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Smith, P., and Bell, L. (2014). *Leading Schools in Challenging Circumstances: Strategies for Success*. New York: Bloomsbury.

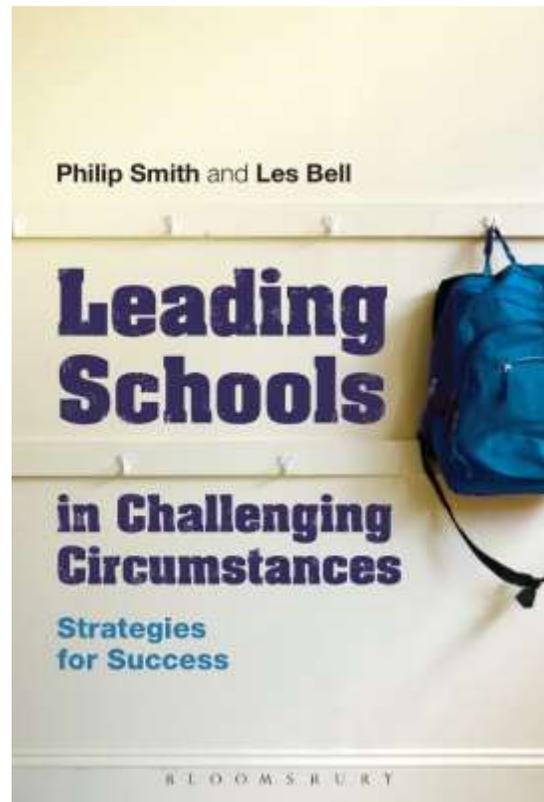
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In *Leading Schools in Challenging Circumstances*, Philip Smith and Les Bell examine different approaches to leadership in schools. At the core of the study is the view that the leadership of headteachers is the most influential factor in determining the level of success in a school and the book offers an in-depth study of different approaches to school leadership along with a discussion of their impact. The book is split into two distinct sections with the first part considering the extent to which four headteachers in the same local authority deployed transactional and transformational leadership styles. The second half of the book then provides a case study of how one newly appointed headteacher sought to deploy these findings, along with an examination of the impact that this approach had on his leadership of a school in challenging circumstances.

The book opens with an overview of some theoretical work on leadership in schools. While hardly exhaustive in scope, the reader is introduced to transactional and transformational leadership as a framework within which to interpret and explore the activities of the leaders discussed in the book. In



short, transactional leadership focuses on transactions between the leader and their followers. This usually involves the follower being motivated by fear of punishment or desire for reward, such as the incentive of financial gain or promotion, and the focus is on task completion. Transformational leadership, on the other hand, is where the leader influences by inspiring individuals to follow them and ensuring that the vision that they are working towards is shared by all. This approach is people centred and is more concerned with long term development than short term tasks.

In their analysis of how the two approaches to leadership have been employed by headteachers, Smith and Bell interviewed four headteachers from the same local authority along with interviews with their deputies to provide an alternative perspective. Their findings showed that all of the headteachers adopted transactional approaches at different times as the situation necessitated. This was seen particularly during the initial period a headteacher was in place at a school in challenging circumstances as it was often felt that a task orientated approach would ensure that changes that were immediately necessary were pushed through. For example, one headteacher recognised that his new school “needed a vision and that establishing this was more important than the involvement of staff and as such was not open to input from others” (p. 34). The headteachers interviewed also felt that task focused, transactional leadership could play a particular role in the day to day running of a school to ensure that jobs were completed to a satisfactory standard, particularly in relation to ensuring national standards were met. As Smith and Bell note, “transactional leadership may provide the groundwork to move the school forward, as it will ensure that the school is viewed as successful when subjected to external measurement criteria, providing greater freedom for the headteacher than does a school that is viewed as failing” (p. 146).

Transformational leadership, in contrast, is heavily associated with the core values of a leader and involves followers buying into, if not co-creating, a vision that is followed by all. One of the key features of transformational leadership is that it is person-centred. The leaders interviewed recorded a strong belief in their staff and in the students in their school, investing heavily in the development of both and

focusing their energies on this aspect of their leadership as opposed to the more operational aspects of running a school. This was evident in the comments of one headteacher who felt that his job was akin to that of a “missionary” (p. 60) and that one of his chief roles was to ensure all members of the community were “partners in the vision” of developing the school (p. 58). The strategic aspect of transformational leadership was seen in that when using this approach all headteachers aligned their vision with their values and regularly identified possibilities for their school and the individuals within it, which had hitherto been unidentified. When compared with transactional leadership, the headteachers interviewed noted that when deploying transformational leadership they were more able to bring about long term developments that would have a positive impact on their schools for years to come.

A particularly interesting aspect of the study is how the school leaders interviewed would move between transactional and transformational leadership approaches, utilising both as the situation required. Any perceived dichotomy between the two approaches would appear to be misplaced - instead *Leading Schools in Challenging Circumstances* suggests that exceptional leaders are able to adapt their leadership style and utilise a range of different approaches to get the results sought. It was the least experienced of the headteachers who struggled most to adopt a transformational approach, often claiming that they were using transformational leadership though sticking rigidly to a preconceived vision and failing to include others in its development. That this was the case supports another argument made by Smith and Bell that transformational leadership not only requires conviction, but also courage in those convictions. Fortunately, they argue that headteachers tend to evolve with the school they lead and this confidence was seen to emerge with experience.

The second part of the book provides a case study of the leadership employed by one of the deputies from the first study, documenting his approach when he was employed as a headteacher. The individual was “fully aware of the research of phase one, and ... took a conscious approach to develop the findings on transformational aspects of leadership in an attempt to employ the proposals from the original research and identify the impact

these would have on a failing school situated in challenging circumstances” (p. 107). The school in the case study fundamentally changed for the better under the new leader, which is attributed to the transformational style of leadership adopted by him. The key to the success of the school was seen as having three main elements: firstly that the school had a clear vision, secondly that staff at the school were heavily invested in and finally that no excuse could ever be accepted. Wherever possible, the headteacher promoted a transformational approach, tempering those aspects of school leadership – such as the completion of duties – with transformational elements that connect to the overall purpose and vision of the school. The chapter contains a wealth of practical examples of how transformational leadership might look on a day to day level, with examples of assemblies delivered, training courses run and the way parents might be brought into school. This part of the book, then, offers a practical approach to delivering the theoretical findings outlined earlier.

*Leading Schools in Challenging Circumstances* is not without its faults. At times the book appears formulaic, on occasions repetitive, and this reader cannot help but feel that the two parts could have been better connected. Nonetheless, Smith and Bell offer some fascinating insights into approaches to school leadership, making a complex field of research eminently accessible through a small scale study of four headteachers. The second section of the book is particularly strong. It does have hints of a victory narrative, but given that it is describing an incredibly successful transformation of a school it would be hard to avoid this. A flick through this relatively brief chapter not only provides a wealth of practical examples to lead a school, but offers a point of reflection for any school leader hoping to link their vision for the school with their practice as a leader in it. Overall, I would whole heartedly recommend *Leading Schools in Challenging Circumstances* to those interested in the leadership of schools. The succinct manner in which complex work on educational leadership is handled and the wealth of practical examples in the final substantive chapter will make it particularly appealing to school principals who do not have the time to complete extensive research in this field, yet want to develop a research informed approach to their practice.

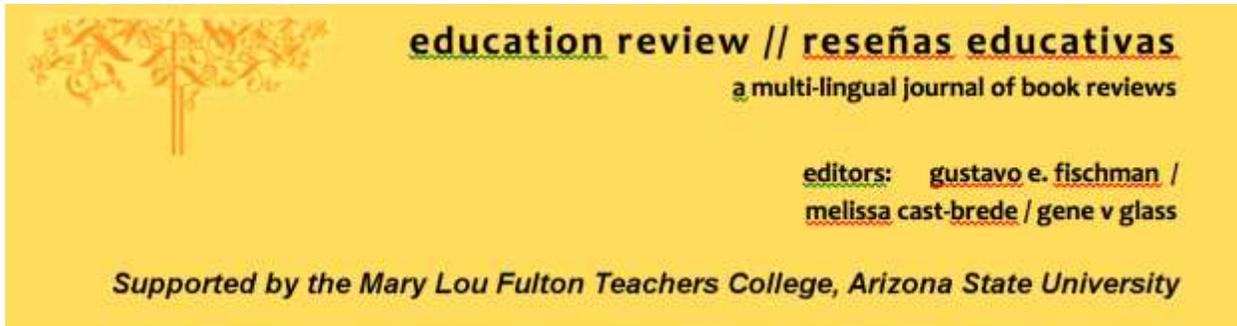
## About the Reviewer

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Dr. Geoff Baker is Principal of Cromer Academy in Norfolk and a visiting fellow at both the University of East Anglia and Liverpool Hope University. His research interests include employability in secondary schools, teacher development in professional learning communities and the comparison of teaching practice in secondary and higher education. The volume of essays he co-edited with Andrew Fisher, *Arts and Humanities Academics in Schools: Mapping the Pedagogical Interface* (Continuum, 2013), has recently been released in paperback.



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