate; and the structural and unspoken constraints on their opportunities to progress, which may include their personal appetite for promotion.

Concluding the research articles, Karen Starr broadens the scope of our special issue by drawing on research conducted in Canada, the USA, Australia and New Zealand, as well as the UK. Significant, widespread and fundamental changes occurring in education’s purposes, policies, practices and accountabilities have triggered the rapid transformation of school business management. Starr discusses the consequent rapid professionalisation of SBLs and, looking to the future, highlights the challenges for those whose work lies on the boundary between macro pressures and
micro necessities. School business, Starr argues, is unlike other forms of business: it requires specific education-related knowledge and skills, as well as business expertise. Teaching and learning are foundational to the work of SBLs, who can contribute to building learning communities, not merely managing them.

This special issue’s Opinion Piece is contributed by the Chief Executive of the Institute of School Business Leadership (IBSL), Stephen Morales. As a sector leader, Stephen represents SBLs in discussions at national policy level in England and has the ear of government ministers, policy makers and professional associations. He is acutely aware that, in many schools and school trusts, there remain elements of misunderstanding and mistrust, where a perception prevails that the responsibilities for ‘the three pillars of leadership’—governance, pedagogy and business—require different groups of people, with different backgrounds and skill sets. Morales argues that joined-up leadership requires those involved to overcome anxieties about sharing power, influence and responsibilities.

In our final piece in this issue, Stephen Rayner interviews past Chair of Trustees of the ISBL Matthew Clements-Wheeler. The interview discusses the themes in each of the preceding articles, bringing Matthew’s interpretation of those issues based on his almost 20 years’ experience of working in senior posts in schools, as well as playing a leading role in the transition from the National Association of School Business Management to the Institute of School Business Leadership. Matthew has strong connections with the international community of SBLs, bringing important insights from his visits to South Africa and the USA. Matthew identifies his top priorities for the future of business leadership in education, concluding with the challenge to the profession of addressing its current lack of cultural and ethnic diversity.

Paul Wilfred Armstrong is Senior Lecturer in education leadership and management at the Manchester Institute of Education, University of Manchester, UK. His work focuses on contemporary forms of educational leadership and management, in particular the means by which schools are managed and resourced organisationally. He is also a trustee for the Institute of School Business Professionals in England. His most recent publications include ‘School business managers in England: Negotiating identity’ (2018) and ‘School to school support within a competitive education system: Views from the inside’ (co-authored with Mel Ainscow, 2018).

Stephen Rayner is Director of Teaching and Learning in the Manchester Institute of Education. He has worked in and with schools in England for more than 30 years as a teacher, senior leader, governor and education adviser. Stephen’s research interests include policy, leadership and teacher education. His research into academisation was recognised by a BELMAS award for his doctoral thesis and a Best Paper award from the journal Education Management Administration and Leadership for his article, ‘Leaders and leadership in a climate of uncertainty: A case study of structural change in England’.

Author biographies

Paul Wilfred Armstrong©
University of Manchester, UK
Stephen Rayner©
University of Manchester, UK

References

Evans L (2019) Implicit and informal professional development: what it ‘looks like’, how it occurs, and why we need to research it. Professional Development in Education 45(1): 3–16.
West A and Wolfe D (2019) Academies, autonomy, equality and democratic accountability: reforming the fragmented publicly funded school system in England. London Review of Education 17(1): 70–86.
Woods C (2014) Anatomy of a Professionalization Project: The Making of the Modern School Business Manager. London: Bloomsbury.