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## Leading complementary schools: trials, tribulations and rewards.

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### Background

'Complementary' schools now constitute a significant educational sector in the UK and yet little is known about those who lead these organizations. The schools (which are sometimes called 'community' or 'supplementary' schools) are operated on a part-time basis by voluntary organisations to meet the specific cultural and language needs of the different minority ethnic communities that they represent. Existing research has concluded that these schools are attempting to meet important social and cultural needs which have implications for education policy, social justice and community cohesion. However, the research has focused upon the place of these schools in the educational system and their impact upon students and their families, rather than those who lead and manage the schools. The paper explores some of the professional challenges that complementary school leaders face and how they deal with them by reporting on some early outcomes from a small research project.

### Research Questions

1. How are complementary schools organized and how they operate as organizations with a focus on leadership and management?
2. The identification of challenges, difficulties and also the advantages of how the schools operate.
3. What might be the strengths and weaknesses of leaders and managers from their own perceptions?

### Methods

**The Literature:** Complementary schools are sometimes called 'cultural', 'community', 'mother tongue' or 'supplementary' schools. The term 'supplementary' (Cousins, 2005; Bristol, 2007) is often used to describe these organizations in local authority documentation where the schools are seen as supplementing the 'mainstream' state schooling and perhaps are judged to be subordinate to the mainstream. However, there is an alternative take on this term that sees such schools as being established by community groups in reaction to poor mainstream provision and so they are supplementing a lack in the educational opportunities for ethnic minorities (Abdelrazak, 2001; Li Wei, 2006).

In contrast, the term 'complementary' has been used by three ESRC funded research projects which have been completed in recent years (Martin et al., 2004; Cresse et al., 2007 and Francis et al., 2008). One argument for the use of the term rather than that of supplementary is that it stresses the value and importance of the schools and their contribution to people's lives (Martin et al. 2004). However, Francis et al., (2009), see the term complementary as referring to a particular type of provision focused on language teaching.

Existing research has concluded that these schools are attempting to meet important social and cultural needs. However, research has been either on students in schools (see Francis et al., 2008) or looking at the interaction between language, identity and education within the context of the schools (Martin et al., 2004; Li Wei, 2006; Creese and Martin, 2006;). In other words, research has focused upon the place of these schools in the educational system and their impact upon students and their families, rather than those who lead and manage the school.

**Research Methods:** Previous large scale research projects have involved the use of ethnography and case study employing methods such as observation, questionnaires and interviews (Martin et al., 2004 and Francis et al., 2008). There are many challenges including obtaining access to participants and ethical issues in balances of power and the appropriateness of researchers. In this case, simple semi-structured interviews are conducted with senior leaders of a small number of complementary schools in the south east of England.

## Frame

a) The marginalization of complementary schools has already been identified (Li Wei, 2006). There are, I would contend, at least two aspects of this marginalization which are those of exclusion and recognition. These two aspects relate to people being recognised as part of the wider community and fellow citizens, which links to the issue of complementary schools being recognised and how might they be recognised.

b) The cultural issues of education leadership and management have been considered by a number of authors. Dimmock and Walker (2005) consider the interrelationships between educational leadership, context and culture. They warn against trying to understand everything through a dominant Anglo-America view. It seems to me that complementary schools provide particularly rich and complex contexts where the application of a cultural framework to current expectations of leadership and management practices in order to avoid assumptions about good and appropriate practice.

## Research findings

It is contended that there are important issues for the future of educational leadership that arise from the leadership of complementary schools for matters that include promoting education of all UK citizens, social justice and the improvement of mainstream education.

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