

**Making Sense of Policy in London Secondary  
Education: What Can Be Learned  
from the London Challenge?**

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## **PREFACE**

### **Contextual Statement**

The assessment criteria for the EdD programme require a separate 2,000 word contextual statement showing:

- How the EdD programme, through a synthesis of research and critical reflection, has contributed to my own professional learning as an experienced practitioner;
- How the taught courses, the Institution Focused Study and the thesis are inter-linked, each building upon the other in the development of my learning and thinking;
- How the EdD programme has enhanced my professional development.

## **PREFACE**

### **Contextual Statement for the Thesis: The Contribution of this Thesis and of the EdD to My Professional Context and My Professional Development**

What the leaders of urban schools need to know and be able to do on a daily basis is what many colleagues in less pressing contexts will need to know and be able to do in future years. These are issues about social justice; creativity and energy; as well as about managing complex issues and challenges. (Riley, 2009:12)

#### ***Introduction***

This research study has evolved from a previous small scale enquiry which was undertaken as an Institution Focused Study (IFS) as part of the EdD programme (Doctor in Education) at the Institute of Education, London University. The programme aims to provide an academic training for practitioners working in an educational capacity. It offers opportunities for practitioners to interact with literature and empirical research at doctoral level, creating new knowledge about their line of professional work and advancing understanding of 'pratique' – practical, professional expertise. To be an expert practitioner is now a contemporary expectation of those in public service, like educators. Society does not confer professional status unquestioningly; it has to be earned through proven results (Dent and Whitehead, 2002:4-5). There is a professional imperative now for educators to be informed about their field at a higher level. The EdD allows educators to develop their expertise in the pursuit of enhanced practice and to contribute to the advancement of the field. In studying for the EdD, this is what I hope to have achieved.

Writing this thesis has been an iterative process: there has been a dialogue between my research and my practice. One has informed the other in a dialectical approach as I have developed my theory. It is 'engaged scholarship' (Boyer, 1990 in Riley,

2008:3). In the thesis development, I set out on a discovery of new knowledge. I integrated this understanding with my professional experience to develop this new knowledge and I have applied this both to my research and my practice. In writing up and disseminating this work through the thesis, conference presentations and journal articles, I am participating in the fourth part of the cycle of engaged scholarship by teaching. Through this thesis I hope to influence the development of practice in my field.

### *1. My Professional Context*

The thesis is relevant to my own professional context in two main ways. The first is to do with secondary education in urban settings. My professional context is that of school leadership in secondary education in London. It is an urban environment with quite specific features. Schools in urban settings – those which are situated in large towns or cities – are faced with particular issues which are different from schools in rural settings.

This does not mean necessarily that urban schools face more challenges to their effectiveness than rural schools (Harris, 2009:10-11) but London is complex and the place that a school is in directly affects the education which a school provides – and vice versa. For example, there are many London communities in which high levels of affluence sit cheek by jowl with extreme poverty. This has a profound impact on schools, the dynamics that affect them, their standards and their capacity to be effective (Lupton, 2006:3–9). I have been a teacher and leader at different levels of leadership in four diverse, challenging London schools and I want to deepen my learning about the issues that have affected each of them and to understand much more about the relationship between education and place.

The second is to do with school leadership in a rapidly changing education policy environment. I am currently a headteacher and, in such a position, I have principal responsibility for my school's effectiveness and improvement. I am subject to challenge and questioning about my work; I am accountable for standards in my

school, which are published annually and scrutinised. In order to be effective in my role, I need to know and understand my field in depth and I need to be able to engage with national and local education policy. In the context of the London situation, I need to be able to negotiate the complexities of my school's setting for the benefit of my pupils and their families. Contemporary education changes rapidly and understanding more about the historical socio-political context of education and its relationship to current policy is essential if one is to manage change in education effectively for secondary schools.

Honig holds that educational leaders need to become more “savvy consumers of research”. They should “mine the research for ideas, evidence and other guides to inform their deliberations and decisions about how lessons from implementation research may apply to their own policies, people and places.” (Honig, 2006:23). I hope to draw insights from this research which will help to develop my own professional learning and contribute new knowledge to the profession about policy-making in education.

## ***2. The Relationship of the Thesis with the IFS***

School leaders' interaction with the contemporary education policy process within my own setting, that of London secondary education, is the main focus of this thesis. In 2006 – 2007, I undertook an IFS (Institution Focused Study) which found that practitioners, especially the headteacher, had a significant impact on the implementation of one successful education policy – the London Challenge – in one London secondary school. I wanted to extend my investigation of this finding in the thesis through a deeper study of the policy and its implementation in London secondary education. I wanted to find out more about how education policy is formed and implemented, exploring what we can learn from the London Challenge.

In keeping with the IFS, this thesis has found that whilst the existence of an explicit policy strategy like the London Challenge will support schools in making improvements, it is how policy is implemented that makes the difference and

headteachers have a key role to play in this part of the policy process. This is because distilling from policy what is relevant and important for a school's development is a vital role for a headteacher. Headteachers have to work within a field that is dominated by 'policy-noise'; not only are individual policies complex, requiring interpretation, they also compete with a vast range of different policy initiatives. Prioritising within the context of competing internal and external demands is an essential skill for headteachers (Fullan, 2001:3-9). In the midst of what sometimes can seem like a sort of 'primeval soup' of different policy ideas and a constant stream of policy initiatives (Kingdon, 2003:116-117) headteachers have to distinguish priorities for their schools. In this way, a headteacher can have a fundamental influence over the impact of policies like the London Challenge. Potentially, this provides headteachers with some significant power over the success of education policies like the London Challenge.

This thesis seeks to learn more about the policy process in education and the role of headteachers. What do policy-makers need to consider when creating a policy in order to ensure that it is implemented by practitioners in such a way as to achieve its objectives faithfully? At the start of the thesis, not much was known about the entire eight year life of the London Challenge policy. There were a few evaluations of the London Challenge but they were limited. There was no analysis of the history of the London Challenge – how it was formed and how it evolved as it was implemented. Nor was there much exploration of why it was successful. The thesis seeks to contribute new knowledge about this.

The London Challenge was formed for a particular context with perceptions about a particular set of problems in secondary education. An investigation of this context is followed in the thesis by an examination of the policy and its metamorphosis. There is a scrutiny of the policy process which underpinned the London Challenge and an empirical enquiry. The enquiry asked the policy-makers and practitioners most involved with the London Challenge why they thought it was successful. The findings were revealing about policy-making in education. They show that if policy-

makers create the right conditions then practitioners can lead system-wide transformation in schools for the benefit of all a region's secondary schools and their children.

### ***3. The relationship of the IFS and Thesis with the Taught Courses***

Both the IFS and this thesis were built on the strong foundation provided by the taught courses for this degree and the assignments that were submitted for assessment. The first of these was focused on a critique of the concept of 'new professionalism' in education. It investigated the socio-political context of contemporary education, exploring the relationship of social policy with the change in teachers' professional identity and the growth of teachers' public accountability for performance. This assignment, together with the fourth which formed a critique of the London Challenge policy, helped me to form my early ideas about contemporary policy-making in education. I encountered the fields of sociology and politics in education and gained a deeper understanding of historical socio-political influences on current policy and practice. I have built on this understanding in the thesis through further research, developing insights from it that help to explain the relationship of education policy-making to its context.

The second and third assignments helped me to develop my knowledge and understanding of research methods at doctoral level. I was able to use these enhanced skills and understanding to support the development of my research question and to deepen the level of sophistication with which I have been able to select methods. I was able to use them to good effect in writing and publishing a journal article in 'Educate', the on-line journal of the doctoral school at the Institute of Education, as well as to support my intentions to enter a paper for a conference and hold a professional seminar on this area for my peers.

#### ***Conclusion: How do I hope to benefit from the research study?***

Undertaking the EdD has had a significant impact on my practice as a headteacher. By understanding the policy process better, it has supported my contribution to my

own school and to my partner schools. School improvement in urban settings requires headteachers who have the capacity to negotiate competing demands in policy and to prioritise. By understanding the policy process and its relationship to practitioners in more depth I have enhanced my own skills as a practitioner and especially as a headteacher.

Another benefit is that my skills in scholarship have been sharpened. I have learned how to conduct empirical research within a coherent framework of methods that satisfies the requirements for academic recognition. I know and understand the complexities of qualitative methodology and I can analyse and codify data to support the creation of new theory and practice. I have learned how to discover new knowledge, integrate it and apply it – and in submitting this thesis, I have begun the process of teaching through dissemination of the findings: I have become an ‘engaged scholar’.

Lastly, this research has another benefit that relates to the wider context of my work as a practitioner in London education. I have gained a deeper professional insight into the dynamics of London education and the complexities that lead to under-attainment in some London secondary schools. I have developed a deeper awareness of the links between place, social exclusion, disadvantage and social polarisation as underpinning problems that affect pupils’ achievement and that impact on the social landscape of London.

## Abstract

This thesis presents an examination of the policy process in education, focusing on the London Challenge as an exemplifying case study. The policy problem of the London Challenge was the poorer performance of London secondary schools compared to other regions and considerable between-school variation. Social polarisation was intensified by the relationship between education, 'place' and social disadvantage and so the London Challenge was designed to intervene in this situation.

A critique of the London Challenge policy over the course of its eight year life is presented in the thesis, identifying that a significant shift in the leadership of the policy – from policy-maker to practitioner – took place as it evolved, altering the character of the policy. The thesis finds that practitioners, especially headteachers, played a central role in the success of the London Challenge because they re-shaped the policy as they implemented it.

An examination of the policy process of the London Challenge follows, together with an empirical study in this thesis. They show that there was a gradual ceding of power from policy-makers to headteachers and London Challenge advisers who led the policy's implementation. It created a 'high trust / high accountability' model for education policy-making which paired professional autonomy and expertise with accountability to government for improvement in London's secondary schools. This took place within a framework of conditions that required shared moral purpose, strong leadership, high challenge with an openness to supportive and fair data-informed scrutiny and a regional commitment to collegial partnership.

The thesis concludes that what can be learned from the London Challenge is that 'mature' self-improving education systems should provide the right conditions for headteachers to act as system leaders with the transformative power to create and lead education policy to the benefit of all a region's schools and its children.

# **Introduction**

## **London's Challenge in 2002**

### *Introduction*

This thesis examines the London Challenge, a policy introduced in 2002 to address the problem of under-performance in London secondary schools compared to other regions in England. The London Challenge was a policy designed to raise standards of attainment and to effect system-wide school improvement. It was created with particular reference to the London context, a context with quite specific issues. These were to do with social, economic and demographic changes at the turn of the century. Many London secondary schools experienced considerable challenges in recruiting teachers and headteachers. Standards were low and London trailed behind the rest of the country.

Existing evaluations hold that the London Challenge policy reversed this decline. During its eight year duration, London moved from being the worst performing to the highest performing region in England at Key Stage 4 and the between-school variation which had dominated London's secondary schools was significantly improved. Further, practitioners felt that the London Challenge was so successful that they were reluctant to let it finish and so in 2011 (the year in which it was officially meant to close), part of the policy known as the 'London Leadership Strategy' was established to continue its work as a not-for-profit company, independent of government, led by many of the original London Challenge team. The 'Challenge Partnership' was also founded by George Berwick, bringing together over 70 schools in a peer relationship with its roots in the London Challenge.

The thesis asks what can be learned about successful policy-making in education through an investigation of the London Challenge. The scope of the thesis is limited and so it takes the lens of the policy process to narrow its focus. It is not the purpose of this thesis to prove the existing evaluations of the London Challenge and the claims that are made about its successes, although there is some critical consideration

of them as far as the scope of this research allows. This thesis is interested in how the London Challenge was formed and implemented, seeking to pin-point identifiable features within the policy process that might inform successful policy-making in education.

This introductory chapter explores the London context for which the policy was created. First, the social, economic and demographic position of London is set out. It is followed by a critical analysis of the problems of social polarisation in education which was a key issue for the London Challenge. The relationship of 'place' with education was central to London's problems within secondary schooling at the time. Next, the chapter outlines the difficulties which London secondary schools were facing in 2002. London was not the area of choice in which to be a teacher or headteacher and yet, by the time the London Challenge came to an end, teaching in challenging London secondary schools was favoured above careers with most of the Times top 100 graduate recruiters (Teach First, 2011; Hill, 2012). The chapter finishes with an outline of the scope of the research in this thesis.

### *The Challenge for Secondary Education in London in 2002*

The London Challenge policy was premised on a central problem with education in London secondary schools at the end of the twentieth century. This was the poorer educational performance of London schools overall compared to every other region in England and in particular, the variation in standards of attainment between schools often situated in close proximity to each other. In 2003 when the London Challenge was officially launched, there were many London schools where the quality of education was of a low standard (DCSF, 2008:3). At this time, there were 70 London secondary schools out of 407 where pupils attained less than 25% 5+ A\* - C or which were in an Ofsted category of 'Special Measures' or 'Serious Weaknesses' (DfE, 2010:9). This was to do with a whole variety of educational problems within schools, including weak leadership, poor teaching and staffing (Brighouse, 2007:72-91). However, the poorer performance of London and the variation in standards between

schools was made worse by London's contextual factors and the growth in social polarisation which was reflected in schools. This problem created two related issues.

First, it meant that parents and carers were concerned about getting their child into the school of their choice if it was performing well. Highly performing schools are commonly regarded as more successful and draw more applications for limited places. Competition becomes fierce and this affects property prices in surrounding areas. This contributed to the second issue, which was the related growth of social polarisation. A mutual relationship exists between a school and where it is situated (Leithwood et al., 2010:28-32). Changes in wealth and class become associated social dynamics of schools in such a context. It is a cycle which deepens the problems for schools that perform poorly – and in this way, at the time of the London Challenge's launch, education in London was inequitable. To fully appreciate the scale of the problem, one needs to understand more about the London context at this time and the challenges that it brought.

### *1. The London Context at the Turn of the Twentieth Century*

In the 1990s and early 2000s, London was a 'global city' (DfES, 2003b:2-5; Hall, 2007:5) which meant that it was of international importance. It was a complex conurbation with a character unlike other cities in England, lending itself to more natural comparison with other leading cities across the globe rather than to those within its national environment. London was one of the financial hubs of the world. It sat at the heart of a complex information and communications network with Heathrow, one of the busiest international airports in the world, near its centre. London was ranked with New York and Tokyo as one of three leading global cities. London's economy had importance for the success of the whole country and so it drew constant attention. This was in marked contrast to the 1980s, when London's industry and population were in decline<sup>1</sup> (Hall, 2007:1–11; Lupton and Sullivan,

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<sup>1</sup> The loss of the manufacturing industries and the dock closures in the 1970s and 1980s was one factor. Another was the migration out of London in this period.

2007:8). By the 1990s, this decline had reversed and there were important economic and social changes which affected London schools deeply. They were:

- *Changes in the type of employment that were developing and for which schools were preparing young people.* Finance and business services had expanded. Public service work, jobs in the creative and media industries, leisure and tourism and ICT were also areas of growth. Employment in these sectors required higher level skills in communication, creativity, critical thinking and numeracy.
- *Changes in economic growth, which were distributed inequitably.* This affected communities in London differentially. Salaries varied considerably; for example, high wages were paid in the City of London with the average salary at £81,000 compared to £23,000 in the rest of the country (Lupton and Sullivan, 2007:13). However, worklessness rates in London were also higher than in any other part of the country. In Tower Hamlets, which is situated on the doorstep of the City of London and which contains the Docklands financial centre, one third of working age people had never worked (Lupton and Sullivan, 2007:13) and there was a high rate of child poverty with many children living in over-crowded housing (Lupton and Sullivan, 2007:14–19). A recent Save the Children report highlighted that four of the ten Local Authorities in England in which more than 25% of children lived in severe poverty were in London; three of them featured in the highest five (Save the Children, 2011).
- *Changes in population, which were significant.* Economic migration increased leading to greater ethnic diversity in London's school population. The need to feed London's economy through workers who had appropriate skills levels led to more immigration from both inside and outside the EU (Hall, 2007:6-7; Lupton and Sullivan, 2007:10). In relation to ethnic diversity, Hall remarked in his study of London in 2007 'London Voices, London Lives', that "London

has a demographic profile quite unlike any other part of the country; it is almost like a different country” (Hall, 2007:7).

At the turn of the twentieth century, London was a more populous, much wealthier, more diverse city than it had been three or four decades before. It was a city of greater opportunity – but it was also a city of greater inequality. Divisions between rich and poor were wider than ever (Brighouse and Fullick, 2007:1). It was estimated that in London 39% of children lived in poverty (Sofer, 2007:68). In his study, Hall found significant numbers of Londoners who were struggling to make ends meet (Hall, 2007:463–4).

Partly, the inequities were associated with housing as well as salaries. There was a high premium on land and the cost of housing had risen three times faster than wages since 1997, with the average cost of a house in London at 8.8 times the national average salary in 2007 (Lupton and Sullivan, 2007:14). Housing affordability difficulties meant that middle income families tended to move out and the gap between the richest and the poorest Londoners grew (Lupton and Sullivan, 2007:15). Richer Londoners could segregate themselves from the poorer – there was a growth in ‘gated communities’ and the cost of housing in areas which were considered more desirable allowed the more affluent to buy social exclusion (Hall, 2007:464).

This was where the context of London, in all its economic and social complexity, became of particular significance with regard to secondary schools. Amongst a wide variety of issues raised by Londoners in Hall’s 2007 study, for those with children the quality of London’s schools was *the* major concern:

Every parent seemed to talk endlessly about it and all seemed alarmingly well-informed about the merits and de-merits of choices on offer. Some had moved – others were contemplating a move, to catchment areas of what they regarded as the best schools – but even more so to avoid what they saw as bad ones. (Hall, 2007:466)

School choice and perceptions about the relative merits of different schools were becoming related to social division. Moving house to a different area, paying for schooling or using London's extensive public transport system to travel some distance to a family's school of choice created social dynamics which exacerbated social polarisation and had a social effect on the schools themselves. The 2003 policy text of the London Challenge described this problem:

We must be honest about the problems and challenges faced by London's education service. Many parents simply do not have sufficient confidence to send their children to their local state secondary school. ...significantly more London parents send their children to independent schools than the national average – 14% in inner London compared to 7% nationally. Some parents even move house to improve their children's chances of admission to a particular state school. (DfES, 2003b:17)

London's context, with its high level of financial resources, its unequal wealth distribution and relative ease of travel, affected the economic and social circumstances of the communities from which schools drew their intakes. Thus social polarisation and the growth of the gap between richer and poorer Londoners had become a fundamental problem which affected London schools deeply.

## *2. Social Polarisation in London: the Relationship between Education and Place*

The problem of social polarisation and its effect on London schools was exacerbated by the social policy context. Built on the principles of 'choice and diversity' in public service provision and the wider politics of 'The Third Way' (Giddens, 1998, 2002; Higham et al., 2009:3-4) influenced strongly by social trends such as individualism and globalisation (Giddens, 1990, 1991), contemporary education policy created in London what some have described as a 'postcode effect' related to schools. The term 'postcode effect' describes a particular problem that the variation in performance between schools brings to a situation where there is a widening gap between the rich and poor. Parents and carers worry about whether a school is good and their perceptions influence their choices. Getting a place at one's state school of choice is highly competitive in London because of the ease of travel and the social and

economic changes that have been described. Those that have the financial means to do so exercise 'risk management' and move to areas where schools are reputed to be good, creating a rise in property prices. Thus, those with less economic (and associated social, cultural and emotional) advantages are selected out of the area and of the school's intake and thus social polarisation is enhanced (Ball, 2003:2–3; 16; 21–25; Power et al, 2003:153).

The existence of a social policy structure which created a competitive 'quasi-market' in education, although intended to raise standards, has tended to fuel the situation (Clarke and Newman, 1997:18–19). Competition between secondary schools has been a key force in education policy in London since 1988. The Education Reform Act 1988 removed much power from the Local Education Authorities (Chitty, 1996:261). It offered schools the opportunity to become more autonomous. The existence of selective independent schools (Timmins, 2001:95-6) and grammar schools alongside Local Management of Schools (LMS), City Technology Colleges and the Academies that were introduced in 2000 advanced the conditions for competition. Ignition to the whole structure for competition was through the publication of performance tables for schools, often presented to parents by the media in local 'league tables'. The tables were meant to raise standards of attainment through competition (Timmins, 2001:520) and to establish an environment where poor performance is supposed to force remedial action to ensure a school's survival (Grace, 1995:41).

Whilst strong arguments are advanced about the success of market competition in improving public services, including education (Le Grand, 2007), a significant associated effect in schools is that it can increase social polarisation which is, in the context that has been described, a particular problem for London (Whitty et al., 1998:96, 101–2; Whitty, 2002:52–60, 83–4). This is because there is an intricate relationship between a school and where it is situated and this is affected by social polarisation. Place affects education: where a school is located has a multi-layered effect on its character and the challenges that it faces (Lupton, 2006). Lupton argues

that neighbourhood disadvantage makes good schooling harder to achieve and so context becomes a driver for school quality (Lupton, 2006:6–7).

Competition deepens the problem. Ball has mounted a critique of the market in education and how it privileges the middle classes with all the advantages that they can command in school choice through their greater affluence, social capital and ‘voice’ (Ball, 2006:264–275). Families move to live in the catchment area for their preferred school; schools are pressured by competition to tailor their intakes as far as possible towards pupils with higher prior attainment or who experience fewer socio-economic challenges; communities thus become more isolated and homogeneous. School intakes become socio-economically slanted since attainment is related to social advantage (Katwala, 2005:38; West, 2007:283). This cycle exacerbates variation in performance between London schools, affecting the life chances of children beyond schooling (Leaton Gray and Whitty, 2007:100–105). It is a tale of ‘survival of the fittest’ in which schools in areas of social and economic disadvantage suffer deepening social exclusion, as do their communities (Brighouse, 2007:84–85).

London’s ‘challenge’ in 2002 when the London Challenge policy was initiated was a complex, socially divisive problem which successive governments had failed to tackle successfully, including the Labour party in its first term of office.

### *3. The Educational Problems in London’s Secondary Schools in 2002*

The London Challenge policy was formed to address the problems for secondary schools within this complex socio-economic context of 2002. There was a range of very practical difficulties for schools which meant that standards were poor across London despite considerable investment in education during Labour’s first period in government (Timmins, 2001:599). These difficulties included:

- *‘The Five Boroughs’*: Some Local Authorities were struggling to provide a high enough standard of secondary education for their children. Hackney, Lambeth, Southwark, Islington and Haringey had all received damning Ofsted

reports (Brighouse, 2007:74). In these boroughs, standards between schools often varied enormously. For example, a look at Haringey showed that Fortismere School and White Hart Lane School (now Woodside High) differed considerably in raw attainment scores in 2002, the year prior to the launch of the London Challenge. Then, over 67% of pupils attained 5+A\* - C at Fortismere whilst at White Hart Lane the figure was 24% (DfES, 2003a). Further, this was a pattern that persisted to varying extents in all LEAs in London. In addition to the five boroughs of real concern, there were about 50 other secondary schools scattered across London that were either at or below the government floor target of 25% 5+ A\* – C or which were in an Ofsted category for improvement – Special Measures or Serious Weaknesses (DfE, 2010a:9).

- *The Quality of Teaching:* The quality of teaching was variable in schools, either because of difficulties with teacher supply or because of poor leadership – often the two were connected. There was a growing shortage of teachers in London, especially in science, maths, English and modern languages. In 2001, London carried a vacancy rate of 3.5% which was higher than the rest of England (Bubb and Earley, 2007:151) and in some London secondary schools where the challenges were greatest, the problem was particularly acute (Brighouse, 2007:80–81).
- *Leadership in Schools:* Leadership in London secondary schools needed improvement. It was recognised that headteachers in London were as effective as other headteachers across the country but that the challenges of running a London secondary school could be far greater (DfES, 2003b:38). It was also recognised that retention problems had weakened the pool of effective middle leaders and that therefore teachers often became middle leaders earlier in their careers in London (DfES, 2003b:38). Support for early leadership development and early headship needed to be much more robust as did support for schools in challenging circumstances.

- *The Effect of Local Poverty on Schools:* Many schools in difficulty were situated in areas where considerable additional support was needed for the local community and its young people. Resources for regeneration and the enhancement of services to help people out of situations of worklessness, over-crowded housing or poor health were needed. School buildings were old and ICT resourcing was poor. Where social exclusion was high, generally young people did not take advantage of the cultural resources of London and opportunities for adults to gain skills for working life, other kinds of advice and support for well-being were hard to access. The Extended School programme, which was piloted in 2001 to help schools become resource centres for the local community, was showing success but it was not widely available (DfES, 2002c; Dyson, et al, 2002). For many boroughs outside central London, despite the efforts of Business in the Community (a third sector organisation set up to encourage businesses to invest in communities), it was difficult to get financial or in kind support from the private sector to help.

With such a range of fundamental educational issues to deal with in such a complex urban setting, any policy intervention for London had to be both uncompromising and comprehensive. Yet, although it was both these things, the first policy text of the London Challenge when it was launched in 2003 did not seem a radical, innovative approach. The text brought together an extensive range of pre-existing policy initiatives into what Brighouse, who wrote the text with Coles, described as a “*coherent gestalt*” (see Chapter Four). It seemed to be a sort of ‘bricolage’ of current policy strategies (Bowe et al, 1992:14) – policies which had been in existence before but which had not yielded system-wide improvement.

What actually happened in practice as the London Challenge was implemented meant, however, that the policy took on a different character. Whilst there remained a strong central drive from government, operating outside the framework of local

democracy with regard to schools that were considered to be failing completely (DfES, 2003b:7), the London Challenge began to take an alternative direction. By 2010, the London Challenge had evolved into the fresh policy approach to school improvement in London that had seemed elusive in the policy's original text of 2003. How this happened and what can be learned from this about successful policy-making in education is the subject of this thesis.

#### *4. Investigating the Successes of the Policy Response to London's Challenge*

The London Challenge lasted until the general election of May 2010 – just about eight years. For that period, it successfully tackled one of the most entrenched problems of the contemporary London education system – that of the variation in standards of attainment between secondary schools and the city's poorer performance compared to the rest of the country. Until 2005, pupils' GCSE performance in London had been below the national average (DCSF, 2008:3) and was worse than every region in the country (DfE, 2010a). By 2007, London was out-performing every region at GCSE (Riley and Emery, 2007:180) and pupils in London who were living in the most socio-economically disadvantaged circumstances out-performed their peer counter-parts everywhere else.

In 2009, which saw the last set of GCSE results published whilst the London Challenge was still a 'live' policy, using the IDACI<sup>2</sup> measure, 43.9% of pupils in the highest decile of income deprivation attained 5+ A\* - C with English and maths. In every other region except the East Midlands, performance for this group was well below 30%. In the South East, London's nearest region, the figure was 25.5% (DCSF website April 2010 [www.education.gov.uk/rsgateway](http://www.education.gov.uk/rsgateway)). In 2011 the effects of the policy continued to show, with London's secondary schools gaining 61% 5+ A\* - C with English and maths compared to the national average of 58%. For three levels of progress in maths, London scored 73.5% compared to the national average of 65.2% and for the same measure in English, London scored 77.8% compared to the national

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<sup>2</sup> Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index – an index designed to measure levels of poverty in each postcode area and to account for the contextual effect of poverty on children's attainment.

average of 72.2%<sup>3</sup>. A 2011 statistical report found that London pupils had better outcomes at every age, social circumstance and level of attainment and it made a direct link between these achievements and the quality of London schools (Wyness, 2011).

Because of the London Challenge's success, it became a model for system-wide improvement and the favoured approach for a number of initiatives to raise standards: the National College for School Leadership (NCSL) used the model as the structure for its National Leader of Education (NLE) programme to support school improvement across the country; the London Challenge was expanded in 2008 to include primary schools (DCSF, 2008:5); also in 2008, the London Challenge was 'rolled out' to Manchester and the Black Country, becoming known as the City Challenge; and in the same year, the London Challenge became the model for the National Challenge which was designed to address under-performance in schools nationally. The Coalition Government of 2010 adopted the model in part in its first White Paper on education 'The Importance of Teaching' (DfE, 2010b).

Yet despite its success, following the change of government in May 2010, the London Challenge was quietly ended by the Department for Education (DfE) about 10 months before it was due to finish. The last text called 'Lessons Learned from London' (DfE, 2010a) was published without publicity or press release. 'Lessons Learned' described the policy as it was by 2010, highlighting the considerable impact of the London Challenge on secondary schools and describing some of the factors in the policy to which the authors, Woods and John, believed its success could be attributed. The ending of the policy in this way was a political decision by the new government to disassociate itself from the previous administration<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> Statistics from LLS (London Leadership Strategy) presentation 3/11/11.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Gove, Secretary of State for Education acknowledged this in a presentation to the LLS team on 3/11/11 and went on to discuss the successes of the London Challenge, lending his whole-hearted support to the new LLS.

The story of the London Challenge merits further investigation. There is much to be learned from a policy that has helped so significantly to alter the educational landscape of London for the better. No other preceding policy managed to achieve this in London, yet we still know relatively little about why the London Challenge was successful and what we can learn from it. Given that previous education policies had failed to address successfully under-attainment in urban schools (Ofsted, 2006a,b and 2010; Smith in Barber and Dann, 1996:27-55), what was it about the London Challenge policy that made this different?

There have been few widely known evaluations of the London Challenge. Two reports by Ofsted were produced in 2006 and 2010 which reported the impact of the policy on pupils' achievement and schools' improvement. There has been a collection of essays about education in London as a global city published by Brighouse and Fullick, some of which commented on the London Challenge. There have been a few evaluations of the London Leadership Strategy which was part of the London Challenge (Earley et al., 2005; Earley and Weindling, 2006; Sammons et al., 2006; NFER 2011) and there have been at least two self-published reports written by key actors in the London Challenge (Woods and Birch, 2011; Berwick, 2010). Other than that by Woods and Birch in 2011, the reports and essays only present snapshots of different aspects of the London Challenge rather than a picture of the policy as a whole. For example, the NFER report of 2011 discusses extensively the role of Teaching Schools in the London Challenge when, in fact, Teaching Schools were piloted in London only two years before the end of the policy and involved a very small number of schools. Thus, this thesis is new research territory in several ways.

First, there has been little study of the London Challenge as a policy response to the London problem. Some of the essays in Brighouse and Fullick discuss the London context up to 2007 but there is no evaluative, historical analysis that charts the London Challenge's development over its entire eight year life as an expression of government policy.

Second, such an investigation makes a new contribution to policy study in education. How the textual expression of the policy compares to its evolution under implementation is interesting. No one has traced the relationship between the London Challenge policy's formation, its textual manifestation and its implementation. The London Challenge offers some observations on the significance of the role of the practitioner in the education policy process and suggests another model for policy-making in school improvement.

Third, there is a new perspective that, as a practitioner, I can bring to such a study. I lived the experience of the London Challenge as an education practitioner in several different ways over the course of the policy's lifetime (see Chapter Three). As a result, I have been able to witness the changes in London and the impact of the London Challenge first hand from positions both on the periphery of the policy's reach and later on at its heart. Whilst this has implications for bias and interpretation which are openly acknowledged and explored in the methods chapter, my position as researcher provides experiential learning that can bring the research alive and offer new perspectives.

Fourth, given its success, a study of the London Challenge could reveal findings of importance about how, in such a complex urban context as London, educators can deal with intractable under-performance in schools at a system-wide level. What makes the difference? What does the London Challenge tell us that policy-makers need to account for in successful education policy-making?

##### *5. The Overall Aim and Design of the Research Process*

This thesis is a small-scale exemplifying case study of the London Challenge. Its aim is to understand why the London Challenge was so successful and to determine what can be learned from this analysis to inform future policy-making in education. In 2006 – 2007, an Institution Focused Study (IFS) which I undertook found that practitioners, in particular headteachers, have a significant impact on the successful implementation of education policy in secondary schools. The thesis takes forward

this finding and extends the investigation asking how an education policy like the London Challenge is formed and implemented and what is the significance of practitioners in the policy process.

The design for the research process was a case study design. A research question was developed which asked:

*Using the London Challenge as a case study, what can be learned about successful education policy-making for London secondary schools?*

Because of the small-scale nature of the study, the scope was limited to London secondary education to make it manageable, however it is important to note that the London Challenge became part of the City Challenge in 2008 when it included Manchester and the Black Country and brought primary education into its remit.

A case study plan was devised which underpinned the design of the research. To begin the investigation, a documentary analysis was undertaken which drew upon every available London Challenge document that could be found. The policy's texts were analysed and the successes of the London Challenge were interrogated using a mixture of quantitative data, such as key performance indicators, data from Ofsted inspection reports and other evaluations, as well as qualitative data such as the commentary in Ofsted inspection reports and other reports which charted the history of the policy's development.

The analysis, set out in Chapter One, found that the London Challenge evolved significantly between the launch of the first policy text in 2003 and June 2010, when the policy officially ended. What began as a top-down, centrally controlled government policy in the 2003 text ended as a practitioner-led strategy in the 2010 text, albeit within a framework of accountability to government. Using Yin's (2009) methodology for case studies (see Chapter Three), the first of the research sub-questions was developed which asked:

*Was the role of the practitioner important in the success of the London Challenge? If so, how and why was it important?*

Next, a literature review of the education policy process and practice relating to the London Challenge was carried out. This is presented in Chapter Two. Key theoretical perspectives of the policy analysts whose work was most relevant to the London Challenge were considered. This revealed that in public policy-making, the role of the practitioner is considered to be highly significant in the success or failure of a policy. It became evident that headteachers in particular and the decisions that they make about policy implementation are of critical importance. It also became clear that, in the case of the London Challenge, a distinction of the policy was the way in which the relationship between policy-makers and headteachers developed. This gave rise to the second research sub-question:

*How should policy-makers frame their relationship with practitioners when shaping education policy if they are to maximise the success of the London Challenge?*

Thus, the development of the main research question and its associated sub-questions was an iterative process, providing a rationale for managing and directing the scope of the thesis. This allowed logical decisions to be made about the range of material that was to be covered by the research and for deciding on the interview questions. It also helped to determine which practitioners should be interviewed for the research.

In this thesis, a decision was made to focus the research on the role of those practitioners who were most involved in the London Challenge at the interface between the policy and the field of practice. This was the consultant headteachers and London Challenge advisers. This decision was influenced partly by the need to keep the scale of the research small but primarily by the fact that their interface with the policy so important that it influenced the evolution of the London Challenge. It was

by mining the data from those most closely involved with the policy over the course of its lifetime that the richest material was drawn. These practitioners occupied a unique place in the evolution of the London Challenge which helped to reveal in great depth the inner workings of the policy's process.

The interviews were conducted from a cross-section of policy-makers and practitioners involved in the London Challenge, in particular consultant headteachers and London Challenge advisers who were closely involved with the policy's evolution. The interview questions were based on the sub-questions of the main research question and they drew upon the findings of the textual and documentary analysis, as well as the literature review, which enriched the material and provided more capacity to probe effectively. The questions were set out in such a way as to pre-code to some extent the data analysis which followed. The material gathered was synthesised into a critical interpretation of the findings which was reported in Chapter Four and followed by a discussion in Chapter Five, setting out the lessons to be learned from the conduct of the study, making suggestions about future research (Robson, 2004:510), drawing some conclusions about why the London Challenge was so successful and highlighting the implications of this for future policy-making.

Table One, presented below, lays out a table of the sources for the research. The documentary evidence together with the data and statistics were used to inform the documentary analysis in Chapter One. The academic literature was principally used to inform Chapter Two on the policy process of the London Challenge, the discussion chapter, Chapter Five and the Introduction and Conclusion of the thesis. The empirical evidence was used to explore the findings from the documentary analysis and the literature review. This included reflective journal entries and notes of London Challenge meetings, which were used to inform my understanding of the policy's implementation. As discussed in more detail in the methods chapter, I was in some ways a participant observer in the London Challenge from 2006 onwards following my appointment to headship in London and so, although I used my notes to deepen my knowledge of the policy and its implementation, for ethical reasons any direct

reference to things that were said at those meetings was avoided in the research to ensure that the ethics of confidentiality were upheld.

**Table One: Sources for the Research**

<b>Documentary Evidence</b>	<b>Data and statistics</b>	<b>Academic Literature</b>	<b>Empirical Evidence</b>
London Challenge policy texts	Data and statistics from the DfE website	A collection of writings by academics analysing the London Challenge	Reflective journal entries and notes by the researcher when involved as a participant in the London Challenge
Presentations on the London Challenge by policy-makers and practitioners	Annual London Challenge 'Family of Schools' documents providing comprehensive data on secondary schools' performance	Articles on the London Challenge	Interviews exploring the lived experience of those involved in making the policy
Evaluative reports of the London Challenge, such as those by Ofsted, NFER and the DfE		Writing on policy study, both the history of education policy and the education policy process as well as writing on the wider socio-political context	Interviews exploring the lived experience of those involved in implementing the policy
		Writing on London's context	
		Writing on leadership in education	

### *6. The Learning Journey of the Researcher*

The thesis has had a significant impact on my practice in a number of ways. The relationship between the research, the development of the London Challenge policy and my own practice has been iterative. Table Two presents a timeline to illustrate this relationship more clearly. The study has been longitudinal, stretching across ten years of my work in London as a senior leader in secondary schools. It has been a learning journey that has helped me to grow professionally, extending my knowledge and skills, enhancing my work in ways that have benefitted my own school strategically and operationally, as well as helping me to make a wider contribution to London education.

School improvement in urban settings requires school leaders who have the capacity to negotiate the competing demands of education policy and to prioritise. By understanding the policy process and its relationship to practitioners in more depth I have been able to anticipate more effectively changes in education policy thus

**Table Two: Timeline of the Professional Trajectory of the Researcher**

<b>Month / Year</b>	<b>Professional Role</b>	<b>London Challenge Policy</b>	<b>Research</b>
Sept. 2001	Appointed deputy headteacher in London secondary school in category for improvement		
Sept. 2002	School out of category	Brighouse appointed Chief Adviser for London Schools	EdD commenced
April 2003	School no longer qualifies for London Challenge support – becomes a ‘Priority 3’ school	First London Challenge policy text launched	
April 2004			Assignment 4 on the London Challenge
January 2005			IFS commenced on single school case study of the London Challenge
May 2005	Appointed headteacher and taken onto ‘Moving to New Headship’ programme of London Challenge	New London Challenge programmes developing	
January 2006	Took up headship in a London secondary school		
January 2008			Submitted IFS
February 2008		Involved in international conference on London Challenge	Commence thesis proposal
October 2008	Invited to become London Challenge consultant headteacher for new heads and accredited as LLE (Local Leader in Education)	Second London Challenge policy launched	Write thesis proposal
February 2009			Thesis proposal accepted and research commenced
November 2010		Final London Challenge policy text published	
January 2011	Designated NLE		

	(National Leader in Education) to work with schools in challenging circumstances		
November 2011		London Leadership Strategy Ltd launched independently	
April 2012			Thesis submitted

enabling me to write the three year strategic plans for my own school with more predictive accuracy. I have been able to discuss more effectively with governors, parents and teachers the implications of current policy changes thereby using my enhanced knowledge to manage change better and to ensure that all stakeholders are fully involved in the development of the school, fulfilling the demands of ‘democratic professionalism’ (Whitty, 2002).

Another benefit is that my historical and socio-political knowledge about education in London has widened. Although this thesis includes references to only some of the material that has been read, for example Chitty’s work on the history of policy (2009) and that of Bangs, Galton and Macbeath (2011), much of the learning that was gleaned from a full consideration of such texts has informed my practice. For example, a wider historical knowledge of education has helped me to understand the perspectives of a range of teachers in my school with varying lengths of service and this has helped me to be a better school leader. Also, a deeper knowledge of the changing socio-political framework has helped me to manage conversations with policy-makers more effectively and with more confidence. For example, I have been able to use my knowledge at Labour party policy events, in giving evidence to the Academies Commission or in meetings with the Minister for Schools for the Coalition Government to enable me to speak in a much more informed way and to greater purpose than previously.

The thesis also changed my views about the London Challenge. As can be seen in Table Two, the first London Challenge policy text of 2003 was launched whilst I was leading in a school that came under ‘Priority Three’ of the London Challenge (see

Chapter One). Thus, the school received only the level of support from the programme that all London secondary schools received despite being in challenging circumstances and recently out of a category for improvement. This gave me a very different perspective on the London Challenge and I found the top-down nature of the policy's strategy, outlined in the text, to be disappointing at first. Consequently my IFS and the journal article that followed it in 'Educate', 2008 was more critical of the policy's effectiveness. However, as time went on and my relationship to the policy changed, becoming much more involved with school improvement across London schools (see Table Two), my views altered and I began to see the policy from a much wider position of experience.

Lastly, this research has another benefit that relates to the wider context of my work as a practitioner in London education. I have gained a deeper professional insight into the dynamics of London education and the complexities that lead to under-attainment in some London secondary schools. I have developed a deeper awareness of the links between place, social exclusion, disadvantage and social polarisation as underpinning problems that affect pupils' achievement and that impact on the social landscape of London. I have been able to use this knowledge powerfully in arguing at national level, for example as a trustee of Teach First or when giving evidence to the Academies Commission, for greater educational and political change in support of the most vulnerable of London's children.

Thus, it is to the documentary analysis of the London Challenge that this thesis now turns, beginning the story of a policy that has helped to alter the life chances of children and young people in London for the better and to achieve the school change in urban under-achievement that had eluded policy-makers for years (Barber and Dann, 1996).

## Chapter One

### **‘The London Challenge’: a Policy Response to the Problem of Under-Attainment in London Secondary Schools**

... there are still far too many schools which are failing to inspire and lead their communities and far too many where the educational aspirations are too low. Too many parents are anguished and fearful, rather than proud or confident, when choosing their child’s secondary school. And there are far too many who feel that either expensive private education or lengthy journeys across the city from home to school are the only satisfactory answer.

(DfES 2003b:4)

#### *Introduction*

The previous chapter discussed the complexity of London’s situation in 2002. Significant challenges were to be found socially, economically and demographically which made London both a city of great advantage and a city of great inequity (Halpin, 2003b:6-9). This social polarisation had a deep effect on London secondary schools which contributed to significant between-school variation and poor performance. The situation was described in the London Challenge’s first policy text, cited above. It led to some serious educational challenges in London which included problems with the quality of teaching and school leadership, as well as difficulties for communities (and thus their schools) which were disproportionately affected by poverty. Teachers did not want to teach in London and the challenges of headship in many of the city’s secondary schools were not attractive. The London Challenge policy was launched to address these problems.

This chapter provides a historical analysis of the development of the London Challenge. It explores how the London Challenge was formed and how it evolved as it was implemented. There were stark differences between the policy texts of 2003, 2008 and 2010. What commenced as a top-down, centrally driven and government-led approach in 2003 evolved into a practitioner-led strategy for system-wide school improvement. By 2010, headteachers and the London Challenge advisers were the driving force in the policy’s development, with a high degree of autonomy albeit

within a framework of high accountability for standards. Why did the shape and character of the London Challenge policy evolve in this way between the texts of 2003 and 2010? And what relationship did this have, if any, to the policy's success?

### ***Part One: The London Challenge of 2002***

Part One explores the London Challenge's development in its early days and examines the policy text of 2003 as a response to London's problem with under-performance in its secondary schools and the variation in standards between them. The section moves on to consider the policy's structure and its proposals for dealing with the problem, followed by an exposition of the documentary evidence about its successes.

#### ***1.1 The Early Days of the London Challenge***

Not much publicly available documentary evidence exists about the early days of the London Challenge during the period of its first textual formation. Most of it comprises presentations and lecture material made variously to different audiences by Tim Brighouse and Jon Coles and there is also some writing by Brighouse in a collection of essays about London education (DfES, 2002a; DfES 2002b; Brighouse, 2002; Brighouse, 2007:71-94). This literature tells us that in its first term of office, the Labour government had devoted significant time, energy and resources to education generally but that this had made little impact on standards in London. When Labour was re-elected to office in June 2001, its attention was turned more specifically to the problems in London secondary education, about which there was impatience from the Prime Minister, Tony Blair (Brighouse, 2007:72-73). Blair was determined to deal with what he felt to be the unacceptably slow pace of improvement (Brighouse, 2007:74). Thus London's performance in secondary education was a problem that had high priority on the government's policy agenda of 2001.

By February 2002, a civil service team had been established led by Coles in the Department for Education and Skills (DfES)<sup>5</sup>. The establishment of this team was followed by the appointment of Brighouse to lead the initiative as Commissioner for London Schools (later known as Chief Adviser for London Schools) in the autumn. The task was to analyse London's problem of poor secondary school performance and to propose some solutions. Coles, who wrote with Brighouse the first policy text, was clear that the origins of the London Challenge lay within Blair's impatience for a faster pace of improvement. To have the nation's capital as its worst performing region in secondary education was "unacceptable" (DfES, 2003b:4).

What is also known from the literature is that the government was concerned about school choice in London and about the enormous variation in standards of performance between schools which was fuelling social polarisation (Brighouse, 2007:77–79; DfES, 2002a and b). This was being driven home sharply to some MPs, including the Prime Minister, Diane Abbott and Harriet Harman, who were experiencing problems themselves with choosing secondary schools for their own children (Blair, 2010:87–88). Brighouse suggested that the media had a significant influence, drawing attention to the situation through feeding a discourse of school failure in London, as did Ofsted when it published damning reports on several Local Authorities – the 'Five Boroughs' – which subsequently became a key focus of the London Challenge (Brighouse, 2007:74).

Extensive research was carried out by Coles and his civil service team to investigate thoroughly the problems which London faced (DfES, 2003b). In the research documents, secondary schools were mapped across London both in relation to their performance and to where they were situated by council ward. The data clearly demonstrated patterns of under-achievement related to place and to socio-economic deprivation. There was a corridor of challenge that ran along the Thames from central to east London that corresponded with areas that had previously thrived on industries

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<sup>5</sup> Now known, in 2012, as the Department for Education (DfE).

connected to the docks – industries which, as was shown in the Introduction, had now disappeared (DfES, 2002a).

Estelle Morris was the Secretary of State for Education in this early period of the policy's formation. She was of the view that if standards in London secondary schools were to be improved then a special policy initiative should be created (Brighouse, 2007:74). Morris had previously been a teacher in inner city education and she had an understanding of the issues faced by urban schools. She was also MP for Birmingham, another complex metropolitan setting and she was familiar with the successes of the Birmingham education department under the leadership of Brighouse. She wanted a separate approach for London with strong leadership by someone who understood the challenge. This led to the appointment of Brighouse as leader of the London Challenge after his retirement as Chief Education Officer in Birmingham (Brighouse, 2007:75).

What the discussions, the negotiations and the debates about the London Challenge were during this early period are unknown from the available literature other than that powerful dynamics were at play: impatience from Blair; input from powerful visible actors such as Morris, Coles and Brighouse; and input from powerful less visible actors such as the Number 10 Policy Unit, Woods, the London Challenge advisers and London headteachers like George Berwick, Vanessa Wiseman and Alan Davidson. Policy analyst Kingdon calls this time of policy formation the “murky” area of “pre-decision” (Kingdon, 2003:1). Kingdon describes this as a period when different policy ideas float about in a sort of ‘primeval soup’ (Kingdon, 2003:116-117) subject to the influence of policy actors. What emerges as policy is often the result of connected events and the power struggles that go on between them, as will be shown in Chapter Two.

The political urgency and sense of frustration about London's situation was made very apparent in the policy text of the London Challenge, 2003. The emphasis of the language in the foreword was assertive and challenging, using clauses and sentences

such as: “Piecemeal change is not enough”; “Radical, structural reform is necessary”; “Nowhere is the challenge to create this new system greater than in inner London”; “We need to inject dynamism and bottom-up pressure for change” (DfES, 2003b:2-5). There was impatience for change and the sense of a moral imperative for strong intervention. This urgency was helped by a mistake. The percentage of pupils in London leaving the state maintained secondary system for independent schools was misheard by ministers as 30% instead of 13%. Morris told Brighouse that this was a key moment in the decision-making which launched the London Challenge (Brighouse, 2007:75;93). It is an interesting reflection on policy-making – that mistakes can be as important a driver as the research and information-gathering that sits behind it.

The policy’s first text in 2003 outlined a centrally-driven, multi-layered strategy that would impact upon all secondary schools in London. Its stated aim was to ‘transform’ London’s secondary schools. It presented a complex solution for a complex social and educational problem. The discussion now turns to an analysis of that text.

### *1.2 The London Challenge Policy Text of 2003*

The policy text that was launched in 2003 was very broad-ranging. The text was entitled: “The London Challenge: Transforming London Secondary Schools”. A series of policy proposals were presented, with differentiated approaches to London schools. There were three key groups, referred to as priority areas: those in the ‘five boroughs’ which required extensive support; individual schools scattered across every London borough which needed intensive help; and then all remaining London secondary schools. There was a range of different options for action which could be put together into a tailored programme relevant to schools in each group. These options could be broadly categorised under four themes (Brighouse, 2007:80):

- The London teacher

- Financial incentives for teachers to remain in London through the key workers' mortgage guarantee scheme to enable teachers to afford to live in London
  - Workforce remodelling for teachers to address workload issues
  - Recruitment to teaching through Teach First, a graduate teacher training programme recruiting high calibre graduates for inner city London secondary schools
  
- The London leader
  - Professional development for teachers through: a) leadership development through the London Leadership Centre; b) the Leadership Incentive Grant providing financial resources to develop leadership directly to schools; c) the London Commissioner's teachers recruited from amongst Advanced Skills Teachers in London
  - A London Commissioner for Education – later known as the Chief Adviser for London Schools
  
- The London school
  - Diversity of provision through universal school specialisation, the establishment of 30 independent city academies, 20 new schools, 15 new sixth form colleges and collegiate federations of schools by 2008
  - Increased parental, business and local involvement in the establishment and running of schools
  - Joined-up public services provision through the establishment of 33 full service extended schools by 2006 in which childcare, health and employment services are available to strengthen support outside the classroom for families 'dawn till dusk' and at weekends
  
- The London student
  - A single London-wide transfer system from primary to secondary school

- Free travel for school age children to allow them to take advantage of London's cultural and historic resources
- Educational initiatives for pupils to include: a) the London Gifted and Talented Centre; b) the Behaviour Improvement Programme to address challenging behaviour in schools; c) a pilot for a shortened KS3 in 20 schools; d) projects to support micro-populations of low attainers such as Afro-Caribbean and white working class boys

(from DfES, 2003b:6–15)

Tracing these options back to the difficulties for London schools outlined in the Introduction, one can see how each initiative was designed to address a specific systemic problem, for example, dealing with teacher supply by: a) introducing Teach First, a teacher recruitment programme designed to support schools in London's most socio-economically disadvantaged areas; and b) making housing more affordable for teachers through the key workers scheme, thereby keeping teachers in London for longer.

Three different levels of approach were taken towards the three different groups of London secondary schools, called 'Priorities' for the London Challenge. They were:

*Priority One: Transforming Key Areas*

This approach dealt with the areas of inner London which were deemed to have the most comprehensive under-attainment. The London Challenge identified two areas of inner London involving five Local Authorities that were considered to present the greatest challenges: Haringey, Hackney and Islington in the North and Lambeth and Southwark in the South. It involved a planned approach including the establishment of: academies and other new schools; increased sixth form provision; full service extended schools in which childcare, employment, health and social services were attached to schools and schools remained open 'dawn till dusk'; and universal school

specialism (DfES, 2003b:20–22, 31). Schools in these boroughs could also benefit from the other options open to all.

*Priority Two: The Keys to Success*

This approach was directed at those schools which had ongoing problems with raising standards of attainment. They were scattered throughout London rather than collected together in one area like those in Priority One. Many of these schools were in an Ofsted category – either ‘Special Measures’ or ‘Serious Weaknesses’. The policy text referred to another 40 schools which were then below the government’s minimum performance target of 25% 5+ GCSE grades at A\* - C in addition to those in an Ofsted category (DfES 2003b:7). These schools would have tailor-made support programmes, with new headteachers who had energy, commitment and a record of leadership success (DfES 2003b:7). Altogether, in addition to those schools in Priority One, there were 70 that required intensive support or intervention. The proposals included the establishment of: city academies; new schools; full service extended schools; federation with other schools; use of the Leadership Incentive Grant to develop leadership; and the opportunity to employ Advanced Skills Teachers (ASTs) as the ‘Commissioner’s Teachers’ (DfES 2003b:7-8).

*Priority Three: A Better Deal for London*

This approach addressed the whole of London and it outlined the options already described under the four themes, which were to be made available to all London schools as required but without focused attention.

Which school merited which approach was a decision made by the London Challenge team – a team of civil servants supported initially by Woods, eight London Challenge advisers and Brighouse as Chief Adviser for London Schools, who all reported directly to the Minister for London Schools, Stephen Twigg (Brighouse, 2007:78). Decisions were based on schools’ performance data and Ofsted reports as well as

comprehensive knowledge about a school's local area. The matching process by which schools were paired with a supporting school was carefully done, taking account of the relevant strengths of the headteacher and staff. The whole process was framed within the data set that was created to support this work called the 'Families of Schools'<sup>6</sup>. A bespoke programme for each London secondary school in accordance with need, using every available resource including input from the private sector to boost investment in areas of London that suffered most social disadvantage, was presented in the text of the London Challenge.

According to Ofsted, the initial successes of the London Challenge began to show in schools' key performance data quite early on, as early as 2005 – about two and a half years into the life of the policy. The chapter moves on to examine the policy's growing impact and how the London Challenge evolved as confidence developed in its work.

### *1.3 The Successes of the London Challenge*

Ofsted produced a report in 2006 (Ofsted 2006a) which directly linked the work of the London Challenge to rises in standards in London secondary schools. There were significant improvements in GCSE results, in attendance and in Ofsted inspection judgements, even at that early stage. The report headlines were that:

- Standards in London schools had risen faster than in similar schools nationally
- 89% of London secondary schools had made improvements in the numbers of pupils achieving 5+ A\* - C compared with 73% of schools nationally
- In 2005/6, inspectors graded a significantly higher proportion of London secondary schools as good or better for overall effectiveness, leadership and

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<sup>6</sup> This was a document designed to support fair performance analysis. All London secondary schools were divided into families which were grouped together according to characteristics such as poverty, ethnicity and prior attainment. With the exception of a very few cases, schools within these families were from different areas in London, making quite clear the social polarisation which was affecting the nature of intake and level of challenge that schools experienced despite their proximity.

management and quality of teaching than secondary schools nationally  
(Ofsted 2006b)

This positive picture was supported by data in Brighouse's analysis of improvements in London schools since 1997 compared to other parts of the country (Brighouse, 2007:92). It also corroborated another report on the London Challenge by Earley and Weindling in 2005 which highlighted the gains of schools involved in the London Leadership Strategy (Earley and Weindling, 2005). Performance data at GCSE showed improvements year on year. It led to an extension and an expansion of the policy by the government in 2008 and to a revised set of London Challenge policy proposals entitled 'Vision for London 2008 – 2011: London Education on the Way to World Class' (DCSF, 2008).

In this second policy document of 2008, some of the previous policy proposals of 2003 were dropped, such as the Mortgage Guarantee Scheme and some new ones were created. Primary schools, for example, were included. The London Challenge was considered to be such a success that its duration was extended to 2011. In addition, the policy was expanded to two other metropolitan areas of the country – Manchester and The Black Country. At this point, the London Challenge became part of what was then known as the 'The City Challenge' (DCSF, 2010a).

The newer policy document had a different tone to the first. It took up the most successful policy proposals of the London Challenge 2003 and built upon them. It was more representative of a 'top-down / bottom-up' approach to policy, a reflection which this thesis returns to in Chapter Two. The text reviewed and celebrated the achievements of the London Challenge up to 2008, describing the impact of the London Challenge as "enormous" (DCSF, 2008:3) and the improvements in London secondary schools as "dramatic". It stated:

- In 2007 and for four years running London continued to surpass the national average for 5+ A\* - C

- For three years running London secondary schools outperformed the national average for 5+ A\* - C with English and maths
- Almost one in three London secondary schools secured over 70% 5+ A\* - C compared to ten years prior, when only thirty-six London secondary schools achieved this (DCSF, 2008:5)

Throughout the next few years, the successes of the London Challenge continued to grow. In 2009, London's secondary schools consistently out-performed the national average at GCSE. London had been above the national average for six years running against the performance measure 5+ A\* - C and for five years running against the performance measure 5+ A\* - C with English and maths. A third policy document of the London Challenge was published in 2010 by Woods, who was by then the third Chief Adviser for London schools and John, Director of the London Leadership Strategy. The document provided a review of the policy, detailing the London Challenge's successes. It showed that:

- In 2009, London schools continued to surpass the national average gaining 71.2% of pupils with 5+A\* - C passes compared to 70% nationally
- In 2009, London schools continued to surpass the national average with 54% of pupils gaining 5+ A\* - C with English and maths compared to 51.7%. In 2002, before the launch of the London Challenge, this figure was 38.5% compared to the national average of 39.5%
- In 2010, no schools in London were below the original floor target of 25% 5+ A\* - C compared to 70 in 2003
- In London, the annual improvement rate from 2003 – 2009 was 5% compared to a national annual improvement rate of 2.6%
- In 2010, the number of schools in Special Measures in London had declined since 2003 from 17 to three
- In London, 23% of schools by 2009 were rated as outstanding by Ofsted (DfE, 2010a:6 – 11;19)

Finally, in December 2010 at the end of the policy's life, Ofsted produced another evaluation of the London Challenge (Ofsted, 2010). Ofsted commented:

(The) London Challenge has continued to improve outcomes for pupils in London's primary and secondary schools at a faster rate than nationally. London's secondary schools continue to perform better than those in the rest of England. Programmes of support for schools are planned with experienced and credible London Challenge advisers using a shared and accurate audit of need. Excellent system leadership and pan-London networks of schools allow effective partnerships to be established between schools, enabling needs to be tackled quickly and progress to be accelerated. (Ofsted, 2010:1)

Ofsted found that after nearly eight years of the policy's duration, by 2010:

- Secondary schools in London had performed better and improved faster than schools in the rest of England in terms of exam results since the introduction of the London Challenge
- 30% of Local Authority controlled secondary schools had been judged to be outstanding compared to 17.5% in the rest of England, whilst 24% of academies in London had been judged to be outstanding compared to 22% in the rest of England
- 2.4% of London secondary schools had been judged inadequate compared to 4.1% in the rest of England, whilst 9% of London academies were in this position compared to 9.5% in the rest of England

(Ofsted, 2010:6)

Looking back over the evaluations of London's performance from 2003, the story of improvement over eight years was impressive. Ofsted's first report held that the London Challenge was responsible for system-wide improvements across London. The final evaluation by Ofsted in 2010 showed that these improvements were not only consistently sustained but that they were accelerated.

However, there are questions to ask. First, the 2003 policy text was built from many pre-existing education policies which may have influenced its success. How far can

the London Challenge claim the successes that have been attributed to it? Second, as has been intimated, the policy evolved considerably between 2003 and 2010. Much activity took place within the London Leadership Strategy which was not widely known of or reported. What were the changes that occurred, why did they happen and how far are they related to the policy's success?

### *Part Two: Interrogating the Success of the London Challenge*

London, by 2010, was the highest performing region in the country at Key Stage 4 and between-school variation was significantly reduced. Whilst it is not the purpose of this thesis to prove them, this section makes some comments on the evaluations of the London Challenge's impact before moving on to an exposition of the distinctions between the policy of 2003 and that of 2010.

#### *2.1 Was London's Success Solely Attributable to the London Challenge Policy?*

Educational change in schools is complex. External policy factors influence internal ones just as the socio-economic dynamics of 'place' affect education, as was shown in the Introduction. The quality of leadership is important: for example, how effectively policy proposals and the dynamics of place are marshalled by leaders to create and direct strategies for school improvement is critical (Riley, 2009:12). The interdependence of the many different parts in a strategy for school improvement, especially in London, often makes it difficult to isolate any one thing that is the cause of a school's success. Is it use of data, quality of teaching, school ethos, quality of curriculum, use of multi-agency services to prevent pupils' social exclusion, a school's built environment – or all these things together and more? This complexity is as true of the London Challenge policy as it is about individual schools.

A number of contemporary structural changes to the education system together with policy initiatives which pre-dated the London Challenge, (some of which had been in

operation for as much as 20 years<sup>7</sup>), were harnessed together in the first policy text to provide its strategy for system-wide improvement. Some of them were:

- the establishment of a National College for School Leadership (NCSL) in 2000 following a pledge to the improvement of support for school leadership by the new Prime Minister in 1998 (NCSL, 2007)
- the establishment of the London Leadership Centre (now the London Centre for Leadership in Learning) in 2001
- the commitment to ‘joined-up’ provision in public services in complex, disadvantaged urban areas through Extended Schools (DfES, 2002c; Dyson, et al, 2002)
- the establishment of the academies programme and the commitment to increased specialisation by schools in 2001 (DfEE 2001a)
- the commitment to improved professional development for teachers in 2001 (DfEE 2001b) and
- the creation of Teach First in 2001, which originated from the USA and was first planned separately from the London Challenge in 2001 – 2 and called ‘Teach for London’ (Brighouse, 2007:81; Teach First, 2007).

The improvement relationship between the London Challenge and these other pre-existing initiatives is complex because the first policy text of 2003 was in part constructed from them. Research shows that in school improvement, a sustained rise in results usually takes time to achieve. There is usually a time lag between introducing structures for change and achieving the changes that are desired (MacGilchrist, 2003:17,21) – there are “no magic answers and quick fixes” (Stoll and Myers, 1998:12). For this reason, it is hard to disentangle the impact of the London Challenge from that of these other policies in the early evaluations of its success (Riley and Emery, 2007:180). The improvements that Ofsted refers to in its 2006

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<sup>7</sup> Sir Cyril Taylor led the establishment of a number of City Technology Colleges and specialist schools in 1987 as part of the Conservative government’s education policy (Specialist Schools Trust 2005). CTCs were the forerunners of Academies and school specialism became for a period a universal expectation for secondary schools.

evaluation relate to data that go back further than the commencement of the London Challenge – to 2000. Also, there is no doubt that some pre-existing policy initiatives had an influence on the London Challenge’s successes. For example, Teach First made a significant impact on improving teacher supply in London’s secondary schools, as well as changing attitudes towards teaching in London (Muijs et al, 2010; Hill, 2012).

Questions should be asked about how reliably Ofsted could attribute London’s improvements in 2006 to the London Challenge after only three years of GCSE results. A more robust study of the data is needed than is possible within the scope of this thesis to prove these claims. What can be said, however, is that as time went on and the gains in London’s secondary school improvement continued the London Challenge might reliably claim success. In 2010, Ofsted’s report attributed the successes in London since 2003 directly to the policy and supported this position with relevant data. Ofsted’s position can be corroborated if one examines the impact of one of the initiatives from the 2003 policy text which endured into 2010. This was the ‘Keys to Success’ programme.

The ‘Keys to Success’ programme, which was designed to tackle between-school variation in London, was one of the most successful policy initiatives of the London Challenge (DCSF, 2010c). It was created to address the needs of schools that were some of the most challenging in London. Initially, in 2003, they were schools in which either pupils’ performance at GCSE was below the floor target of 25% 5+ A\* - C and their performance varied significantly from other schools in the local area, or they were schools in an Ofsted ‘category for improvement’. At the time of the launch of the London Challenge, the schools in this group numbered 70 (DfES, 2003b:7). By 2010, there were none below this floor target (DfE, 2010a:11).

Further, as performance improved, the floor targets were altered to continue to challenge London schools to improve further<sup>8</sup>. In 2010, it was set at 30% 5+ A\* - C with English and maths (DfE, 2010a:9) whereas before the launch of the London Challenge in 2002, the average level of performance for all schools in London at 5+ A\* - C with English and maths was close to this floor target at 38.5% (DfE, 2010a:7). Further still, by the summer of 2010 there were only four schools in London that fell below this floor target (Ofsted 2010:4) compared to the 70 requiring intervention against a much lower floor target in 2002.

This programme became of central importance to the London Challenge. The tools upon which it depended in the 2003 policy text were drawn in some part from pre-existing policy strategies, such as changing a school's status, recruiting from Teach First or starting extended school work. Yet, there was something fundamentally new about it. This was the bespoke nature of the programme – a tailored approach for each school and the central involvement in it of practising London leaders. So, whilst the text of 2003 to some extent hailed the policies of the day, the lived experience of the London Challenge over time became different – and the 2010 policy text reflects this contrast to 2003.

## *2.2 The London Challenge 2010: System-wide, Sustainable Improvement*

### *From Within*

The policy text of 2010, 'Lessons Learned from London: Secondary School Improvement Programmes' presented a very different picture of the London Challenge than those of 2003 and 2008. In the 2003 text, one reads of a matrix of strategies many of which involved big, pre-existing and well-funded policy initiatives that were being centrally driven. There was no reference, for example, to the London Leadership Strategy. The description in the policy proposals of school leadership development in London was confined to some general comments about the need to develop headship and middle leadership roles, together with some proposals for the

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<sup>8</sup> Over the course of the first five years, 70 schools became Keys to Success Schools (Brighouse, 2007:86).

establishment of a London Centre for Leadership and some commitment to additional financial resourcing for this (DfES, 2003b:38–39). In 2008, there was some reference to the London Leadership Strategy and more focus on practitioner-led initiatives. By contrast in 2010, the strategy for leadership development had become an entity in itself known as the London Leadership Strategy: serving practitioners were leading the school improvement system in London and creating transformation from within (DfE, 2010a:5-6). One can see the policy’s evolution more clearly in a table which sets out the comparisons:

*Table Three: The Evolution of the London Challenge*

<b>Policy Proposals</b>	<b>The London Challenge: Transforming London Secondary Schools, 2003</b>	<b>Vision for London 2008 – 2011, 2008</b>	<b>Lessons Learnt From London: Secondary School Improvement Programmes, 2010</b>
<b>Language of the policy text, in particular analysis of current situation</b>	Directive, muscular and intolerant of failure by London secondary schools. Fear of long-term effects on prosperity for London associated with social polarisation related to between-school variation in performance	Less assertive and more balanced: celebratory of rapid progress made by London schools since 2003. Reminds practitioners of the need to go further and to continue to improve, setting specific targets	Inspirational language, celebrating the extent of the success of the London Challenge. Focused on the leadership of headteacher practitioners in creating system-wide improvement and the moral purpose behind their work to support the achievement of all London’s children
<b>Government-led policy proposals</b>	Virtually all proposals are	* Expansion to primary schools,	None

	<p>government- instigated and led.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Key workers' mortgage guarantee scheme</li> <li>* Workforce re-modelling</li> <li>* Teach First</li> <li>* London Leadership Centre</li> <li>* New leadership development programmes</li> <li>* Leadership Incentive Grant</li> <li>* The Commissioner's Teachers</li> <li>* London Commissioner for Education</li> <li>* School specialism</li> <li>* The Academies programme</li> <li>* Increased parental, business and local involvement</li> <li>* Full service extended schools</li> <li>* A single London-wide school transfer system</li> <li>* Free travel for school-age children</li> </ul>	<p>Manchester and the Black Country.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Developing school specialism and the Academies programme</li> <li>* National strategy for EAL</li> <li>* Sure Start Children's Centres</li> <li>* Full service extended schools</li> <li>* Teaching Leaders and Future Leaders programmes</li> <li>* Key Worker Living Scheme</li> <li>* HEI involvement and improving progression to HE</li> <li>* Raising participation and reducing NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training)</li> <li>* Pan-London strategy for improving attainment and progression at post-16</li> </ul>	
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* The London Gifted and Talented Centre</li> <li>* The Behaviour Improvement Programme</li> </ul>		
Practitioner-led policy proposals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Keys to Success programme – heavily monitored by London Challenge Advisors and accountable to government.</li> <li>* Teaching and learning programmes on literacy of boys and pilot shortened KS3 to two years instead of three.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Consultant leaders</li> <li>* Good to Great programme</li> <li>* Pilot of Teaching Schools (four)</li> <li>* Keys to Success programme</li> <li>* Advanced Skills teachers</li> <li>* Chartered London Teacher</li> <li>* Improving post-16 teaching and learning</li> </ul>	<p>All programmes are led by serving or recently serving headteachers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Keys to Success programme</li> <li>* Moving to New Headship</li> <li>* Gaining Ground programme</li> <li>* Good to Great programme</li> <li>* Going for Great programme</li> <li>* VIP: Sixth Form Improvement programme</li> <li>* Inclusion Support programme</li> <li>* EAL Support programme</li> <li>* Teaching and Learning programme</li> <li>* Narrowing the Gap programme</li> </ul>

Between 2003 and 2010, the London Challenge had become a practitioner-led model based on high accountability paired with high professional autonomy. This was very

much in contrast to the top-down, government-led policy text of 2003 and it happened incrementally. Although it was not mentioned in the 2003 text, during following years the London Leadership Strategy became a significant force in the London Challenge, as was shown in the 2005 and 2006 evaluations of its work (Earley and Weindling, 2005; Sammons et al., 2006). By 2010, the London Leadership Strategy dominated the policy and its text reflected this.

In the 2010 text, there were two series of practitioner-led programmes. The first was a set of four core programmes focused on whole school improvement, the most important of which was intensive support for schools in challenging circumstances through the 'Keys to Success' programme<sup>9</sup>. The second was a set of eight programmes designed to tackle common areas of challenge experienced in most London schools, such as the 'Inclusion Support' programme, 'EAL Support', 'Teaching and Learning' and 'Narrowing the Gap' (DfE, 2010a:8). Schools could join any of the programmes except the 'Keys to Success', membership of which was determined by the London Challenge team. Each programme was designed and led by a current or former London headteacher and all came under the direction of the London Leadership Strategy.

The vision for London secondary schools in the 2010 text was one in which self-sustaining, system-wide improvement was driven from within by practitioners who were at the cutting edge of achievement and innovation; practitioners who were committed to a moral purpose which held that every London child mattered and which meant that schools had to work together to achieve improvement for all London's children as well as their own (DfE, 2010a:6). It was a vision to which by 2010 a significant majority of schools had demonstrated their commitment through participation in some form (DfE, 2010a:5).

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<sup>9</sup> There were three others which took a similar but less intensive approach to school improvement work, designed for schools and sixth forms that were judged by Ofsted to be satisfactory and good but which were aiming to become outstanding. These were called: the 'Gaining Ground', 'Good to Great' and 'Sixth Form VIP' programmes.

The literature shows some important features in this practitioner-led model of system-wide school improvement in 2010. They were:

- *The quality of the London Challenge advisers and consultant headteachers leading the London Leadership Strategy.* Crucial to the policy's success throughout its life was the quality of the London Challenge advisers and consultant leaders who worked on the London Challenge. Their competence, credibility and high level of professional knowledge and skills was fundamental (Brighouse, 2007:85–86; Earley and Weindling, 2006; Riley and Emery, 2007:180–181). Although the 2003 policy text makes little reference to it, the team had been in existence from the outset although it was limited to work on the 'Keys to Success' programme at first. It was a highly organised group of serving or recently serving London headteachers trained by Berwick, Woods and Brighouse together with some experienced consultant leaders who were London Challenge advisers. Their approach was based on the principle that the knowledge of how to improve London schools lay within the system (DfE, 2010a:5). The style of school improvement work followed a coaching model but it was framed within an accountability contract for a school's performance. It was a collegiate and collaborative approach with a strong sense of shared, moral purpose (DfE, 2010a:5).
- *The importance of accountability for results by supporting schools, of the bespoke nature of the support and of the matching process.* All three dimensions to the London Challenge's approach were crucial. Accountability came from the rigorous use of data to inform improvement work. Bespoke support came from a tailor-made package brokered between the receiving school, the supporting school and London Challenge advisers with ministers. There could not be a 'one size fits all' approach to improving London's schools (Brighouse, 2007:85). Close attention was paid to the performance data of a school using the 'Families of Schools' document and its improvement was closely analysed against that of similar schools whilst

pupils' performance was carefully tracked. The importance of the data, Brighouse stated, would be "hard to over-estimate" (Brighouse, 2007:86).

Work was undertaken by contract between the supporting and receiving schools linked to improvement plans that were explicitly related to performance data. Results in the schools which advisers and leaders were supporting had to improve and accountability for this was at ministerial level (DfE, 2010a:10–11). The matching process between schools was also essential. Much care was taken by the London Challenge team to match the right supporting headteacher with the right receiving headteacher. Leadership style, experience and skills were all taken account of with a high degree of emotional intelligence and knowledge about the context of each partnering school (DfE, 2010a:10–11).

- *A shared language which described a strong sense of corporate responsibility for London's children and which focused on the collegiate nature of the task rather than on blame.* The language that was used with schools and the culture of the approach were significant factors in the success of the London Challenge (DfE, 2010a:9). Schools receiving support, especially those on the 'Keys to Success' programme, experienced some of the most challenging circumstances in which to educate young people. Brighouse made the decision to name this programme the 'Keys to Success' (DfE, 2010a:9) because he felt that blaming such schools, which often had low morale, staff shortages and poor effectiveness, was counter-productive – especially when, if performance in all of the lowest performing, most challenging schools could be improved this would provide the step change that London secondary education needed (Brighouse, 2007:85).

From his experience in Birmingham, Brighouse believed that to achieve system-wide school improvement, teachers needed to believe in high expectations, the widespread tangibility of success in their efforts and the higher moral purpose of what they were

doing – that this would resonate with the best teachers, whilst the shortcomings of individuals could be dealt with privately (Brighouse, 2007:78–79). Whilst this was not in the policy text of 2003, it was agreed between all those involved in the London Challenge team from the very start that a culture change was required in this way (Brighouse, 2007:78). At the same time, the challenging of poor performance was uncompromising and framed within detailed data analysis. Hard decisions sometimes had to be made about how far a school’s leadership had the capacity to succeed or whether its removal was required to effect the right conditions for change.

By 2010, the strategy of the London Challenge policy was quite different from that of 2003 although the aim remained the same. Improvement in the system was being led by practitioners – school leaders and their schools – who were creating transformation from within. Using high levels of expertise within London’s secondary school system, headteachers were being trusted by government to use their professional judgement and skills to work collegially with their colleagues. Whilst they were highly accountable, there was a professional autonomy in this work for which they were expected to take responsibility.

Thus it can be seen that the shape and character of the London Challenge evolved considerably between the policy texts of 2003 and 2010. Whilst the first text was constructed from pre-existing policy initiatives, leading to questions about how much of the early successes could be claimed by the London Challenge alone, by the time it reached its end the documentary evidence suggests that the policy’s impact on school improvement in London had made it one of the more successful recent education policies. Not only did the London Challenge have a deep impact on London’s performance, it influenced the development of policy, expanding into other regions, into London’s primary sector and into national initiatives such as the NLE programme. It also influenced the Coalition Government as shown in the 2010 White Paper ‘The Importance of Teaching’ (DfE, 2010b).

Over time, this growing success coincided with the development of a greater leadership role by practitioners, in particular the consultant headteachers and the London Challenge advisers. The Ofsted report<sup>10</sup> in 2010 stated that the role of lead practitioners was critical to the policy's success and it recommended that the DfE should note "in particular the success of partnerships between schools and the use of current practitioners as effective agents of support" (Ofsted, 2010:7). Whilst there still existed a policy approach that focused where necessary on forceful remedial action (for example through closing down and re-opening schools as academies and removing Local Authorities' education departments), headteachers together with the London Challenge advisers developed an approach to their work which expressed values and beliefs about mutuality and professional reciprocity. At the end of this chapter, it can be seen that whilst the London Challenge began life as a top-down, centrally driven policy by 2010 its policy framework had altered significantly.

### *Summary*

The London Challenge took a complex policy problem in London education that successive governments had been unable to address and provided a policy response that produced not only a transformation in the performance of London's secondary schools, reducing the variation between schools, but also a culture change within the system. London became a self-sustaining system for school improvement with a commitment to school-to-school support for the benefit of all London's children.

Over time, as the London Challenge increasingly demonstrated its success from quite early on, the policy began to evolve and change. By 2010, the policy's framework was quite different from that of 2003. It was focused on a practitioner-led model

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<sup>10</sup> In its report of 2010, it highlighted four factors that were of particular significance in the success of the London Challenge, all of which relied upon the leadership of 'expert practitioners': 1) clear and consistent leadership from the team leaders of the London Challenge and a sense of moral commitment to the children of London shared by those leaders and staff in the participating schools; 2) the quality of the London Challenge advisers, the matching process and the careful tailoring of support programmes led by practitioners; 3) improvement in the quality of teaching and learning led by practitioners in a model of school-to-school support; and 4) the development of robust tracking to intervene in pupils' under-achievement and systems of self-evaluation using rich data, especially in those schools that had previously been recipients of support (Ofsted, 2010a:4-5)

based on high accountability paired with professional autonomy and use of the expertise that lay within the system to yield improvement. Compared with the 2003 text, which was built from top-down initiatives and strong interventions, this new approach featured a different relationship with policy-makers.

It was a change in approach to policy in education which was unusual and quite different to the prevailing culture of 'command and control' in previous years (Higham et al., 2009:4). Over time, policy-makers ceded more leadership of the London Challenge to practitioners. What was created was a system-wide approach to school improvement which drew upon the professionalism and expertise of practitioners whilst providing the resources for a central leadership team and an accountability structure. It is suggested at the end of this chapter that this new framing of the relationship between policy-makers and practitioners in policy-making was linked to the policy's success.

There are two comments to make as the thesis moves forward to the next chapter. The first is that in this review of the evidence it appears that the London Challenge evolved in a coherent and linear fashion. This is illusory – the result of an attempt to make sense of the policy from a range of written material. In fact, as will be shown in the next chapter, the policy process of the London Challenge was dialectical and its evolution was influenced by many socio-political factors. The second is that the analysis strongly suggests that the role of practitioners – particularly headteachers and London Challenge advisers – was central to the evolution and success of the policy. The thesis proposes (in accordance with Yin's (2009) methodology for case study – see Chapter Three) that the role of the practitioner and the context of practice were important in the success of the London Challenge.

The next chapter explores the policy process of the London Challenge. It provides a theoretical examination of the London Challenge, explaining the dialectical nature of the policy, suggesting how these dynamics related to the evolution of the policy and why the role of the practitioner emerged with such significance.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Theoretical Perspectives on the Policy Process of the London Challenge**

Government initiatives may work, but they will not last unless teachers can develop them themselves. Numerous reasons are advanced for the marginalisation and ultimate demise of the strategies<sup>11</sup> and whether they were loved or hated depended in part, as we have argued, on the endorsement of the headteacher or other influential voices. (Bangs, MacBeath and Galton, 2011:181.)

#### *Introduction*

Chapter Two explores the London Challenge through the lens of the policy process. Chapter One showed that the London Challenge evolved considerably between the first policy text of 2003 and the last of 2010. There was a concurrent shift in the policy's leadership from policy-maker to practitioner. Policy study shows that a key reason why the London Challenge evolved is because practitioners have a role that is of high importance in education policy-making. Lipsky argues, for example, that successful policy-making in public services is reliant on the role of the practitioner. Bangs, MacBeath and Galton point out, in their work on education policy cited above, that government initiatives are dependent on teachers – and in particular headteachers – if they are to be successful.

The chapter commences with a conceptual analysis of the London Challenge policy, highlighting the relationship in policy-making between policy problems, politics and power. A theoretical model of the policy process is then applied to the London Challenge, helping to expose the dynamics which affected its evolution and explaining in part why it was possible for the balance of power between policy-makers and practitioners to shift. Whilst the analysis shows that the policy process can allow for such shifts to happen, especially because of the autonomous nature of a

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<sup>11</sup> The National Strategies of the late 1990s and most of the first decade of 2000 included the Literacy Strategy, the Numeracy Strategy and the Key Stage 3 Strategy which became the Secondary Strategy. All of them were designed to change teachers' pedagogy and classroom practice.

practitioner's work in public service, it cannot entirely explain why this happened in the London Challenge. Governments in the past have tightly controlled what practitioners did in various ways to prevent this, so what changed for the London Challenge? The analysis suggests that the emergence of a new approach to the government's relationship with practitioners in education policy-making assisted the success of the London Challenge.

### *Part One: Policy, Policy Process and the London Challenge*

Policy-making is a dialectical process which interacts with the wider socio-political environment. It is not a rational, processual path (Jenkins, 1997:32) and it is not linear. It is an ongoing, iterative process in which policy formation and policy implementation are continuous and inter-connected (Bowe et al., 1992:14) and in which the balance of power can change between those who initiate and form the policy and those who implement it. It is not random but it does happen within a fluid context of influence, text production and practice (Bowe et al. 1992:20) and there is a dialogical relationship between socio-political problems, policy-making and implementation (Gordon et al. 1997:8).

Separating a policy from its process is therefore, to some extent, an artificial activity. This is because, according to Ball, a policy is both a product and a process at the same time. It is both text and discourse and "both are implicit in each other" (Ball, 2006:44). A policy cannot be divorced from its context of formation and so policies like the London Challenge are multi-layered. This section seeks to understand more about the policy through analysing its conceptual framework.

#### *1.1 Defining Education Policy*

Although an education policy like the London Challenge is a text that contains a strategy designed to intervene in practice, it is much more than this. The London Challenge was not just a set of instructions with intended outcomes. Like other public policies, it was the embodiment of a political and social discourse in which bargaining and negotiation from powerful actors had taken place whilst the policy

was being formed. It contained political ideas and statements of values that were social, economic, institutional and educational. It was about who held the power and who was to benefit from it.

Fowler describes education policy as:

the dynamic and value-laden process through which a political system handles a public problem. It includes a government's expressed intentions and official enactments as well as its consistent patterns of activity and inactivity. (Fowler, 2009:3–4).

In this way, an education policy such as the London Challenge constitutes a complex interweaving of three key features: policy problems; politics, which represent the historical and contemporary socio-political context in which the policy is formed; and power. The discussion here deals with each concept in turn with regard to the London Challenge.

*i) Policy Problems:* Policies like the London Challenge are created to deal with specific problems that have risen to the top of a government's policy agenda. There is always a range of problems that press on the government of the day (Kingdon, 2003:90). The 'play of power' (Fowler, 2009:24) influences which particular problems a government chooses to address and when. Policy actors, the interests they have and the proposals for consideration which they generate have an influence, as do such dynamics as swings in the national mood, election results, changes in government, public opinion, responses to crises (either domestic or global) and the pre-dominant political theories at that time (Kingdon, 2003:17–18).

The policy focus of the London Challenge in 2003 reflected international concerns that were high on the political agendas of some nations, in particular the USA and Canada, as well as England (Harris and Chrispeels, 2006:297-8). These concerns were about the growing gap in educational achievement between the most and least affluent pupils in these societies (Harris et al, 2006:3). Other governments, as well as

that of the Labour party in 1997 and 2001, were exercised about this problem. In the USA in 2002, a policy intervention was passed by the second Bush Administration called 'No Child Left Behind'. The main focus of this policy was to eradicate the gap in educational achievement between children from high and low income homes (Fowler, 2009:353–356). Similarly, England at the same time was trying various policy strategies to deal with the same situation, such as the 'Excellence in Cities' programme of 1999 and the establishment of Education Action Zones (EAZs) in 1998. Neither of these initiatives was successful in addressing the London problem and so the London Challenge was formed to address a policy problem that was of both national and international political significance.

London's problem, as was shown in the Introduction and Chapter One, was its secondary school performance (which was poorer than all other regions in England) and its significant between-school variation. There were concerns that this problem was making secondary school choice problematic for families. Having choice within a quasi-market for public services like education was a key part of the flagship reforms to the welfare state by the Labour government (OPSR, 2002). In fact, the introduction of market principles to state education under New Public Management theory dominated public service reform during the 1980s and 1990s (Clarke and Newman, 1997:58–60; Ferlie, 1996:1).

Many had expressed concerns that fuelling competition between schools through market choice enhanced social polarisation and reduced social mobility (Olssen et al., 2004:208-210; Whitty, 2002:53), especially in London. However, to deconstruct this system would have been against the tide of the prevailing national and international political culture and so a policy solution for London was created that could fit with a political ideology which accepted the power of the market in public services, despite the inequalities which many felt it created (Olssen et al., 2004:200–201). Government policy solutions to policy problems like that of the London Challenge usually reflect closely the political ideologies of the day. This can be seen in the 'politics' of the London Challenge.

*ii) Politics:* Policy problems are addressed through proposals which are reflective of a state's politics and ideologies. The politics of the state provide the controlling framework for all government activity at any given time, acting to control a policy's reach, its activities and its values (Ball, 2006:45). One can see how this is true of the London Challenge in 2003. The text contains themes that reflect the pre-dominant political discourses of the day emerging from 'Third Way' politics<sup>12</sup> (Giddens, 2002) and the new framework for public sector reform (OPSR, 2002)<sup>13</sup>. These political ideas, which were influenced by an international context dominated by capitalism, formed the basis of many of the London Challenge's policy proposals and they included:

- The importance of London as a leading capital city within a global economic system – in the foreword to the 2003 text (DfES, 2003b:4–5)
- Diversity and choice in the education system – in the 2003 proposals to use change of status as leverage for improvement in some of the most challenging schools ( DfES, 2003b:2;14;20–21)<sup>14</sup>
- Greater regional and local democracy – in the 2003 proposals to involve parents and businesses in local schools (DfES, 2003b:16–18;45)<sup>15</sup>
- Private sector involvement in state education – through the 2003 proposals to use academy sponsorship and school specialism to bring in more resources (DfES, 2003b:45–47)<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> The 'Third Way' is a political system which rejects conservatism and socialism whilst taking account of globalism as the overarching framework within which all political systems must operate (Giddens 1998:24) and the need to engage with free trade in world markets that are based on the principles of capitalism. In Giddens' view, taken to its end, this leads ultimately to the need for a 'mixed economy' in public services.

<sup>13</sup> The political context for this reform, which influenced the policy proposals of the London Challenge, was one in which a 'mixed economy' for public service provision was to be based on state, private and public involvement (Giddens, 1998:37,69; Giddens, 2002:36).

<sup>14</sup> The conceptual framework for this is the new 'mixed economy' in the public policy of the time, where involvement by the state, economy and civil society are held in balance (Giddens, 1998:37;69; Giddens, 2002:36).

<sup>15</sup> "Gladesmore Community School in Tottenham, in Haringey, offers Saturday classes for 500 children ... much of the teaching is carried out by community volunteers" (DfES, 2003b:45).

<sup>16</sup> The London Challenge described various ways of creating these partnerships in education. "We want to challenge every major London business to become involved in supporting schools, as many

- Maintaining social cohesion by building social capital through more public involvement in local government and public institutions like schools and hospitals – through the 2003 proposals to use extended school provision and the governance of academies as a means to bring about social change in areas of disadvantage (DfES, 2003b:16–18;44)<sup>17</sup>.
- Joined-up government and public service provision – again, through the 2003 proposals to use extended school provision to re-generate the communities in areas of significant disadvantage (DfES, 2003b:44–46).

The policy environment to which the London Challenge was responding had quite specific social and economic trends, the most important of which for London were changes to the economy, globalisation and demography, as outlined in the Introduction. The London Challenge text of 2003 represented the contemporary political culture of quasi-marketisation in public services that favoured diversity and choice in schooling, the establishment of a mixed economy through private sector involvement in education, the creation of greater regional and local democracy through devolved power, greater involvement of the public in determining service provision and improved social cohesion (DfES, 2003b; OPSR, 2002). How these political ideas and values became the determinants of the shape and character of the policy’s proposals was subject to the actors who held the power at the point of policy formation – in this case, the policy-makers. In this way, policy solutions like those of the London Challenge are influenced by power.

*iii) Power:* Power dynamics in policy formation play a central role in how a policy problem is addressed. What is seen of the political ideas and values that were expressed in the text of the London Challenge was the result of debate and negotiation by key policy actors during the formation of the text. Whilst there is usually room for individual and collective agency by other groups in the creation of a

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already are” (DfES, 2003b:45). “We want other local education authorities to develop similar hard-edged forms of partnership that meet their needs ... Private sector providers can also play an important role in helping to build capacity and community” (DfES, 2003b:47).

<sup>17</sup> The London Challenge text of 2003 makes frequent reference to the importance of social cohesion and the role of schools as ‘community glue’ (Bentley, 1998:3; Green et al., 1999:23).

policy, the power of the state limits some actors during policy formation whilst legitimising others (Ward and Eden, 2009:1–12).

Kingdon suggests that during this early period of policy formation, ‘significant actors’ (Kingdon, 2003:15-16) push their own ideas and proposals, using their influence and bargaining and negotiating the outcomes for policy. As stated in Chapter One, he describes it as a ‘primeval soup’ of ideas and problems until circumstances and power dynamics combine to bring them together (Kingdon, 2003:200), as they did for London in 2002. The text, once it is produced, reveals the final outcome of the play of power that sits behind it.

Applying this analysis to the documentary evidence discussed in Chapter One, one can see from the text of 2003 that the balance of power in the London Challenge’s first iteration was held by the government. Key policy actors in the formation of the London Challenge – the “dramatis personae of the policy drama” (Fowler, 2009:140) – fell broadly into two groups during the early period of a policy’s formation: ‘visible actors’ and ‘invisible actors’ (Kingdon, 2003:68). These two groups were constituted from different sorts of category of policy actor, each having a distinctive role (Fowler, 2009:142–156; Kingdon, 2003:21–70). In the case of the London Challenge, these were:

- Government actors<sup>18</sup> who were elected officials such as Prime Minister Blair and the Secretary of State for Education in 2002, Morris (followed by Charles Clarke in 2003), David Miliband, Minister for Schools and Twigg, Minister for London Schools. Government appointed actors included Brighouse, the first ‘Chief Adviser for London Schools’ and civil servants, such as Gerard MacAlea and Coles. Woods came from Birmingham to work with Brighouse. The Number 10 Policy Unit was headed by Andrew Adonis.

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<sup>18</sup> Government actors could be politically elected such as the Prime Minister and other MPs (Members of Parliament), appointed officials such as professional civil servants and local government public servants such as Chief Executives of Councils or Local Authority officers (Fowler, 2009:142–156; Kingdon, 2003:21–70).

- Non-government actors<sup>19</sup> such as some serving London secondary headteachers, in particular Berwick, Davidson, Pritpal Singh and Wiseman as well as some previously serving headteachers and educationalists like George Gyte and Victor Burgess who were appointed as London Challenge Advisers. Members of the academic community at the Institute of Education who had previously been teachers, headteachers or local government education officers in particular Leisha Fullick, Pro-Director for London, Kathryn Riley, Hilary Emery, Sara Bubb and Vivienne Porritt.

Most of these government and non-government actors had varying degrees of visibility in their influence over the policy's formation at the early stages of the London Challenge. As the thesis shows, the London Challenge text of 2003 represented the political response by government actors to dealing with the policy problem whilst the much less visible work of the non-government actors was taking place directly in the field of practice. This was reflected in the texts of 2008 and 2010.

Thus power is not static in education policy-making. Whilst the textual expression of a policy freezes an instant in time in the policy's formation, reflecting the power relationships and politics of that moment, the dynamics change constantly (see Figure 1). At the stage of text production, power usually privileges the government actors because of the state's legal authority in education policy-making (Fowler, 2009:30), but as it moves into implementation the power shifts. This dynamic can be seen at work in the London Challenge. Over the course of the policy's life, the leadership of the London Challenge changed, permitting the practitioners to take it on. It suggests that policy-making in the London Challenge was a dialectical process.

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<sup>19</sup> Non-government actors who sought to influence government actors in pursuit of particular policy outcomes, such as the NCSL, the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), the academic communities in education (in London, the Institute of Education in particular), policy networks, think tanks and the media (Fowler, 2009:142–156; Kingdon, 2003:21–70).

## *1.2 The Dialectical Nature of the London Challenge*

Policy in education has tended to be handed down from government as though it is created in a linear fashion, so it is possible to assume at first that the policy process is tightly bounded and that it moves through a logical schematic pattern of problem formulation, evaluation of alternatives, decision-making about proposals and implementation (Gordon et al., 1997:7–8; Jenkins, 1997:32). This is a positivist view of policy-making (Taylor, 1997:18) that has a ‘top-down’ approach. In such a linear model the power lies with the government as opposed to with those who are tasked with a policy’s implementation (Bowe et al, 1997:10) – in public policy, this is the practitioners.

Whilst the textual expression of the 2003 policy text of the London Challenge gives the impression that a linear conceptualisation of the policy process is suitable, it is not. It does not explain the evolution of the policy that occurred over its lifetime, as described in Chapter One. It does not explain the interplay in the London Challenge between the policy problem, the politics and power that has been discussed, nor does it allow enough recognition of cause and effect (Minogue, 1997:11). For example, what would have happened if the situation had never occurred where the statistic on numbers of London pupils educated in the independent sector was misheard<sup>20</sup> or if some Labour ministers and MPs had had no trouble themselves with state secondary school choice<sup>21</sup>? Would there have been a London Challenge policy? Such seemingly small details can be disproportionately influential in the debates that lie behind the establishment of a policy, as shown in Chapter One.

There is a consensus amongst many analysts that the policy process is contingent on fluidity (Olssen et al, 2004:2-3). This view of policy-making is interpretive. It holds that policy-making is not a wholly rational activity (Swift, 2001:44). There is interdependence between different stages of the policy process. The perceptions and

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<sup>20</sup> Refer to Chapter One, p.33.

<sup>21</sup> Refer to Chapter One, p.31.

interests of actors at each of these stages lead to ‘bargained’ outcomes (Gordon et al., 1997:7) and this is a continuous process. Interpretive models of policy-making acknowledge the importance of the environment which exerts social, political and economic influences on the policy process at every point (Jenkins, 1997:33; Bell and Stevenson, 2006). In this way, the policy process of a policy like the London Challenge is ‘dialectical’.

Policy-making is a complex cyclical and dialogical process which includes mediating variables, such as demands, resources, pressure groups, research and social theory. These mediating variables feed into the central political system of government and policy decision-making. There is a dynamic and cyclical flow between each stage of policy-making as problems are identified, proposals are formed, decisions are made and text is written. The whole process is interconnected at every point and grounded within a reflexive socio-economic and political environment (Jenkins, 1997:30–38). It makes the genesis and evolution of education policies difficult to analyse because of this complexity.

If one really wants to understand the London Challenge, one needs to apply to it a model of the education policy process and break it down for deeper examination. A model for the London Challenge that is particularly pertinent is that of Bowe, Ball and Gold (Bowe et al, 1992). It is a cyclical and dialectical model which fits the London Challenge rather better than a more linear conception, like those of Fowler (Fowler, 2009:15) and Jenkins (Jenkins, 1997:35). In this model, Bowe et al. divide the education policy process into three different but related dimensions, describing it as a continuous process of inter-connected generation and implementation, through which a policy loops during its formation. They are:

- The *context of influence*, where policy is initiated and formed. This is where ‘*policy discourses are constructed*’ and where concepts, ideologies, social purposes and power influence the values and intentions of policy. Key actors in this context are parliamentary committees, ministers, national bodies,

think tanks and pressure groups that can gain some kind of influence or voice through MPs.

- The *context of policy text production*, where influence and political reason are written into documents of varying kinds, primarily a policy text but also other documents addressed to different parties such as the media, practitioners and officials. They aim to ‘*control the meaning of policy through its representation*’.
- The *context of practice*, where the consequences of policy are experienced and practised. Policy is implemented – or not – by practitioners depending on how it is received and interpreted. Practitioners will interpret policy within the context of their own, differing ‘*histories, experiences, values, purposes and interests*’. (Bowe et al., 1992:19–23).

These contexts form a ‘continuous policy cycle’ (Bowe et al., 1992:19) in which they are ‘loosely coupled’ (Ball, 2006:51) rather than associated in a linear form. Within and between each of these contexts, there are a number of arenas that are public and private in which interpretations and influences are contested and where there is “struggle and compromise” (Ball, 2006:51). An important point to note about this model is that policy-making continues once a policy text has been launched (Bowe et al., 1992:14). Practitioners are as much policy-makers in this model as those who control the discourse and text production in the early stages of a policy’s formation.

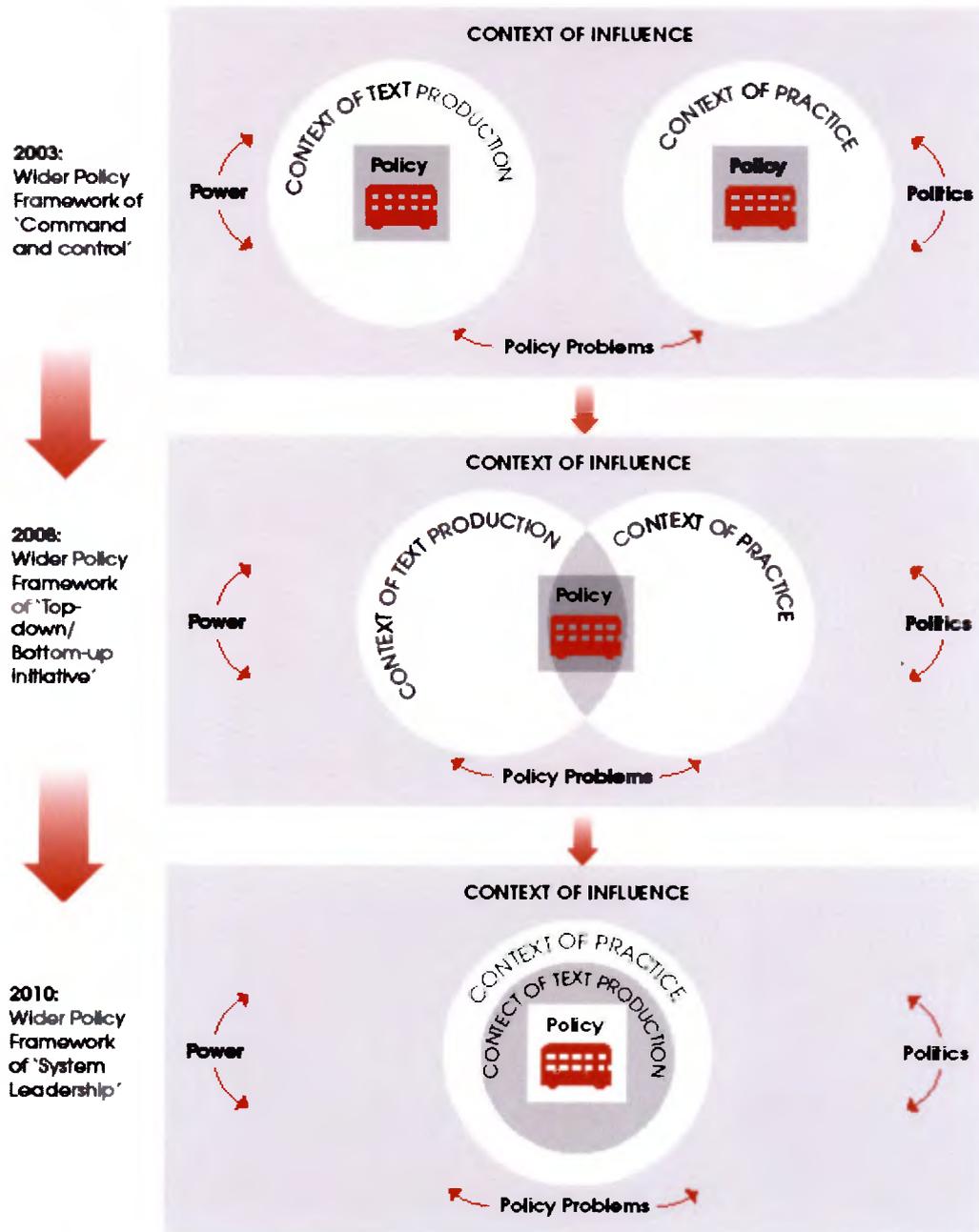
This model helps to explain theoretically what happened in the London Challenge. Going back to the documentary analysis and what was learned in Chapter One about the history of the London Challenge over its eight year life, when this is overlaid with Bowe et al.’s model of the policy process and reflected upon, there are two key points to draw out:

- In the London Challenge, the relationship between the contexts of influence, text production and practice changed as the policy evolved. Whilst the government in the policy's early period of formation controlled the textual outcome of the London Challenge, activity with practitioners had already commenced within the context of influence as the text was being formed.
- The London Challenge continued its generation once it was in the context of practice. During implementation, it twice re-entered the policy cycle, looping back through the contexts of influence, text production and practice in 2008 and 2010. This led to two further textual iterations of the London Challenge five and seven years on from its original launch and they reveal a significant shift in emphasis from a centrally driven model to one that was practitioner-led.

A visual model is presented below of the London Challenge frozen at the three points when a policy text was produced in 2003, 2008 and 2010 showing how the policy evolved. In 2003, the contexts of text production and practice were quite separate from each other although both were situated within the context of influence, subject to the all-pervading dynamics of the policy problem, politics and power within the policy process. In 2003, as can be seen, the policy was handed by policy-makers from one context – the context of text production – to the other. In 2008, the policy text reflected the moving together of both the worlds of policy-makers and practitioners, following the ongoing influence of the work of the London Challenge team. There was more of a balance between the contexts of text production and practice represented in the policy text. By 2010, the model reflected the subsuming of the context of text production within the context of practice as practitioners took on its leadership and the text was produced together.

The significance of the context of practice in the ongoing formation of the London Challenge can be clearly seen in this visual model, as well as in the documentary evidence. For example, whilst the first policy text was being produced in 2003, we

**Figure 1: Visual Model of the Evolution of the London Challenge Policy 2003 – 2010\***



\*Based on Bows, Ball and Gold, 1997; Fowler, 2009 and Kingdon, 2006.

know from the documentary evidence that Brighouse had already begun work with practitioners in the context of practice. One illustration of this is Chartered London Teacher status (Bubb and Porritt, 2008), which did not appear in the 2003 text although its genesis began with Brighouse before then. Once the initiative went 'live', it was so successful that the website for registration crashed. In July 2005, there were 5000 London teachers registered; because of the financial incentive for schools, by February 2006, the number was 10,000; and at the end of March 2006, 38,000 were registered (Bubb and Porritt, 2008:40). In 2008, the Chartered London Teacher programme appeared in the second textual iteration of the London Challenge (DCSF, 2008:33).

Again, the London Challenge text of 2008 started in the foreword on a much more positive and celebratory note than its 2003 predecessor and it continued in the same vein throughout (DCSF, 2008:3). What was particularly noticeable was how far the 2008 policy text made more reference to practitioner-led (DCSF, 2008:20-33) strategies for improvement. Government-led strategies for structural change such as the Academies Programme still featured but the 2008 policy proposals were dominated by the Keys to Success programme and programmes mainly led by schools and their staff. This was even more the case by 2010, by which time the London Challenge was practitioner-led.

Bowe et al.'s model when applied to the London Challenge shows that the policy obeyed the dynamics of a dialectical policy process – a cyclical and iterative process which allowed the policy to be re-shaped and re-defined as it was implemented. The literature suggests that these dynamics assisted the metamorphosis of the London Challenge. As the policy was put into practice, the power dynamics shifted the balance of power, altering it between those that initiated policy and those charged with its implementation – and so the London Challenge evolved as it was put into practice.

This chapter has so far shown that practitioners, through the process of policy implementation hold significant power over its shape and character. This is because the policy process permits a policy to alter as it is put into practice and so practitioners had the potential to exercise considerable influence over the London Challenge. Thus the role of the practitioner had a key significance in how and why the London Challenge evolved. This was not just because of the dynamics of the policy process. It was also because of the nature of a practitioner's work in education and so the discussion turns to a deeper analysis of the role of the practitioner in policy-making.

### *Part Two: The London Challenge and the Role of Practitioners*

The power of the practitioner in policy-making lies within the context of practice where policies like the London Challenge are implemented. Policy is implemented – or not – within this domain of the policy process. It gives practitioners a relatively powerful position in policy-making, which over the last 30 years has been regarded by governments as problematic. This has given rise to a whole set of structures designed to curb the influence of practitioners.

This section explores the role of the practitioner in education policy. It examines the salient history of the relationship between education practitioners and government policy-makers since the post-war period. In education, successive governments have sought to control the power of practitioners in policy-making through levers which have enforced their accountability. In the late 1990s, the concept of the 'expert practitioner' was partnered with this 'top down government' approach as a way of reforming public services and eventually it led to the emergence of 'school-led system leadership' in education. The discussion considers the evolution of the London Challenge within this political context.

#### *2.1 The Role of the Practitioner in Education Policy*

In the policy process, Bowe et al. argue that practitioners wield the power of change within the context of practice. Lipsky (2010), in his seminal text first published in

1980, explored the dynamics of this. He argued that it is with the practitioner in the context of practice, where education policies like the London Challenge are implemented, that the power really lies in public policy-making (Lipsky, 2010:13–25).

I argue that the decisions of street-level bureaucrats, the routines they establish, and the devices they invent to cope with uncertainties and work pressures, effectively become the public policies they carry out. I argue that public policy is not best understood as made in legislatures or top-floor suites of high-ranking administrators, because in important ways it is made in the crowded offices and daily encounters of street-level workers. (Lipsky, 1980 in Hill, 1993:389-390)

Lipsky's term 'street-level bureaucrat' describes a practitioner in public service who is bound by government policies – sets of rules and structures (hence the use of the term bureaucrat) laid out to ensure that a good service is delivered equitably and effectively to the public – but who has a distance from government authority. S/he works directly with the public – at 'street-level' (Lipsky, 2010:xii).

In public service, practitioners have “substantial discretion in the execution of their work” (Hudson, 1997:394). The nature of their work involves them in a direct relationship with those they are there to serve and it usually requires the extensive use of professional judgement, discretion and individual decision-making (Lipsky, 2010:13). They often act alone in their work – for example, like a teacher educating pupils in a classroom or a headteacher having the right to determine what the priorities for their schools should be – and so they can have fairly wide-ranging professional autonomy. It is a relatively powerful position to be in (Bangs et al., 2011:47); a practitioner's agency affects the quality and style of service provision and it can distort the implementation of a public policy. This not only has an influence on how successful a policy can be: it can change the very nature of a policy itself (Bowe et al, 1992:22). How practitioners behave in their work can be either obedient of policy or subversive of it (Barnes and Prior, 1991:191-206; MacBeath, 2008).

Education is an enormous public institution in which the structure of work is centred on human interactions. For Lipsky, one key way to ensure that the objectives of a public policy are achieved is through control using policy levers by which to achieve this (Lipsky, 2010:228-9). Thus, preventing the distortion of public policy by practitioners and controlling their work has been a key driver of government policy in England for over thirty years. It has influenced the introduction by successive governments of various measures to control what education practitioners do.

This happened first in the 1980s through the establishment of systems rooted in 'New Public Management' theory (Barnes and Prior, 2009:3). This theory introduced into education both 'managerialism', (with its priorities of economy, efficiency and effectiveness, value for money and scrutiny, as well as initiatives on target-setting and performance management) and 'marketisation' (Clarke and Newman, 1997:20, 58–60). It was followed in the late 1990s by public service reforms situated in Third Way politics (Higham et al., 2009:4).

It was a very different world for educators than existed during the period of post-war reconstruction (Timmins, 2001:65-91). The social democratic period of the welfare state meant that teachers had status, influence and autonomy as professionals (Chitty, 2009:23; Grace, 1995:14). The period between 1944 and 1975 has been known as "the golden age of teacher control" (Helsby and McCulloch in Goodson and Hargreaves, 1996:57; Le Grand, 1995:156) during which teachers maintained a high degree of autonomy (Goodson and Hargreaves, 1996:1). Teachers were free to decide on curriculum content, pedagogy and practice. However, a loss of public confidence in schools occurred during the 1970s which was not helped by controversies such as the case of the William Tyndale Junior School 1973 – 1975 (Barber, 1996:47-48; Timmins, 2001:321; Riley, 1998:21-55).

During the 1980s under a Conservative administration, education became progressively subject to central political control, contributing to the decline in trust of education practitioners (Whitty, 2002:19; Timmins, 2001:365; Sardar, 2000:26). In

the 1990s, HMCI Woodhead fuelled this with public pronouncements about “hopelessly incompetent” teaching (Timmins, 2001:521). New Labour continued this approach, embracing a language of target-setting, rhetoric about poor standards, ‘naming and shaming’ of schools, the closure of failing schools and Local Authorities, and the ‘zero tolerance of failure’, (Bangs et al., 2011:50-51; Chitty, 2009: 58–67). There was a growth in external accountability systems and levers, accompanied by sanctions, to try and control what education practitioners did (Chitty, 2009:128; Hudson, 1992:38; West et al, 2010:45-46). We can see these levers in education in all sorts of ways, examples being school performance tables, financial reporting, Ofsted inspection, legislation, parliamentary scrutiny and child safeguarding requirements (West et al, 2010:47–48).

In the late 1990s following the election of the Labour Party to government, the idea of the ‘expert practitioner’ in education began to develop in conjunction with the continuance by New Labour of New Public Management. It was the commencement of public service reforms which enshrined the notion of ‘top-down government’ control through accountability mechanisms paired with ‘bottom-up initiative’ from the field of practice (Hargreaves and Shirley, 2009:12-16; OPSR, 2002). In education, this found its expression in various government programmes to develop expert practice. Practitioner research to inform the system (Saunders, 2004:3-9) and practitioner-to-practitioner support to improve practice (Hargreaves and Shirley, 2009:56-8) became very important. Examples included:

- ‘Best Practice Research Scholarships’, introduced in 2000 by the DfES, which involved giving small sums of money to teachers to research and write about an aspect of professional practice;
- ‘Advanced Skills Teacher’ status, introduced through the 1997 White Paper ‘Excellence in Schools’ and which was a new grade of more highly paid teacher with externally verified proven excellence in the classroom and time freed up to work with other practitioners on improving teaching (DfEE, 1997);

- The General Teachers' Council (the GTC – later known following devolution in 2002 as the GTCE) was established in 2000 with majority practitioner representation to improve standards of learning and teaching and standards of professional conduct (GTCE, 2011);
- The 'National Teacher Research Panel', established in 1999 involving the TTA (Teacher Training Agency), the DfES and the GTCE to support and develop research-informed practice in schools (NTRP, 2012);
- The launch of a comprehensive system for career-long professional development which included funding for short sabbaticals for teachers published in the 2001 policy document 'Learning and Teaching: A Strategy for Professional Development' (DfEE, 2001b). It was never implemented.

Finding ways to transfer knowledge between practitioners and to develop their classroom practice in a personalised and tailored way was felt to yield much longer term gains in school improvement (Bangs et al., 2011:181; Earley and Bubb, 2004:2; Harris, 2003:21-2; Hopkins, 2003:64-67; Hopkins, 2007:11-14; Riley and Khamis, 2005:121).

The wider socio-political context, through which central government seeks to control what happens in the field of practice, exerts influence on education policies like the London Challenge. As was shown in the previous section, the politics of the state provide the controlling framework in which an education policy is formed and this can be traced in the evolution of the London Challenge. The policy text of 2003 represented the culture of 'command and control' which dominated education policy in the first term of office for New Labour (Higham et al., 2009:4), whilst the 2008 policy text was characterised by 'top-down government' paired with 'bottom-up initiative' which, as has been shown, prevailed in the early 2000s. There was a relationship between the wider policy context and the growing influence of practitioners on the shape and character of the London Challenge. It was illustrated again in the 2010 text, which reflected another alteration in the relationship between central government and practitioners, which assisted the policy's evolution still

further (see Figure 1). Social and political developments including the influence of globalisation required a more sophisticated model for leadership in education to match the growing complexity of public service delivery.

### *2.2 The London Challenge and the Emergence of a New Policy Model*

Education policy began to recognise the need for more complex headship capabilities – leadership beyond that of a single school – around the time of the launch of the London Challenge. It came out of government policy on ‘joined up public services’ early in the 2000s (Dunleavy, 2010:7), which aimed to create better support for families through integrating services and creating multi-agency working. The enactment of policies such as ‘Every Child Matters’ in the Children Act 2004, the creation of extended schools, the Tomlinson report and subsequent White Paper ‘14 – 19 Education and Skills’ and (later) the creation of SIPs (School Improvement Partners) and NLEs were built on a principle of what became known as ‘system leadership’. This new way of working in education found its fullest expression in the 2009 White Paper ‘Your Child, Your Schools, Our Future: Building a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Schools System’ (DCSF, 2009b:33, 42-54), which cited numerous ways in which schools would lead the system. They included chains of schools, federations, multi-agency working and so on. However, a coherent conception of ‘system leadership’ in schools did not exist at the beginning of the London Challenge, although one can see it represented amongst the 2003 proposals.

In about 2004 – 5, two years into the London Challenge, the NCSL and the Innovation Unit at the DfES first developed a National Standard for System Leadership (Collarbone and West-Burnham, 2008:83-85). System leadership described a situation in which a headteacher became a leader who was accountable for a number of different domains within the education system, not just their own school. A system leader might lead, for example, a cluster of schools, a community initiative such as a Sure Start Children’s Centre, a hub for extended service provision and be a NLE to support other schools in challenging circumstances – as well as leading their own school (Collarbone and West-Burnham, 2008:16-19). Collarbone

and West-Burnham present a descending hierarchical typology of system leadership which includes eight different ways in which it could happen:

- Advising on national policies and strategies
- Collaborating with other agencies
- Working for Local Authorities
- Leading community initiatives
- Leading networks, clusters and federations
- Executive leadership
- Leadership of extended services
- School leadership (Collarbone and West-Burnham, 2008:18)

System leadership responded to the more complex world in which education was now situated. ‘Joined-up public service’ provision presented organisational complexities for schools. Also, the socio-economic and political context had become subject to the dynamics of reflexivity, high relativity and globalisation – it had become a world of ‘supercomplexity’<sup>22</sup> (Barnett, 2000:73-75; Giddens, 1991:208). These social changes meant that the ‘command and control’ approach of the 1980s and ‘top-down, bottom-up’ approach of the 1990s were no longer appropriate for policy-making in education. More flexible structures were required to deal with networks of relationships in education, many of which shifted constantly in this new social climate (Anderson, 2005:71). A new paradigm was needed and system leadership provided this.

Hopkins (2007) and Higham, Hopkins and Matthews (2009) set about defining system leadership. They stated that “system leaders are those that care about and work for the success of other schools as well as their own” (Hopkins, 2007:47). They go substantially beyond collaboration and they are “a powerful force for change and improvement” (Higham et al., 2009:2). System leaders in schools engage in innovation, risk-taking and creativity. They have a deep knowledge of pedagogy and

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<sup>22</sup> ‘Supercomplex’ is a term created by Barnett to describe the world of multiplying frameworks of meaning in this era of proliferating knowledge and high relativity.

they are willing to work collegiately with other headteachers for wider system improvement (Higham et al., 2009:2).

The aim in theories of system leadership is that system leaders should lead the system for education and, with it, system reform (Hopkins, 2007:141; 169; Higham et al., 2009:9-10). The role of government was to create the right conditions in which to steer it. This would require the two worlds of policy-makers and practitioners to come together in what Fullan described in 2001 as a 'processual relationship'. He was critical of policy-makers, arguing that they lacked attention to the importance of policy implementation in the field of practice. He pointed out that the two worlds – that of the policy-makers and the other of practitioners – were ignorant of each other and had not learned how to establish a 'processual relationship'. Instead their relationship was based on "episodic" interactions largely to do with "paperwork, not people" (Fullan, 2001:86-87).

This bringing together of the two worlds was precisely what the London Challenge managed to achieve. As the London Challenge evolved, policy-makers and practitioners worked together in the London Challenge team as a highly organised group of expert practitioners, civil servants and advisers led by a figurehead who had credibility with both practitioners and policy-makers alike. This was important. Brighouse, who led the team, was able to straddle the worlds of policy-maker and practitioner and, through the work of the London Challenge team, created a direct face-to-face relationship between the policy-makers and practitioners. Thus the power dynamics between policy-makers and practitioners in the London Challenge were gradually re-negotiated as the policy's successes grew and with it, trust.

It established a sort of 'settlement' – an accord –between the two. Looking back in this chapter to the description of the sometimes turbulent relationship that existed between policy-makers and the field of practice, in the London Challenge by 2010 the relationship was rather different. Through the work of the London Challenge team, both were engaged together in a mutual effort to effect system-wide school

improvement. Practitioners were able to express their creativity and have their expertise recognised, leading the London system whilst reporting back to government and taking responsibility for improvement. Fullan had concluded in 2001 that the future for lasting, system-wide educational transformation would depend upon this kind of a settlement between accountability to government and professional learning communities (Fullan, 2001:267).

More recently, Hargreaves and Shirley (2009) took this up and outlined a way in which, in this supercomplex world, the new paradigm could work. They entitled it the 'Fourth Way', rooting its influences in 'Third Way' politics. The 'Fourth Way' set out a policy framework for education based on system leadership by headteachers in which governments, whilst steering, allowed room for professional leadership to define and set practice (Hargreaves and Shirley, 2009:45, 107-8). Whilst the London Challenge did not reach as far as the entire scope of the 'Fourth Way', it did establish a new model for system-wide school improvement. It re-negotiated the roles of government and practitioners as well as changing the relationship between them, presenting a way in which policy-makers and practitioners could work together mutually on a regional basis with great success.

At the end of this chapter, the literature review has shown how, in the light of theory on the policy process, the role of the practitioner and the context of practice had such significance in the success of the London Challenge. It has shown how in previous decades the role of the practitioner was tightly controlled by government in education policy-making. However, a settlement was reached with the London Challenge between policy-makers and practitioners in which roles were re-negotiated and both worked together in the interests of all London's children. It created a new model for policy-making in education and, going back to the words of Bangs et al., it allowed practitioners to develop the strategy themselves suggesting the possibility of lasting change. The thesis argues that this new model, created as the London Challenge evolved, was a key reason for the policy's success. It was because of a re-balancing of roles between policy-makers and practitioners in the policy process, which

permitted practitioners to lead the system building professional learning communities whilst accepting accountability.

### *Summary*

Chapter Two explored the London Challenge through the lens of the policy process, seeking to understand why it was successful. Part One of the chapter showed that the policy process of the London Challenge was built from a complex inter-weaving of the policy problem, politics and power. Over the course of the policy's eight year duration, the power shifted and the relationship between government policy-makers and practitioners altered.

This happened because practitioners can exercise significant power in policy formation. By applying a model of the policy process suggested by Bowe et al., it could be seen that there were three contexts through which the London Challenge travelled as it was formed: the contexts of influence, text production and practice. These contexts formed a continuous policy cycle through which the London Challenge moved to provide three separate iterations of the policy in 2003, 2008 and 2010, each showing a clear evolution in the relationship between the policy-makers and practitioners.

This dynamic was assisted by the particular nature of an education practitioner's work and her/his relative autonomy in policy implementation. It is part of the reason why the London Challenge evolved in the way that it did. Practitioners had the power to exercise increasing control over the shape and character of the London Challenge as they implemented it. The wider policy context has historically exerted a controlling force on the way in which education practitioners carry out their work and so the evolution of the London Challenge has closely matched the changing political climate.

The emergence of system leadership concurrently with the London Challenge meant that by 2010, the London Challenge presented a new model for policy-making in

education. Such a model permits practitioners to lead policy development and innovation whilst central government provides the right conditions to steer it. The London Challenge in 2010 was an exemplar of this model: it defined a way of situating the relationship between policy-makers and practitioners so that practitioners could innovate and lead initiatives whilst government could create the framework of conditions that steered it.

In Chapter Three, the thesis moves on to discuss the methodology for the empirical enquiry.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Methods of Enquiry: A Case Study of the London Challenge**

#### *Introduction*

This chapter sets out the rationale and design for the empirical enquiry in this thesis. The chapter is divided into three parts. In Part One of this chapter, the structure of the research and the methodology are explained before moving on to discuss the design, the research question and the data collection in Part Two. In Part Three, there is a critical consideration of the political and ethical questions that arise from the methods of enquiry and an outline of the dissemination methods.

#### *Part One: The Structure for the Enquiry and the Methodology*

The framework for this research is that of an exemplifying case study. It involved interview data collection within a real life context therefore, a case study structure was an appropriate choice (Robson, 2002:178) despite the criticisms that are sometimes made of case study research. This section outlines the case study design and comments critically on the implications which it had for interpreting the findings, explaining how those issues were overcome. It then moves on to discuss the choice of methodology for the empirical enquiry, showing how the use of interpretivism helped to overcome the potential difficulties from widely different respondents' perspectives in such a small scale study, especially given their different points of entry into the policy's life-span. The section finishes with a discussion of the research question. One of the complications of this study was the broad-ranging nature of the subject. Thus the discussion comments on how the research design was constructed so that an appropriately rigorous account of the London context and policy study could be given, employing Yin's theory on case study structure to narrow the question enough for an incisive empirical enquiry.

### *1.1 The Structure for the Enquiry*

A case study is the exploration of a 'specific instance...designed to illustrate a more general principle' (Cohen et al, 2000:181). A case study design was chosen for the research because this method best served the purpose of the enquiry in two main ways.

First, the complexity of the London Challenge policy could be deciphered using a wide range of information collected from a number of sources that were textual, experiential and analytical and comparing them. These sources are set out in Figure 1 (see the Introduction). By critically considering the information which this variety of sources contained, it was possible to establish cause and effect within the real life context of the London Challenge. This helped my understanding of its policy process. I could trace the relationship between the policy's objectives and their impact, as well as charting the policy's evolution and exploring the factors which influenced its changing character.

A case study of a policy like the London Challenge over the course of its lifetime is the study of a human system in its 'wholeness or integrity' which allows for the effects to be traced back to the causes (Cohen et al, 2000:181). This gave the study a longitudinal aspect (Bryman, 2004a:52) which helped, for example, to trace connections between actions carried out by policy-makers and practitioners in the early days of the London Challenge and their later impact on the policy's success.

Second, case study data are strong in reality, grounded in lived experience. By informing the enquiry through contextual research about the socio-political context of the London Challenge and then charting the policy's history against this, a rich body of information was created from which to draw upon in the interviews, helping me to probe in more depth. Triangulating the findings of the research enquiry in this way was important; it helped me to abstract meaning from the verbal data provided in

interviews. Thus, the literature review, the documentary analysis and the interview data had a dialogical relationship (Brown and Dowling, 1998:83) which added depth to the empirical enquiry. The findings from the interview respondents could be matched against the documentary analysis, contextual information and literature review, assisting interpretation. In a small scale study such as this with a more limited scope for empirical research, this was very helpful.

Whilst the use of a case study design has limitations, for the purposes of this thesis which asks ‘how’ the London Challenge was successful and seeks to offer some generalisable lessons for education policy-making, this method was the most fitting (Yin, 2009:3-8). I wanted to understand the real-life phenomenon of the London Challenge within its context. I also wanted to understand how and why the policy evolved in the way that it did and how far this evolution related to its success when none of these questions could be answered definitively from the available literature. In addition, there were many variables to interpret and multiple sources of evidence to triangulate and so the design was mixed method. Although the methods used for the research were mainly qualitative, some quantitative data was included – in the documentary analysis, for example – which considered statistically the impact and success of the London Challenge (Yin, 2009:18-19).

A particularly important point is that the case study structure allowed for both participant and non-participant observations to be included in the data collection (Cohen et al, 2000:185-188). Whilst this study was not framed in ethnography and was conducted without observations of practice, nevertheless, I was a participant in the implementation of the London Challenge throughout the course of the policy’s lifetime, in several different roles (see below). This had implications for bias and ethics which are acknowledged, but it also presented opportunities for analysis which proved very valuable in gaining different sorts of direct insight into the dynamics of the policy’s process. A case study design allows for the inclusion of these insights in an appropriately rigorous way (Yin, 2009:11).

## *1.2 The Methodology*

The theoretical framework for this enquiry was that of interpretivism, which suits the use of qualitative research methods (Brown and Dowling, 1998:82; Cresswell, 2003:18-20; Crotty, 1998:8–17) as well as the use of a case study approach (Cohen et al, 2000:181 – 183). Interpretivism was also appropriate for the analysis of policy as a dialectical process. The use of interpretivism places the method of enquiry in an epistemological context of ‘constructionism’ (Crotty, 1998:8-9) – termed by some as ‘constructivism’ (Robson, 2002:27-28). This was the most appropriate context for an enquiry where policy is conceived as a set of inter-related, cyclical stages which influence each other. It was also highly relevant for a subject area which required the researcher to pay attention to the interpretations of practitioners and policy-makers in the field and the ways in which they ‘construct’ meaning (Crotty, 1998:42 – 52).

Practitioners and policy-makers brought to the research context values and assumptions that influenced them both consciously and sub-consciously in their engagement with the London Challenge (Pring, 2000:87). For example, headteachers’ perspectives on the London Challenge were influenced by their position within the London education system’s structure, their length of service in headship, their gender, race and age and their relative experience in different school contexts.

Respondents in this empirical enquiry had varied perspectives on the London Challenge. This was partly because of the entry points at which they became involved: some were involved in the London Challenge from the very beginning whereas others did not become involved until later, in 2006 for example, by which time the policy was already different from the 2003 text. It was also partly because the lived experience of the policy process for each respondent, which was according to role and responsibility, gave every person interviewed an individual perspective. Some respondents were policy-makers and some were practitioners, whereas others worked in both roles. It was therefore important to engage critically as a researcher with the resulting layers of subjective meaning from the interviews and so planning the research design carefully was essential. The choice of a semi-structured interview

as a principal research tool allowed enough flexibility to achieve this. As the interview dialogue was developed, subjective responses could be more effectively explored.

However, although the variety of perspectives provided an interesting finding on the policy process and how one's experience of it is contingent on one's position in it, this variety could have been one of the main disadvantages of the research. There was the potential for a lack of standardisation in gathering the data which could have led to questions about the reliability of the research (Robson, 2002:273). Planning the interview process to eradicate this problem was essential. In this study, the sampling, setting the schedule for interview questions, the creation of prompts and probes to ensure that non-verbal influence of the interview process was minimal were all planned in advance to overcome these challenges (Robson, 2002:290). The sampling for the study was particularly important. Because of the range of entry points to the policy process of the London Challenge by many of the possible respondents, a higher number of interviews than is usual for a study of this size was undertaken to ensure that consistency in findings emerged. Whilst this was a disadvantage in relation to use of my own time for the analysis of the findings because of the volume of material to manage, nevertheless it yielded a rich seam of useful data which was highly interesting.

***Part Two: The Research Question, the Data Collection and the Research Sample***

Because this was a case study, a clear plan was prepared beforehand (Robson, 2002:184) – see Appendix 1. This particular case study was contextualised within a literature review on two key areas: the context of the London Challenge and policy study. The documentary analysis, the interview questions and the conduct of the interviews were all set in relation to this information, which was written up in the Introduction, Chapter One and Chapter Two. This section explores the construction of the research question. It also explains the methods of data collection and the research sample.

## *2.1 The Research Question*

The research question guided decisions about the research design, about the data to collect and from whom and about the analysis and writing up of data (Bryman, 2004a:31-33). The research subject of the London Challenge was broad-ranging, covering policy-making including policy study and the history of education policy as well as literature on the London Challenge, the London context and the relationship of place to education, school leadership and school effectiveness and improvement. Whilst being helpful to my own professional learning and to gaining new knowledge about the London Challenge and successful policy-making, it was also a key disadvantage for management of the research, which (although I was prepared for it) became very complex. To help with manageability, I employed Yin's theory on case study design as outlined in the fourth edition of his book on case study research (Yin, 2009 – especially p.25-45). Thus the empirical enquiry was narrowed through the documentary analysis of Chapter One and the review of policy study in Chapter Two, using the following process:

- Chapter One identified that the London Challenge evolved as it was implemented within the context of practice. From a centrally-driven, government-led initiative, the policy became by 2010 a practitioner-led, system-wide strategy for improvement with particular features. The evaluations by Ofsted and others suggested that there was a relationship between practitioner leadership and the policy's success. It suggested that the leadership of the London Challenge by practitioners, in quite specific ways, was highly significant in the success of the policy.
- The review of policy study in Chapter Two supported this possibility, showing that the dynamics of the policy process and the nature of practitioners' work provided a set of conditions in which this could happen. By the time the final text of the London Challenge was issued, the policy appeared to be a new model for policy-making in education related closely to system leadership.

Continuing in accordance with Yin's guidance, some propositions were formed at that stage about the relationship of policy with the context of practice which guided the design of the research question and the sub-questions to focus the scope of the study. As well as exploring respondents' views about why the London Challenge was successful, I knew that I had to look for information about the relationship between policy-makers and practitioners over the course of the policy's life, as well as how practitioners mediate policy in practice given their pivotal position in the policy process. Hence, the sub-questions reflect these propositions. In this way, the scope of the research was made manageable and incisive.

To avoid 'leading' the empirical study and thus biasing the results of the enquiry, however, the research question had to be quite open (Cresswell, 2003:106–7; Strauss and Corbin, 1998:40–41). The respondents had to be clear about the context and purpose of the research enquiry without being directed towards answers by the phraseology of the question. The research question was therefore phrased in as open a style as possible. The question was clear, researchable and connected with established theory and research.

The research question was:

*Using the London Challenge as a case study, what can be learned about successful education policy-making for London secondary schools?*

This question allowed for a range of different possibilities according to respondents' perspectives and for a consideration of a full range of cause and effect in the policy's implementation. The phraseology of the research question limited the enquiry's scope by focusing the research on one specific context within the respondents' experience. Also, despite the fact that the London Challenge broadened in 2008 to include primary education as well as widening its coverage to two other urban areas –

Manchester and the Black Country – the study was kept tight to the London secondary context, thereby making the research more manageable.

Narrowing the focus still further, two sub-questions were constructed from the findings in the documentary analysis and the policy review. These were:

- *Was the role of the practitioner important in the success of the London Challenge? If so, how and why was it important?*
- *How should policy-makers frame their relationship with practitioners when shaping education policy if they are to maximise the success of a policy like the London Challenge?*

Along with the over-arching research question, these sub-questions guided the examination of all material and data, including the documentary analysis and the collection of data. Their purpose was – without closing down the discussion of possible alternative interpretations – to focus the discussion on the two areas of historical and theoretical analysis that were provided in the studies for Chapter One and Chapter Two.

## *2.2 The Data Collection*

The main research tools in this enquiry were qualitative, the principal tool being the interview. Interviewing, a form of survey (Cohen and Manion, 1994:271), was chosen because it had considerable advantages over questionnaire surveys in this research subject. The interviews were face-to-face, allowing me to make effective use of probes and prompts to clarify meaning with respondents and to triangulate answers with data gleaned from the documentary analysis (Cresswell, 2003:186). This method permitted much more comprehensive access to what the respondents knew, understood and interpreted. It opened up the respondents' preferences, values, attitudes and beliefs to closer analysis (Cohen and Manion, 1994:272). For this reason, the interviews carried out for this research enquiry were semi-structured,

which allowed the respondents much more flexibility; pre-determined questions were modified, omitted or added to as the interviewer deemed appropriate (Robson, 2002:270).

The interview questions flowed directly from the main research question and its sub-questions. The interviews sought to determine what role each respondent had in the formation and implementation of the London Challenge policy. The questions were formed both in relation to the findings from the documentary analysis on the significance of the role of the practitioner and to theory on policy process considered in the literature review.

Since the interviews were to be semi-structured, an interview schedule was required to guide each interview towards the collection of data under similar categories of information gathering and to ensure that the interview remained focused on the research subject – see Appendix 2. Thus, the collection of data was to a small extent pre-coded through the structure of the schedule.

How the questions were designed was crucial to the validity of the research (Robson, 2002:274-277). The data collection needed to have continuity across each interview in order to ensure the findings were reliable. Ten questions were set (some sub-sectioned) which were designed to explore the respondents' views about their role and relationship to the London Challenge, as well as their views about how the policy was mediated in implementation. It was also important to discover to whom or to what the respondents attributed the success of the London Challenge policy and whether they felt there were other causal factors for this, such as pre-existing policy and school leadership intervention. Questions were phrased openly to avoid leading respondents. Theoretical probes were noted beforehand when planning for each interview so that diversion from the research question could be avoided and to ensure continuity in the data collection. The phraseology of questions was checked with various possible respondents before the final question schedule was set to ensure that questions were 'fit for purpose' (Bryman, 2004a:152 – 160).

Interviews took place in two stages. Stage 1 interviews concentrated on the responses of policy-makers and other key participants in the formation of the policy. Once the findings from Stage 1 had been analysed, the questions were revised for Stage 2, which focused on interviews with headteacher practitioners. The rationale for this was to yield a more intensive analysis of the research question (Bryman, 2004a:52). Policy-makers and practitioners, in general, inhabit two different phases of the policy process. The first group is usually connected with the contexts of influence and text production; the second group is usually concerned with the context of policy implementation. As was shown in Chapter Two, the balance of power shifts between them and thus it was important to explore the perspectives of each group in relation to each other. By interviewing the two groups in two different phases, the findings of Stage 1 helped to refine the questions for Stage 2 so that richer data was drawn out.

Interviews were tape recorded and transcribed, except in cases where tape recording would restrict the extent of the discussion because of confidentiality or a need to speak 'off the record'. It was also true in the case of some interviews that they had to be undertaken by telephone due to time constraints. Planning for the interviews needed to consider carefully the workloads of the respondents: headteachers, academics and policy-makers run busy diaries and due respect needed to be paid to this (Cohen and Manion, 1994: 354-359). The interviews were planned to last about an hour but in some cases (for example with policy-makers with heavy time commitments) they were shorter and in other cases they were longer. Interviews with the respondents took place in a variety of locations from my own office to that of the respondent. Despite the variety, each location was a place in which the researcher and the respondent could share information confidentially.

Codified data from the transcripts of interviews was written up in two related sections in Chapter Four. Meaning was generated from the data by noting patterns and trends, clustering, counting, making comparisons, noting relations between variables, building logical chains of evidence, interpreting / making metaphors and making

conceptual / theoretical coherence from all these ways of breaking down and labelling the findings (Robson, 2002:480 – 481). The findings were presented thematically together with a qualitative, narrative account.

### *2.3 The Research Sample*

Careful consideration of the sampling for this research was required. In the case of the policy-makers and other participants, the sample consisted of most of those who were known to be visible actors in the policy-making process as set out in Chapter Two. In total, nine actors in the policy-making process were involved in the Stage 1 interviews.

A balanced and representative sample of headteachers was selected for the Stage 2 interviews, totalling about 20 - 25% of the headteachers involved in the London Challenge as consultant leaders. Altogether ten interviews were conducted. Headteachers had a range of experience and involvement with the London Challenge – see Appendix 3. The breadth of experience in school leadership, school improvement and other educational experience was representative of the balance within the London Challenge team. A broad range of involvement in London Challenge policy initiatives was also included. Some were programme leaders or former programme leaders and some were consultant headteachers with varying lengths of service to the London Challenge. What was more difficult to achieve was a balance in race representation across the respondents since at the time, there were few headteachers in London from minority ethnic groups. Gender representation was also difficult given that I was dependent on voluntary agreement to the interview. More women than men participated.

Respondents were invited by letter to be part of the study. The purpose of the research was stated in the invitation letter and again at the beginning of the interview. Almost all those who were invited agreed to participate. Unless the respondent agreed, all data in the analysis was anonymised to maintain the confidentiality of those involved – although for some, particularly for senior policy-makers or the Chief

Advisers for London Schools, anonymity was virtually impossible and so permission was sought for quotation.

*Part Three: Political and Ethical Questions Raised by the  
Research Methods and Methods of Dissemination*

This study makes a contribution to new knowledge for the academic and professional field of education which can be disseminated to a wide number of audiences. These have been outlined in the Introductory chapter. This section explores the political and ethical questions raised by the research, in particular including researcher and respondent bias, followed by an outline of the methods for the dissemination of the findings from this thesis.

*3.1 Political and Ethical Questions*

There were several political and ethical questions to take account of concerning the design, conduct and uses of this research that were important. Possible bias needed careful thought because of the potential sensitivities in researching government policy. I was also aware that the small scale nature of the thesis would necessarily limit the scope of what I could cover. Some findings would be omitted and I was conscious that this would disappoint some respondents. I had to think carefully about omissions and ensure that they did not affect the validity of the research findings. In particular, I had to ensure that my judgements were objective and not open to being swayed by the pressure of disappointing some fairly influential figures in the field of education.

The research subject matter was quite sensitive in that it related to a critique of a contemporary education policy that had received accolades from Ofsted and from ministers. Responses from some of those interviewed might have been influenced by concern that, despite the anonymity, their comments would be perceived as negative by those with powerful positions in education and traced back to them in some way. Responses might have been biased by this. In all cases, the sample chosen represented confident policy-makers, academics and headteachers who seemed to

have little reservation about discussing their views openly with me regardless of whether they were being supportive or critical of policy.

Respondent bias was a potential problem in terms of intrusion into the analysis (Strauss and Corbin, 1998:97). The sample was thoughtfully selected to invite respondents whom I considered were unlikely to be influenced by any relative position of power between us. I chose to invite more experienced colleagues with more power and status than me so that there was unlikely to be a hierarchical influence towards bias. However, it needs to be recognised that many of the respondents who were interviewed played a central role in the formation and implementation of the London Challenge. Thus, identifying bias was important.

Respondent bias is a limiting factor in this study, although not to the extent that it undermines the validity of the findings so long as careful scrutiny and planning for the design was exercised. I chose to interview policy-makers and practitioners who had direct experience of the policy process of the London Challenge at close hand. This meant that they had to be policy-makers, London Challenge Advisers, civil servants and academic practitioners all of whom were likely to have a sympathetic view of the policy's success because they had been part of it. However, this case study was not intended as a detailed interrogation of evaluations of the policy's success, although there was some scrutiny of this. The study was of the policy process and of what can be learned from the London Challenge. Thus, to interview the policy-makers and practitioners most closely associated with the policy was appropriate.

Another potential problem was that of researcher bias. In the case of this enquiry, I was part of the lived experience of the London Challenge in several different ways. I was a deputy headteacher at a London secondary school in the early years of the London Challenge as well as a headteacher at another in the later years of the policy's life. In 2005 – 6, I was mentored as a new head as part of 'Moving to New Headship' and since 2009, I have been involved in mentoring other new headteachers as part of

the same programme. More recently, I have been involved in coaching other headteachers for the 'Good to Great' programme.

Whilst these positions have given me invaluable insights into the dynamics of the policy's formation and implementation, nevertheless, the potential for researcher bias is significant and the ethics of such a position are tricky. Although it was impossible to be completely free of bias, it was important to ensure that any opportunity for such bias was eradicated as far as possible in the design of the research. There has been close scrutiny for bias when carrying out the analysis and write-up of the findings. Where it might exist, this has been acknowledged.

Finally, the ethics of the research were also important. An important starting point was to ensure that the research was ethical in purpose (Cresswell, 2003:63-64). The thesis was seeking to enhance education provision by looking at the impact of a major education policy on school improvement and to provide a critique that could inform future policy-making in this area. I obtained informed consent from all the participants and assured their anonymity (Manion and Cohen, 1994:349-354). Respondents' time and workload were thoughtfully considered. Care was taken to ensure that ethical considerations have been made and that the BERA (British Education Research Association) code of ethics in research was followed.

### *3.2 Dissemination*

The findings of this empirical enquiry will be disseminated in a number of ways:

1. A copy of the final report will be sent to all the respondents who participated in the interviews. Respondents can use the material to support their future work if they find it to be useful. It is hoped that the report will provide a useful reference tool for those that were involved as evidence of their contribution to the initiative.

2. Governors and the senior leadership team at my current school will receive a copy of the report to inform our ongoing strategic improvement planning. I have been grateful for their interest in and support of my research, which has reinforced the school's knowledge of urban education in a rapidly changing political context. It has also contributed significantly to my own leadership development.
3. It is my intention to publish the findings, using the thesis to form the basis of journal and professional magazine articles and conference presentations. Thus, the findings will be made available to the wider research community for critical consideration. Already, the thesis has resulted in four seminar and conference presentations (one at an international conference) and a journal article.
4. Finally, the report will be made available to the DfE, to Ofsted, to the NCSL and to the LLS through a professional seminar that will be held at the Institute of Education. It is hoped that the findings will contribute meaningfully to debate on policy-making in education at this level and that it might possibly open up more involvement of practitioners in policy formation at earlier stages than has previously been the case.

### *Summary*

This chapter has outlined the methodology and methods for the research in this thesis. The structure for the enquiry was that of an exemplifying case study which drew upon a range of documentary evidence, academic literature and empirical enquiry. The methodology was interpretivism placed within an epistemological context of constructionism as the most appropriate framework for a study of policy. As a practitioner researching in my own field, the potential for bias was considerable. The research question and methods of data collection, as well as the structure of the study, were carefully constructed to eradicate possible bias and ethical issues, as far as possible.

The research sample has provided as full a range of perspectives as could be accommodated in a thesis of this size with such limitations on word count. The questions and the questioning have been carefully thought through and designed to be open and exploratory. Codification and analysis have been under constant scrutiny to ensure as much objectivity as possible. Whilst the case study is an exemplifying case study rather than being a representative or generalisable one, the design of the research is such that it should be possible to replicate it in relation to other education policies to further test the findings.

An in-depth case study on a policy as successful as the London Challenge makes a contribution to the field of education and policy-making. The research design was carefully created to ensure that the rich seam of data that was available was mined to its fullest extent and to ensure that the findings were reliable. The opportunity for my professional learning afforded by researching a contemporary policy over the course of its lifetime through close-hand encounter, both as a participant in different ways and as a researcher, I have taken with open hands. Whilst this has had some complexity with regard to scale, manageability and bias, nevertheless, the insights that such an encounter have provided me with have been invaluable. The generosity of the research respondents in giving their time so immediately and so freely testifies to the significance with which they felt the policy was invested through its success.

Chapter Four explains the findings thematically. What emerges is a story of the life of the London Challenge as it was put into practice that stretches beyond what was discovered in the documentary analysis and the theoretical study of the policy. It provides a richer understanding of what happened from the perspective of those policy-makers and practitioners most closely associated with the London Challenge, describing the lived experience of the policy in practice.

## **Chapter Four**

### **The Interface Between Policy and Practice in Education: Empirical Findings**

#### *Introduction*

This chapter presents the findings of the empirical enquiry. In earlier chapters, the discussion found that the practitioner's role in the success of the London Challenge was of key significance. It was also suggested that as the London Challenge developed, influenced by the dynamics within the context of practice, a new model for policy-making in education evolved which re-negotiated the relationship between policy-makers and practitioners. The empirical enquiry tested these two findings against the experience of those who were instrumental in the creation of the London Challenge and its implementation. Whilst it is acknowledged in this thesis that this will present a set of perspectives limited to those who are in sympathy with the policy's aims and the positive reflection of its achievements, nevertheless these government and non-government actors had a close, ongoing and intimate relationship with the London Challenge over the course of its life. The detailed views which respondents expressed are of significant value in understanding the dynamics of the policy process and its relationship to the London Challenge's success.

The chapter is organised into two sections. Part One deals with the first of the sub-questions to the over-arching research question, examining the respondents' views about the importance of engaging with the context of practice and how to achieve this in the policy process. Part Two deals with the second of the sub-questions, analysing the respondents' views about the evolution of the London Challenge and the reasons for the change in relationship between policy-makers and practitioners.

## ***Part One: The Importance of Policy-Makers'***

### ***Engagement With the Context of Practice***

The first sub-question explored the significance of the role of the practitioner in the successes of the London Challenge. It asked: *Was the role of the practitioner important in the success of the London Challenge? If so, how and why was it important?* Respondents believed that without support from London practitioners, particularly headteachers, the London Challenge would not have been successful. Respondents cited three key, interconnected reasons why the London Challenge gained this support:

- The strong, trusted leadership of Brighthouse located visibly in the field of practice was said to be pivotal by most of those involved in the policy's establishment;
- The keen sense of identity with the London context felt widely by those involved in London secondary education, sometimes linked back to the loss of ILEA;
- The type of model for system-wide school improvement for London that was established by the London Challenge team.

Commonly, the respondents felt that these three things were vital to practitioners' engagement with the London Challenge and to its successful implementation within the context of practice. They are examined in the next three sub-sections.

#### ***1.1 The Importance of Strong, Trusted Leadership From the Outset Which Placed Practice at its Heart***

Many respondents considered that the leadership of Brighthouse was the key force in securing the early success of the London Challenge. This was mostly to do with the way in which Brighthouse placed practice at the heart of the policy's work. Brighthouse consciously set out to recruit the involvement of practitioners to the London

Challenge in all sorts of ways which signalled his belief in the importance of practitioners, in inspiring and re-invigorating their practice and in building professional development relationships between them.

First, it was held that Brighthouse deliberately located himself within the context of practice and then he actively set out to engage practitioners himself, with his team, in every possible way. Brighthouse's decision to change the title of his role and to base himself at the Institute of Education and not at the DCSF was regarded by many respondents as symbolic of his commitment to practitioners. This was noted for example by AP1, who went on to describe his approach to the role of Chief Adviser for London Schools:

*Tim went out single-handedly and talked to teachers. It was a punishing schedule. He refused to be bureaucratised and got out into schools, unpicking the challenges with schools.*

This total commitment to engagement with the context of practice by Brighthouse was also reported by members of the London Challenge team. CS1 spoke about Brighthouse's unstinting hard work in trying to bring the whole of London within his reach. It was agreed within the London Challenge team that the focus of the work would be on "*getting out into schools*". CS1 and CS2 described how Brighthouse set himself a relentless task, travelling significant distances to meet groups of headteachers for dinner or for evening meetings to hold professional conversations about the London Challenge, after having worked all day either in schools or with the London Challenge team<sup>23</sup>.

Second, Brighthouse believed that practitioners' engagement with the London Challenge was fundamental to its success. The civil servants spoke in the warmest terms of Brighthouse's drive to inspire practice widely: his expertise, which was

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<sup>23</sup> Although Brighthouse never spoke about this, it was reported by several respondents that his level of commitment eventually took a personal toll and forced him to go part-time.

respected and trusted by policy-makers and practitioners alike, was an important reason why he was able to do this. CS1 spoke about Brighouse's ability to attract practitioners to turn out in large numbers to hear him speak in a way that they would not for others. CS1 and CS2 both said that this ability to inspire would show itself in London Challenge team meetings, which Brighouse wanted to begin with practice-based examples of improvement that was currently happening in schools or with aspirational suggestions – CS2 recalled Brighouse starting meetings saying “*Wouldn't it be good if ...?*” or having such sayings as “*Do we want ambulances at the bottom or fences at the top?*” with reference to the way in which they should be working to support schools to improve.

CS2 reported it was Brighouse's view that practitioner involvement needed to be totally embedded within the London Challenge and so a team of experienced former practitioners were recruited to be the London Challenge advisers, tasked with spending all their time out in schools. He went on to say that London's improvement would not have happened without the involvement of practitioners and the engagement of leaders. This view was widely supported by respondents.

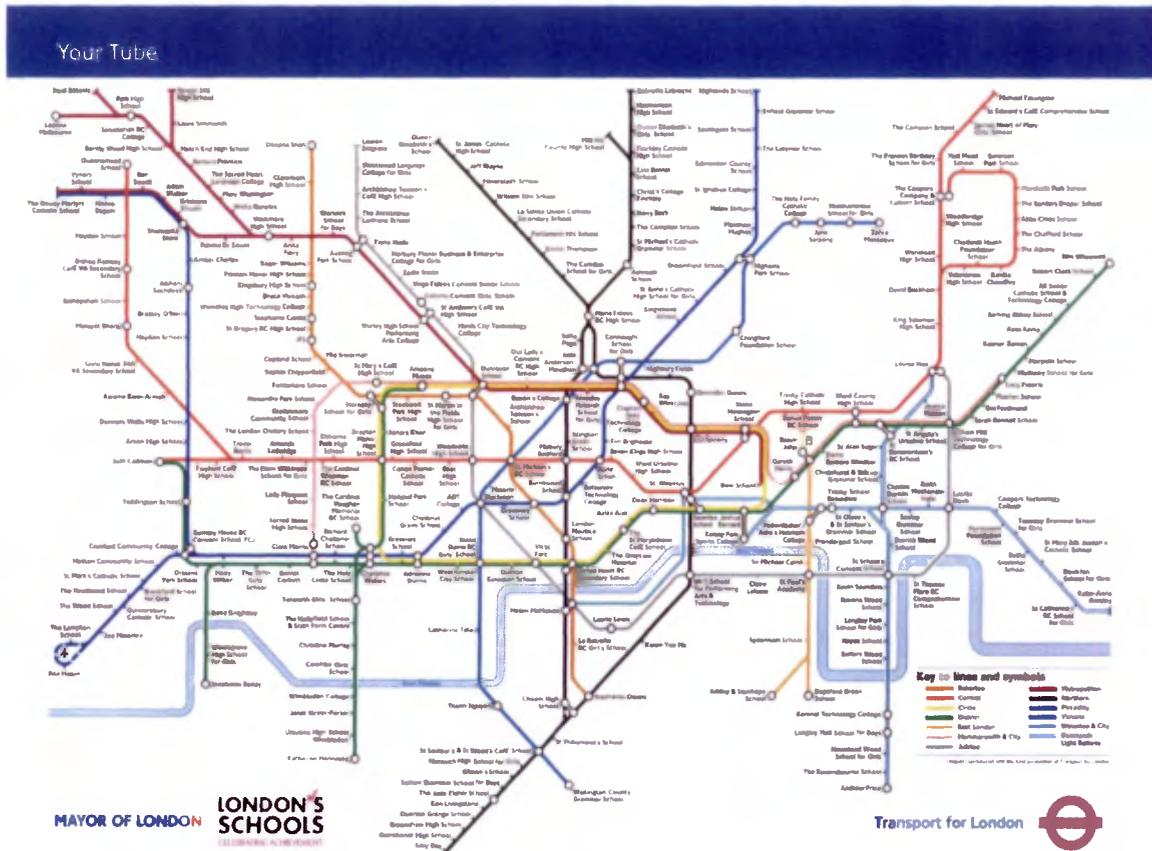
When asked in interview about the rationale for his approach, Brighouse said that his “*sole interest was – how could I influence what is happening in schools?*” Brighouse understood the policy process and that success in education policy lies within the way in which it is implemented in schools. Support from within the context of practice was vital and so this was his key focus.

What happened as a result was described by respondents as a huge generation of energy and drive to establish initiatives that stretched well beyond the 2003 policy text. Respondents referred to a variety: the Chartered London Teacher programme, which Brighouse described as a “*battle*” to establish but for which he managed to win payment for teachers and accreditation by the College of Teachers; the independent-state school partnerships, which established collegiates of schools with diverse status working together in full collaboration; the publication “*Butterflies for*

*School Improvement*” which contained vignettes from schools of small classroom-based initiatives that have disproportionate success – an idea that was borrowed from chaos theory; ‘Leading from the Middle’, a NCSL leadership development programme for middle leaders based on a coaching model of professional development.

By the time of the international London Challenge conference of February 2008, organised by AP1, achievements in the state maintained sector were widely known across London. In the preceding year, the London Challenge team had produced tee shirts, mugs, oyster card holders and even adverts on the London underground which celebrated the significant improvements through such slogans as *‘I went to a London state school and all I got was 8 A\*s’*. A special edition of the London underground tube map was produced with London’s most successful schools on it (see Picture 1).

Picture 1: London Challenge Tube Map



All of this activity was designed to create a sense amongst practitioners of what Woods described in interview as “*London pride*” and a sense of belonging to something greater than oneself. This was a very important component of the London Challenge’s success. Stories of success or failure tend to reinforce themselves in schools. Schools are highly relational organisations. As well as high quality teaching and leadership, a school’s self-belief and self-confidence play a significant part in pupils’ achievement and these depend on the quality of relationships between teachers and pupils, the school’s ethos and how far everyone at the school believes in the possibility of success. The same applies to school systems, as Woods pointed out in his interview.

Brighthouse led the London Challenge team and the other non-governmental actors who worked with them in such a way that they made it their aim to generate a commitment to the London Challenge from within the context of practice. They did this by getting out into schools and into other places where practitioners would come into direct contact with the policy’s work, seeking to inspire practitioners and to build self-confidence and aspiration within the system. They generated practice-based initiatives to improve teaching and leadership across London. They also created a culture amongst practitioners of belief that success was possible. This went hand in hand with another crucial part of the London Challenge’s success: the way in which a strong London identity and a corporate commitment to social justice was established in the interests of all London’s children.

### *1.2 A Commitment to the Success of All London’s Children: the Importance of Corporate Aspiration and Self-Belief in London*

Respondents strongly felt that the creation of a corporate identity and ethos amongst London practitioners was an important factor in the London Challenge’s success. This was comprised of two parts: the creation (or re-creation, for some who had been

part of ILEA<sup>24</sup> previously) of a London-wide identity for teachers and schools; and the establishment of a united commitment to social justice for all London's children.

AP1 described the beginnings of the London Challenge when these two features of the work were discussed, before the policy text of 2003 was written. A dinner was held at the RSA (Royal Society of the Arts) which was attended by key practitioners in the London secondary education system such as Christine Whatford<sup>25</sup>, David Bell<sup>26</sup>, Geoff Whitty<sup>27</sup> as well as Morris. The theme under discussion was "*What was unique and special about London?*" From this, there came a direction of travel for the London Challenge which was not about re-creating ILEA – AP1 commented "*Above all, people mustn't think we were creating ILEA!*" – but which was about a "*lean centre with initiatives*" focused on practice.

A whole raft of work developed which was focused on establishing a professional identity for the London practitioner, led from within the Institute of Education by AP1. She reported that she felt the "*London teacher was the most important element*" of the London Challenge and she wanted to create "*a sense of purpose and pride in being a London teacher*". Aside from the creation of the Chartered London Teacher programme, there were "*three very important things*" which were initiated, focused on this:

a) a magazine for London teachers paid for by a grant from the Gatsby Foundation, "*to provide induction, development and support*" and to create corporate identity so that "*teachers would know that they would be looked after*" and "*that they were part of something*". "*This was Tim's initiative, not the DCSF*";

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<sup>24</sup> ILEA – established in 1965, the Inner London Education Authority was situated at County Hall and overseen by the Greater London Council until 1990, when together with the GLC it was abolished. Until 1990, it had responsibility for all inner London schools and provided a structure for supporting and developing London's teachers.

<sup>25</sup> An experienced former headteacher and director of education in a number of successful London education authorities.

<sup>26</sup> Former HMCI and head of the DCSF.

<sup>27</sup> Director of the Institute of Education.

b) networks of subject practitioners, which took place “*on a shoe-string budget*” led by Margaret Mulholland at the Institute of Education, using Fischer Family Trust data about subject performance to identify strong practice and to link subject teachers together across London to improve practice collaboratively;

c) the establishment of a London Centre for Leadership in Learning (LCLL) to be a “*living symbol – a hub. You could see it, you could walk in off the street. As a London teacher, you could be part of something*”. The DCSF wanted to build a centre for London teachers similar to the one in Harvard, where there could be lectures, courses, dinner – “*a prestige club for London teachers*”. In the end, the capital funding did not come through and a part of the Institute building was refurbished instead.

LCPL2, a serving headteacher and one of the first consultant heads, recalled the sense of identity for inner London teachers which ILEA had created. She felt that the “*good things that brought schools together, like curriculum development and teachers’ centres, were atomised*” in London and that teachers “*had ‘pot-luck CPD (Continuing Professional Development)*”. LCPL2 “*welcomed the London Challenge because of the by-product – part of its role was bringing a London-wide perspective*” to London education. LCCH4, spoke about the excitement and the sense of optimism she felt when she heard about the London Challenge and saw the potential in recreating a London identity for schools. Amongst the respondents, the reconnection of London practitioners with each other across a system which had become disconnected was mentioned many times as an important part of the London Challenge.

AP2, a former headteacher who was seconded by the DCSF to work on the development of CPD programmes for teachers in London, spoke about the importance of re-creating for teachers a knowledge of London-wide outstanding

practice, where such practice was located and how to connect it across the system. CPD and leadership development in schools were happening as “*disconnected activities across London*”. She wanted the London Challenge to “*widen the scope*” for practitioner involvement through CPD and “*engage people so that they can look after themselves*”. AP2 felt that despite the Chartered London Teacher programme, teachers’ CPD was seen as separate to the London Leadership Strategy and that there was a lack of coherence between the DCSF and the NCSL. She saw her role as one that should “*make links with schools*” where there were “*pockets of good practice*”. She felt it was about creating “*a culture and an ethos – building a vision – as opposed to an achievement culture*”.

The creation of a London-wide identity for teachers resonated widely with respondents, as did the belief in establishing a commitment to social justice. This was the vision for London which Brighouse and those that worked with him sought to create: a corporate identity for London secondary education that cared about all London’s children, working together to achieve the highest possible standards for them all. This commitment to social justice extended right back to within the civil service team for the London Challenge. CS1 said that there was a

*...vision of London as a leading city – a belief that people wanted to believe in – that there is something greater than themselves – that they were creating something better. This is strong amongst teachers and practitioners that work in London. It was about turning attention away from a focus on failure and creating a vision of the future.*

It was a compelling vision for all the respondents. LA1, a Chief Executive of an inner London borough who had been a London teacher and headteacher, commented that London teachers tended towards a “*progressive left-wing approach*” in their work and so “*the London Challenge was strong on moral purpose – its message was: this is the place where we care about London*”. It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that commitment to a better future for the most vulnerable of London’s children and

young people resonated widely amongst headteachers and other practitioners. Education is 'teleological' in character – in essence, it is about growth, development or becoming something better. Woods referred to this as “*a psychology of the whole – what is it that persuades people to do it – there is no extra pay – London children?*” In order to achieve this, however, transcending the competitive tendencies of the London system was absolutely necessary and so the model of school improvement that was constructed was very important.

### *1.3 The Importance of the Model for School Improvement*

There were several important features of the school improvement model of the London Challenge which helped it to overcome competition. The first was the culture within which the work took place. AP1 said that what was particularly important was that Brighouse eschewed the culture of blame on schools for poor standards which was prevalent at the time:

*Tim stopped them calling them failing schools. Refusal (of teachers to participate in the London Challenge) could have happened if it had been the original approach. But this changed because of the approach Tim took. There was no element of blame to it. It was 'Now how are we going to share this learning?'*

Brighouse felt the need for climate change in London schools – that schools which were struggling needed to believe that success was possible and therefore, to blame them was counterproductive. He explained in interview that without an alteration in language and style there could not have been a climate change. He set out to “*talk in a way that was unusual for people to see an administrator talking*” and that although this was regarded as risky, the policy-makers recognised what he was trying to do and allowed him to do it. The approach was “*supportive, affirming and speculative. This was crucial right at the beginning so that the can-doers, the knowledge-creators (in schools) don't feel isolated*”.

The main emphasis of his work was with headteachers on an inter-school basis, to establish the practice of sharing ideas in an environment which he described as otherwise *“competitive and confined to boroughs”*.

However, this did not mean that there was a lack of challenge about standards of achievement. A second feature of the London Challenge model was that it was based on mutual challenge. According to Woods, the model worked as a *“community of equals ...as an expert-led partnership model”*. LCCH2, who significantly influenced the creation and development of this model described the importance of this mutuality. He described the system at the beginning of the London Challenge, explaining that a headteacher he had been asked to support refused to see him because of the previous culture of blame so he had set about building trust with her, visiting the school nine times until she eventually saw him on the tenth. Setting up a contract-based non-hierarchical relationship of trust, confidentiality and mutual accountability in which the coaching headteacher is just as accountable as the headteacher receiving the support was very important. This was echoed by other respondents.

The autonomy and leadership which headteachers could exert in this role, working together to create the climate and capacity for improvement was supportive but also *“challenging”* with a *“hard edge”*. Woods said that *“fundamentally it was about raising standards”*, adding that the funding helped to some extent because it created *“leverage – and with leverage, you can demand high returns – there was a mutuality of challenge – a bargain between both heads with very high level shared values”*. This mutuality of challenge seemed to be extremely rewarding to both headteachers in the partnership, according to respondents.

A third feature of the school improvement model that was regarded by respondents as essential to the London Challenge’s success was the brokering and matching process between supporting headteachers and those headteachers receiving the support. This was carried out by the London Challenge team. LCCH2 argued that the success of the

London Challenge required good matching of the coaching headteacher with the headteacher s/he was supporting. It involved the use of high level emotional intelligence about the personalities of individuals, paired with an accurate assessment of the professional skills sets they had and what the receiving headteacher and school might need. This had to be accompanied by credibility of the supporting headteacher through recognised expertise.

At first, recognition came through the assessment process which LCPL2 referred to. LCPL2 described how she was approached at the end of 2002 to become part of a group of consultant headteachers and that, after her school was carefully vetted through an analysis of Ofsted reports and other data, as well as a school visit, she joined this small group and began work in early 2003 with the Keys to Success programme as a consultant leader. Quality assurance of London Challenge advisers and consultant heads in this way was considered very important. Subsequently, LCPL4 reported that the NCSL in 2008 borrowed from the London Challenge and created the NLE and LLE programme out of the London Challenge model. This became the established means of accrediting consultant headteachers for the London Challenge, an approach which continued throughout the policy's life.

The last feature of the model for school improvement was that schools had to work across Local Authority boundaries. LA1 explained that the London Challenge worked outside – and “*in spite of*” – Local Authorities. “*The implicit message was that the solution was in the school*”. In this way, the role of Local Authorities was sidelined. Partly, the decision to work across Local Authority boundaries was because, as CS1 observed critically, some Local Authorities had persisted in allowing some schools to struggle or fail. However, it was also because of the competitive nature of the London secondary school system which, it was believed by some, had led to all the problems of between-school variation. Woods reported that the London Challenge team members who brokered the support “*deliberately don't allow LLEs and NLEs to practice in their own Local Authorities. They work freely across all the Local Authorities*”.

It can be seen at the end of this section that the leadership of the London Challenge team and, especially that of Brighouse, was considered by most respondents to be fundamental to the success of the London Challenge. Brighouse had a clear understanding of the need to engage practitioners in support of the policy. Thus, with the team, he focused on practitioners, creating energy and drive through practice-based initiatives, being persuasive and inspiring them. This, together with a strong vision for social justice, an identity for London practitioners and a culture of school improvement which overcame competition and distrust were cited as key reasons why the London Challenge policy gained such widespread support for its implementation from within the context of practice. Key leaders in London schools were prepared to join Brighouse and the London Challenge team in this drive for improvement because of this approach. It led to the ‘reformation’ of the relationship between policy-makers and practitioners, re-negotiating the hierarchy and creating a new model for policy-making in London, as will be seen in the next section.

***Part Two: The Importance of the Relationship  
Between Policy-Makers and Practitioners***

The second sub-question focused on the relationship between policy-makers and practitioners, exploring its nature, how it developed and what role it played in the successes of the London Challenge. It asked: *How should policy-makers frame their relationship with practitioners when shaping education policy if they are to maximise the success of a policy like the London Challenge?*

Respondents reported that practitioners in the form of headteachers played an increasingly important role in the development of the London Challenge policy as time went on. They began as a small group of invited partners, joining civil servants, the London Challenge advisers and Brighouse at the end of 2002. By 2010, these headteacher practitioners had become part of the policy’s infrastructure and were leading the policy’s strategy with the London Challenge team. As was shown in the analysis of the policy process in Chapter Two, the successful implementation of an

education policy lies within the field of practice. How did they become so pivotal to the success of the London Challenge? Respondents believed that there were several important factors in the relationship of headteachers with the London Challenge's policy process that led to this:

- The relationship with the London Challenge team and the growth in trust by policy-makers of the consultant headteachers in their ability to deliver improvement;
- The way in which consultant headteachers were permitted, with and in support of their peers, to express their expertise and creativity as builders of capacity in schools and leaders of a self-improving system;
- The way in which consultant headteachers mediated the policy within the context of practice, which allowed the London Challenge to be successful.

Although the reasons given by respondents were varied, they considered these three factors to be of key significance in the successful implementation of the London Challenge. The findings are set out below.

#### *2.1 A 'High Trust, High Accountability' Model: The Relationship Between Policy-Makers and Headteachers in the London Challenge*

The development of a close relationship between policy-makers, in particular the civil service team, London Challenge Advisers and consultant headteachers was considered by many respondents to be very important in the development of the London Challenge. This relationship evolved over time. From the civil servants' point of view, it was built upon the credibility and expertise of the consultant headteachers and London Challenge advisers. CS1 paid tribute to their abilities saying that "*their brilliance was / is key*", acknowledging the influence of their work on the London Challenge:

*It is important to listen carefully and try to understand the complexities. You have to trust the consultants and advisers – if you don't, you're likely to get it wrong.*

As LCPL5 pointed out in her interview, often the DCSF consulted selected headteachers on policy, sometimes commissioning them to lead working parties on aspects of education provision, for example the Steer Report (DfES, 2005) on behaviour in schools led by Alan Steer or the Macdonald Report (DCSF, 2009a) on PSHE led by Alasdair Macdonald. However, with regard to the London Challenge, respondents reported that there was a distinction in the nature of the relationship. All headteachers involved in the London Challenge were approached on the basis of their track record, interviewed and appointed to a long-standing consultancy position throughout the duration of the policy, latterly with accreditation.

LCCH2 described the evolution of this relationship, explaining how he at first worked with a close group of only six headteachers to get the quality of the work right and that the aim was to 'transfer' this knowledge to other headteachers in London, developing capacity. The group of six became a steering group for the London Challenge, working directly with the policy-makers whilst the number of consultant headteachers increased as the model was replicated. The steering group continued to meet each week with the civil servants and to function as the dissemination point for the work amongst the wider group of consultant headteachers.

LCPL2, who was part of the core group from the outset, referred to the London Challenge team meetings which she attended in the early days of the policy, saying that *"The relationship with civil servants was very important – practice and policy was discussed."* Woods described the relationship as a *"high trust model – the department was saying we trust you to transform the system – we'll get behind you and heads responded"*. LCPL3 and LCCH2 reported that the development of this trust in headteachers to be able to deliver sustainable and deep-rooted improvement gathered force as the London Challenge demonstrated its success more and more.

LCPL4 joined the London Challenge as a programme leader in 2007 – 8, as the policy was moving towards its second iteration. He said there was a sense in which, at this point, the civil servants permitted lots of new ideas to be tried by headteachers to see what worked and then to develop models for improvement based on these trials. He said that their attitude was “... *try it – then reflect on what’s worked – and then let’s have some more of this...*”. LCPL4 felt that to an extent it was “*opportunistic – the right time, the right place, the right person...*” - that where there was success, the London Challenge team would capture it and build upon it. LCPL4 believed that the London Challenge policy moved on and extended into building sustainability for system-wide improvement in London as part of the next phase of its development.

This was partly because of the considerable leadership capacity that existed in London by 2007 – 8, according to LCPL4. More could be done with this capacity. The London Challenge could develop sustainability within the London system – it could focus, for example, on moving schools from ‘Good’ to ‘Outstanding’ or ‘Satisfactory’ to ‘Good’. LCPL4 gave some examples. He referred to the ‘Moving to New Headship’ programme which was started by a consultant headteacher in 2005 to support headteachers in their first two years of a new headship – transition in leadership is a time when challenging schools can be particularly vulnerable. He also referred to the Good to Great programme, started by another consultant headteacher in 2007 – 8, which was designed to increase the number of outstanding schools in London and which was one of the objectives of the second London Challenge policy.

The relationship between policy-makers and headteachers eventually reached such a point of trust that, LCPL3 and LCPL4 observed, “*Sue John (serving headteacher and Director of the London Leadership Strategy) could just do what she wanted*”. LCPL3 agreed with this and talked about the sixth form programme, saying that it “*happened by accident – it was bolt on*”, resulting from a conversation with John about post-16 education in London. It began, he said, as a network of heads and schools and

developed into a programme from there because it was built on the success of the network. LCPL2 supported this view of things, saying:

*Initially, it (the London Challenge) was just about interventions. Now it is about sustaining systems and structures.*

It led to an increase in capacity in the system, multiplying the number of headteachers and other practitioners who could lead school improvement. Woods commented that “we did not plan the system-leadership on the scale that we have it”. LCPL2 reported that it was the beginning of a cycle of leadership development as the London Challenge moved on. She commented:

*The strategies which had a wider impact happened later but this was because of the success of the earlier ones. There was more capacity – people had gone through the London Challenge who can now contribute to it ...for example, the journey of the Keys to Success schools which contribute now. \_(Name of school)\_ was in the Keys to Success programme and now \_\_(name of headteacher)\_\_ is an NLE. ...Experienced people do want to support others. The London Challenge has given this a structure and there is now succession planning.*

By 2010, the London Challenge had become a policy that was led by headteachers, in close consultation with policy-makers but within a relationship of high trust in those practitioners’ expertise. Could this have been predicted from the policy text of 2003? As stated in the previous chapters, there was no indication that this was the end-point of the policy.

Asking Brighouse about this in interview, we discussed the 2003 policy text which was written by him together with Coles, comparing what happened in practice with its centrally driven nature, the matrix of pre-existing policies it referred to as solutions and its forceful language. When enquiring whether this gained the London Challenge

its political support, Brighouse acknowledged that it was rather as though “*everyone’s favourite policy was there*” but went on to say that the text was written in this way so as to bring all the prevalent political ideas together into “*a coherent gestalt*”. Brighouse’s priority, however, was to influence practice in schools across London rather than keeping within the boundaries of the text.

The credibility of the consultant headteachers and the way in which they built upon the growing success of the policy allowed for the development of this relationship. The quality of the work, the expertise and the creativity that was demonstrated by the headteachers involved led to the evolution of the policy’s strategy in later years. The second iteration of the London Challenge in 2008 was influenced by the developments that had taken place since 2003. In the following years, Woods described the focus of the London Challenge as about “*harnessing the creativity of headteachers and their power as community leaders*”. It was about creating what he described as an “*expert-led system*” and by 2010, under Woods’ leadership, this was exactly what it had become.

## *2.2 Playing on the Bigger Stage: What Motivated Headteachers to Become Involved in the London Challenge?*

What prompted headteachers to give up significant time and resources, often increasing their own workload into the bargain, to support another colleague in a challenging London secondary school? Woods observed that there was real ambition within the London secondary school system, saying that “*London heads like playing on a bigger stage*”. However, this ambition was reported by respondents to be for the benefit of the London system rather than personal. In all cases, respondents were united in their belief that the London headteachers who took work as part of the London Challenge were committed to the moral purpose of the strategy and to the vision of social justice outlined in the previous section. Thereafter, respondents cited a range of reasons why they believed headteachers became involved with the London Challenge.

The first of the reasons usually given by headteacher respondents for their involvement in the London Challenge was the benefit which they felt was accrued for their own professional development and for that of their staff. This was an over-riding motivating factor in their involvement amongst respondents. LCPL3 spoke about the “*energising*” effect which he could see that his involvement in the London Challenge would have on his practice and that of the school towards the end of his career as a headteacher:

*I went to a number of meetings and conferences. I liked what I was seeing – what I was hearing. I liked the people. I liked the ideas. I could see it would energise me. I could see it would have a productive effect on the school. So that’s where I kind of – you know, you choose where you spend your time.*

LCPL2 welcomed the London Challenge because she saw it as helping London schools but she also described how she had been looking for a transition in her career. She had been thinking about coming out of her school but then, when she was asked to go to Bristol to spread the good practice that was developing in London, she could see the linkage of what she was doing to her own practice as a headteacher and this meant that she stayed on at the school, instead developing her career as a consultant headteacher.

LCPL5 described her keenness to be involved in the London Challenge because of the contribution it made to her own professional development. She mentioned several of the programmes but in particular, she cited the ‘Moving to New Headship’ programme as one that was especially motivating:

*I was very aware that I’d been a new head twice and I had never really had any formal or sustained coaching in that role ...I felt that that had been a real shame ...it was an area I was interested in. I was aware of the deficiencies (of support for new heads).*

LCCH4 felt that involvement with the London Challenge benefitted her own school, providing it with an “*outward-looking focus*”. Other headteachers agreed with her. LCCH1 reported that her school “*learned a lot ...it looked at learning within another environment*” and became part of a “*learning community*” with the other school. LCPL3 also described the mutual benefit that he felt was gained from involvement:

*You engage, you are supporting your own school, you are developing another school – I mean it’s win-win. It became very clear to me in the last few years of headship that it was win-win and I wish I’d engaged more early on.*

Another reason why headteachers became involved in the London Challenge, although this was said less often, was to do with the professional recognition which this brought. LCPL4 talked about the status that came with the designation of consultant leader and LCCH4 felt that when she was approached for her involvement, it showed a “*professional regard*” for her abilities that was gratifying. Several respondents said that approaches were made for reasons of credibility, which they felt was born of recognised expertise and intuition. LCPL2 said that “*the group (of leading headteachers) itself had to be assured of quality*”.

However, there are always dangers with how such a system can be viewed. One respondent, AP2, felt that the creation of such a group of ‘experts’ was problematic – that it led to a ‘clique’ of headteachers, saying that there was “*lots of jockeying to be ‘in’ the agenda and there was a lot of ‘cliquiness’ around those that were*”. LCCH5 also expressed some reservations about what he felt was the ‘hierarchical’ nature of the supporting relationship. He said:

*At \_\_ (Name of School) \_\_ there is a very strong cult of non-hierarchy. A school helping another school is in a hierarchy – it’s not a model that sits comfortably in \_\_ (Name of LA) \_\_.*

LCPL2 disagreed with this, saying that it was not about creating a clique. It was a systematic way of bringing in capable leaders to benefit the system: integrity in those who were approached was an important consideration. She was supported in this by LCCH3, who said that she was attracted to work as a consultant headteacher because the London Challenge was about “*working with schools in different ways to create capacity ...without showing off*”. She went on to say:

*Once or twice, I heard heads speak and it was about them ...and whoever was in the chair ...would say publicly, in such a way as not to blame ...but you got the impression that if you were there to wear a badge of honour you were not welcome.*

LCPL3 talked about the potential for ‘empire-building’ that he perceived to exist which might flatter the personal vanity of some headteachers, but he contrasted this with the approach of the London Challenge which he felt was very opposite. For him and for all those interviewed, it was about creating the capacity for their colleagues to successfully run their own schools – not to take them on as satellites.

### *2.3 Mediating Education Policy: How Significant is the Role of the Headteacher in the Interface Between Policy and Practice?*

*“Do you know, I’ve never read the policy ...”*

So said LCCH2 of the London Challenge, who was one of the key consultant headteachers involved from the outset, contributing significantly to its creation. How, then, did the consultant headteachers approach their work of implementing the London Challenge? Unlike LCCH2, did other respondents who were consultant headteachers follow the policy texts of 2003 and / or 2008 as they undertook their work for the London Challenge? The findings showed that overwhelmingly, policy texts including those of the London Challenge, were largely ignored by headteachers. This was true with the exception of two sets of circumstances:

- If non-compliance would lead to some sort of disciplinary action or negative effect on school performance;
- If the policy would help them to improve their own schools.

This was for several reasons. First, some respondents believed that policy texts and the processes they set in motion could be completely counter-productive. Having the expertise and confidence to move away from the policy text and to create a tailored approach for a school was seen to be very important. Second, some respondents felt that most policy was too low-level or general in its applicability to schools. Third, some respondents felt there was just too much policy issued by government, creating too much ‘policy noise’. It meant that one had to be very selective, choosing carefully which policies or which parts of policies to implement in school.

LCCH1 felt that the first school she was asked to support had been “*completely incapacitated by the London Challenge*”. It was “*receiving ‘support’ from umpteen different directions, each with its own agenda. They couldn’t do anything. No one had looked at the context*”. She said that the work needed a bespoke approach specifically for that school and so this is how she set to work with the headteacher she was supporting, ignoring the policy and refusing other external support saying “*it was the bespoke that worked*”.

LCCH1 took a similar approach with her own school, ignoring education policy or elements of it if she felt they could add nothing to the school’s development. She felt that “*many government policies are about filling gaps ...they are a damage limitation exercise*”. She went on to describe how education policy limits creativity saying that:

*Policy is for the standard school – you need an exceptionality clause. I agree with having entitlements and national standards but you need to leave room for difference and exception.*

This, she said, could be risky leadership especially for new headteachers without the experience and so there must be room for continuity and sustainability through policy but without the need to make all schools the same. Education policy, LCCH1 said, should support and challenge schools but should be applied in a bespoke manner.

LCCH5 held similar views, saying *“Policy is a blunt tool”*. He described how he engaged only with certain parts of the London Challenge policy, for reasons to do with his own view of his abilities and the capacity of his school. He went on to discuss his approach to policy implementation in his own school, saying:

*As a school, at times, we fairly did what we were told. But, as the amount of change increased there were certain aspects that we were not going to do ...we would protect the interests of the pupils and the institution. ...It requires confidence and an understanding of the system ...so long as we get good outcomes we can do what we want in our own way. As soon as they fall, we are held to account...*

It was a common theme. The selective use of policy by headteachers was driven by its perceived usefulness to the school and the achievement of the necessary outcomes for pupils. Everything else was viewed as a distraction in a world where there was significant policy noise.

LCCH3 said that, in the end, she turned her attention in her work as a headteacher only to those things which would help her to improve the outcomes for her school. The things that mattered to her were pedagogic practice related to raising achievement for particular groups of pupils and her priority was to know who these groups were, what needed to be done to make effective change and how to best support her staff to do it. She said that one of the things she was told when she first became a headteacher was *“You need to get used to the WPB – waste-paper bin!”* She went on to explain that there was *“so much ‘stuff’”* – referring to policy – that it

was impossible to read it all. LCCH3 explained that this was very much how she worked with those whom she had supported in her work with the London Challenge.

LCCH4 made sure that she 'filtered' policy to ensure that her staff were not overwhelmed by the amount that came through:

*As a person who kind of filters policy for the rest of the staff, I mean I don't think my staff in the past five years have any idea of the amount of things that I have blocked getting through to them or have really whittled down to the bare essentials. ... One year we did a list of kind of everything and of course there were only about half a dozen out of the list of – you know – forty-two, I think it was, that staff – teaching staff and middle leaders – had to concern themselves with.*

Headteachers were careful about the policies they selected for implementation, thinking carefully about the potential outcomes for pupils and carrying out a 'cost-benefit' analysis before making a decision, often independently of others. LCPL5 said:

*I tend, I suspect like a lot of heads, to look at policies and initiatives and things, you know and ask is this going to benefit my students? Is this, does this tie in with our particular kind of strategic priority and if the answer to both those questions is no – and I know that I'm not going to get put into prison for not doing it – then I don't engage.*

Respondents were quite clear in their view that it is not the existence of a policy text that improves schools but the honing of expert practice 'on the job'. LCCH3 said:

*I was at the same meeting that \_\_\_\_\_ (name of a key policy-maker) was at and you just knew, you might have read the books and know the policies and the legals but that's not going to make it happen – you can bang me over the*

*head and say well actually you know policy three, line four, paragraph eight says ...but from what I can see (and I admit to this) if I've achieved anything in teaching and headship, it wasn't by knowing all the policies ...so just by learning through my own experiences, getting it wrong, getting it right and knowing the statutory stuff ... it hasn't been by implementing the policies, which is the role of the civil service.*

If headteachers ignore policy texts when they do not see them to be of direct relevance – or, in some cases, even if they are of direct relevance – then this section shows that the stakes were high in the success of the London Challenge. The support of headteachers for the London Challenge policy was absolutely critical to its success. Headteachers are the ‘gate keepers’ in schools with regard to policy and its implementation. How they filter policy through the policy noise, how they make decisions about which policies or parts of policies to implement and how they crystallise and disseminate policy to their staff are all important considerations for policy-makers. These factors make a knowledge of the motivations of headteachers about why they become involved in the implementation of policy very important for policy-makers.

It has been shown in this section that the narrative of Brighouse and the London Challenge team which espoused a strong commitment to social justice and a pride in London presented a kind of ‘call to arms’ in the interests of all London’s children which drew many headteachers to support the London Challenge. However, as the findings revealed, headteachers were not entirely ‘martyrs to this cause’. Although they were not self-serving either, there was a strong sense reported by the respondents that they believed there were significant benefits for them and their schools in being involved in the London Challenge. This was to do with ambition, creative drive and the ability to practice at a system-wide level – and a sense of gratification at the professional esteem that was being expressed when they were invited to become involved. When the motivation for headteachers to ignore policy is strong because it is viewed to be either irrelevant to one’s school, a distraction or even a positive dis-

benefit, the means by which headteachers were engaged in support of the London Challenge were very important to its success.

### *Summary*

At the end of this chapter, it has been shown that there were six reasons why the London Challenge was successful that could be drawn from the empirical enquiry. Three were related to the importance of the leadership of the London Challenge and the way in which practitioners were drawn in to support the policy. Three were related to the formation of a relationship between policy-makers and practitioners that shifted the traditionally hierarchical power relationship between government and the field of practice into a re-framed structure for policy-making in education, one that re-negotiated the roles.

This was helped by the willingness of London secondary headteachers to 'stand up and be counted' alongside their colleagues in more difficult circumstances and to employ their expertise at a system-wide level. It gave credibility to their work. It was a 'high trust, high accountability' model of policy-making. A strong infrastructure, created by the leadership of Brighouse with the London Challenge team together with the involvement of key headteachers was critical to the policy's success. In addition, the way in which that team of people worked to engage those in the field of practice was very important – through strong narrative vision, regional commitment and the invocation of a 'moral imperative' directly within the field of practice.

The next chapter discusses these findings further, exploring the implications for education policy-makers and practitioners of what has been learned about how and why the London Challenge was successful.

## **Chapter Five**

### **Creating Successful Policy for System-Wide School Improvement: Learning from the London Challenge**

*People strive to be part of something that is greater than themselves. The London Challenge is about giving people the space, the structures and the support – and to create a culture in which they can do this, so they can do it for themselves.*

Jon Coles, Director General of Schools, DfE, 2010.

#### ***Introduction***

This chapter brings together the documentary analysis, the literature and the findings of the empirical enquiry to discuss what can be learned from the London Challenge about successful policy for system-wide school improvement. The scope of this thesis is limited and so the discussion chooses to focus on only those findings that are deemed to be of most significance to the London Challenge. The discussion takes its direction from the research question and associated sub-questions. It is best illustrated from the words of Coles, cited above from his interview.

Coles pointed out that the vision of the London Challenge was a strong draw for London practitioners. Coles also pointed out that his role as a government policy-maker was about creating the right conditions in which the policy could flourish. Thus, the discussion in this chapter is separated into two parts which concentrate on:

1. The importance of the leadership of the London Challenge, both the figurehead leadership of Brighouse and that of the London Challenge team, as key ingredients of the policy's success;
2. The relationship between policy-makers and practitioners which altered as the London Challenge evolved, establishing a new paradigm for education policy-making.

Part One examines the significance in the policy's success of its leadership. Leaders of the London Challenge understood the importance of engaging with the context of practice in education policy-making. The strategy for leadership which they adopted was vital. It created the climate for a new way of working between policy-makers and headteachers. Part Two returns to the policy process. The London Challenge established a new paradigm for policy-making in education. It fulfilled the ultimate goal of theories of system leadership, where system leaders lead the system and where the government's role is to create the right conditions for this to happen.

*Part One: Establishing a Sense of 'London Pride' (David Woods)  
and a Vision of Something Greater*

In this section, the importance of leadership in the success of the London Challenge policy is discussed. A key reason for the success of the London Challenge was that its leaders understood the importance of practitioners in the policy process and thus the need to galvanise them in support of the policy's aims. In Chapter Two, it was shown that practitioners have an important role in policy implementation and so their engagement was crucial. The empirical enquiry identified that the leadership of Brighouse and his team, the vision and regional identity that they created and the model for school improvement that they constructed were all important reasons why practitioners supported the London Challenge, thus ensuring its success. The discussion in this chapter breaks down the components of the leadership strategy which achieved this. There were two dimensions. The first was the figurehead leadership of the London Challenge. The second was the team leadership of the London Challenge. Each is considered here in turn.

*1.1 The Figurehead Leadership of the London Challenge and the Importance of  
Creating a Vision and Regional Identity*

In Chapter Four, it was reported that a key factor in the success of the policy was the way in which Brighouse approached his work as its figurehead. Whilst an important point about the policy's work was that the leadership of the London Challenge was distributed amongst a core group of advisers, consultant headteachers and civil

servants, Brighthouse's figurehead leadership sat at its heart in the early days, setting, the tone and style of the work. There were two aspects to Brighthouse's approach which were of particular importance:

- The concept of 'remote leadership': Brighthouse developed a way of successfully engaging practitioners from whom, in the position of figurehead, he could otherwise be remote;
- The creation of a vision for London: the establishment of a 'London pride' which included ambition, challenge and the commitment to social justice for all London's children – a vision to which London practitioners would commit and work together with a common purpose.

*i) 'Remote Leadership'*

Brighthouse took an approach to his leadership which reflected that of his work in Birmingham, another complex urban setting, where he was previously Chief Education Officer. He outlined this approach in a chapter entitled 'remote leadership' (Brighthouse, 2005). As Chief Adviser for London Schools, Brighthouse had responsibility for a regional system and so he was in a position that was distant to practitioners. Yet, in order to achieve the kind of system reform that was needed, as was shown in Chapter Two, Brighthouse needed to engage directly with practitioners. To do this from his position as a leader who was 'remote' from practitioners, he needed to:

1. Understand the context of London education
2. Understand the history of London education
3. Imagine the future for London education
4. Spend time talking and listening to London practitioners
5. Communicate the vision for London education
6. Build a team of strong leaders around him driven by passion and commitment to London

7. Have attention to detail and anticipation
8. Give time to all legitimate stakeholders

(from Brighouse, 2005:102-114).

As shown in Chapters One and Four, these features were seen throughout Brighouse's work for London. Respondents noted his relentless commitment to practitioners and the context of practice. In particular, Brighouse's approach demonstrated an acute understanding of education in urban contexts. He developed a deep knowledge of the competitive London context and the link between this and the between-school variation that the London Challenge had to address.

The context-dependent nature of school improvement was a key consideration for Brighouse. As was shown in the Introduction, schools are influenced by their 'place'. Research on school improvement in challenging circumstances has shown that effective school leadership is linked to highly sophisticated skills in the interpretation of context and the ability to be reflexive and adaptable in response (Ainscow and West, 2006:19; Harris et al, 2006:148-151; Thrupp and Lupton, 2011). A knowledge of context and history in London was critical, especially because of the divide between schools. How to overcome these divisions and the associated social polarisation of the London secondary school system was a fundamental concern for Brighouse. He had to find a way to achieve what he regarded as a "prime purpose" for his work – "securing a strong and widely shared commitment to the highest common factor of the organisational purpose and values" (Brighouse, 2005:114). It required two things: close communication with practitioners, despite his remote position; and commitment from practitioners to a vision of how things could be better in London.

As a remote leader, Brighouse recognised the importance of every single communication with individual practitioners, realising that "as a remote leader infrequent contact means that every contact is vital" (Brighouse, 2005:109). Brighouse went as far as to write letters to individual practitioners whom he met,

thanking them for an aspect of their work which he had particularly noticed (Brighouse, 2005:110). The authenticity with which these individual communications were endowed was essential – they needed to be “linked to genuine passion and values” (Brighouse, 2005:109). Respondents commented that these letters were prized by their recipients because of the value they showed for their work.

Brighouse aimed to cut across London’s competitive school environment and to recruit practitioners to the London Challenge’s cause. He did so through the creation of a vision for London which rang true to London’s context and practitioners’ experience of it. The narrative he told, the language he used, the attention to detail in his knowledge and the team of people he developed who could spread this shared vision more widely than he could by himself were all essential components in his approach to engaging practitioners. Respondents reported that it was central to the policy’s success.

#### *ii) Vision and Identity for London*

Understanding and using the power of story was a key aspect of Brighouse’s leadership. As well as discussing it in his theory of ‘remote leadership’, he wrote about it in ‘Passionate Leadership in Education’ (Davies and Brighouse, 2008). There, Brighouse discussed the notion of ‘skald’, the Norwegian word for “the eloquent poet who used to tell stories of past, glorious success on the eve of or during the course of an expedition”. He went on to say:

An expert ‘skaldic’ headteacher links past to present and, speculatively, to future outstanding achievements, always talking about the achievements as slightly ahead of where they really are – not too far ahead, of course, as to be unbelievable. The art of the headteacher as storyteller encompasses imagery, metaphor, simile, analogy, allegory and an unerring sense of timing and occasion. (Brighouse, 2008:22-23)

Respondents reported widely Brighouse’s use of narrative in this way to draw in practitioners’ support. Stories of success ‘create energy’ (Brighouse, 2005:108), and when beginning a culture change such as that which was needed in London at first,

Brighouse set about it through the use of supportive, affirming and speculative language, finding those with a ‘can-do’ philosophy and using their impetus to further develop and implement the vision (Brighouse, 2005:108; Brighouse, 2008:24-26).

According to respondents, there were two very important aspects to Brighouse’s oratory that enabled him to share his vision successfully. The first was practitioners’ identity with London. A significant number of respondents spoke of a hankering for the valuable things that ILEA had previously provided such as professional subject networks and a place where teachers could work together creatively across London. Whilst not re-creating ILEA, Brighouse talked about forging new London networks, bringing practitioners together in support of London education. Woods described this as the foundation of a “*London pride*” – a belief in the importance of London and a pride in identifying oneself as a London practitioner, something which was elusive in London between the dismantlement of ILEA and the launch of the London Challenge.

The second important aspect of Brighouse’s oratory was the establishment of a ‘moral purpose’ for practitioners to work together in the interests of all London’s children. It was a potent driving force, founded authentically in Brighouse’s own commitment to social justice and the importance of education as a means of achieving it – a belief which he had expressed in his writing and work for some years (Brighouse, 1996; 2007). Fullan (2011) pointed out:

Leaders need to support, activate, extract and galvanise the moral commitment that is in the vast majority of teachers. Most teachers want to make a difference, and they especially like leaders who help them and their colleagues achieve success in terrible circumstances. (Fullan, 2011:4)

Knowing and understanding how practitioners would respond to a vision built on moral purpose was important. It turned attention away from stories that reinforced failure such as those which had prevailed in education since the late 1970s (as shown in Chapter Two) to a vision of something greater. It created hope – hope that one could be part of a better future for London.

Hope was explicitly part of the vision which Brighthouse created for London. Hope is an important part of education. The ability to envision how something might be better than it was and to see how to get there are important characteristics of good teaching; one needs a ‘utopian imagination’ (Halpin, 2003a; Day et al, 2011). Teaching and leadership in education are premised on hope – the hope that there will have been an improvement after one has carried out one’s work (Halpin, 2003a:30; Day et al, 2011: 241). As Day et al argue, “Good leadership, like good teaching, is, by definition, a journey of hope based upon a set of ideals. Arguably, it is our ideals that sustain us through difficult times” (Day et al, 2011:241). Thus many London practitioners responded to a utopian vision of how things could be better. As Coles said, “*People strive to be part of something that is greater than themselves*”. An ‘eschatological’ vision for London, founded upon powerful ideals about how things could be better – one which seemed to proclaim the establishment of ‘a new heaven and a new earth’,<sup>28</sup> in London – had a transformative effect on London practitioners, their morale and their belief in what was possible.

The argument in this thesis is that Brighthouse and his colleagues on the London Challenge team knew that to ensure the London Challenge would work, there needed to be a bed-rock of support for the policy from within the field of practice. The challenge – ‘London’s challenge’ – was to overcome spiralling social polarisation and to help practitioners step across the city’s competitive divide to raise standards for all London’s children. Schools would need to work together to support each other, creating a ‘double lift’ in standards. In this way, as the most vulnerable schools improved, the whole system would benefit.

Brighthouse’s figurehead leadership and the way in which he constructed it was central to achieving this. It was visionary, founded in an acute understanding of how to engage practitioners in support of the policy’s aims. Importantly, it was authentic,

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<sup>28</sup>As in Revelation at the end of the world “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea” Revelation 21:1.

reflecting Brighthouse's own beliefs about moral purpose, social justice and high standards of education for all.

Brighthouse also recognised that he could not enact his leadership alone (Brighthouse, 2005:111-112) if success was really going to take root in London for the long term. He developed a team around him who could replicate his work, known as the London Challenge team and it had a key role alongside Brighthouse. Not only did the team support Brighthouse's work, it became the central infrastructure of the work of the London Challenge, leading its development and enabling succession for the role of figurehead so that the policy's implementation could continue faithfully.

### *1.2 Team Leadership of the London Challenge: the Infrastructure for London's System-wide School Improvement*

The London Challenge team sat behind the figurehead leadership of Brighthouse, looking after the appointment, matching and deployment of the consultant headteachers and quality assuring their work. The team acted as the 'system glue' of the London Challenge – through their “constant communication with all groups”, their “precision-based capacity building and problem-solving strategies” and their “careful recruitment of leaders” (Fullan, 2011:47). They provided the central infrastructure for the policy's work. This was very important. As shown in Chapter One, the activities of the London Challenge team were connected closely with the 'Keys to Success' programme initially, which was the core programme for school improvement work and then to the London Leadership Strategy as the London Challenge evolved. The London Challenge team became the central driving force behind the figurehead leader for the policy's work.

As was shown in Chapter Four, respondents identified that the model for school improvement which was adopted – that of school-to-school support – was of particular importance in the policy's success. The London Challenge team co-ordinated this work, especially a number of elements fundamental to its success. They were:

- The bespoke, personalised, context-dependent approach for each school;
- The matching process between headteachers and their schools based on a wide range of intelligence about respective leadership styles, the contexts of each school and their relative strengths;
- The brokering process which was a hard-edged approach, by contract and based on mutual accountability; and
- The quality assurance of the work through direct accountability to ministers via the team.

Central co-ordination and leadership ensured the strength of the London Challenge's work. A 'one-size-fits-all' model was inappropriate to the needs of London's secondary schools (Ainscow and West, 2006:8; Harris et al, 2006:20). How individuals interacted with situational factors in their professional learning was very important (Coldwell and Simkins, 2011) and so in a system that in 2003 suffered from weak leadership capacity, the high level expertise and experience of those who were part of the London Challenge team were essential. The intellectual prowess of those who formed the team and their moral commitment gave considerable legitimacy to the London Challenge. The credibility of their work was fundamentally important to the policy's success.

In particular, the matching process and the way in which consultant headteachers were deployed were highlighted in the findings of the empirical enquiry as being crucial. Equally, the management of the contractual process which the London Challenge team controlled and the advice and guidance they offered to supporting headteachers when situations sometimes became tricky were, respondents argued, of key importance. The control of the support which schools in difficulty received also helped to avoid 'initiative overload', an experience which respondents said the supported schools had often faced (Myers and Paige, 2006:4).

In a number of his works on system leadership, Fullan argued for the importance of co-ordination in sustained, widespread system reform, saying that “There is no getting around it. For the entire system to be on the move, you need relentless, resolute leadership from the top...” (Fullan, 2010:13-14). When considering whole system change, he held that:

Schools as a group cannot move forward unless the district is part of the solution. The district is a crucial part of the infrastructure with respect to leadership development, capacity-building, mobilization and use of data and intervention. (Fullan, 2009:155).

This is not an argument for returning lost powers over schools to the Local Authority, however. Whilst there have been some excellent Local Authorities in London, such as the Borough of Tower Hamlets (Hargreaves and Shirley, 2009:62-68; Fullan, 2010:37-40), respondents’ experience of Local Authorities was often negative. In the London Challenge, London became the district rather than the Local Authority and the London Challenge team provided its leadership for school improvement. The London Challenge team worked consciously across Local Authority boundaries, remaining outside of their influence. This was because of the varied quality of leadership that Local Authorities provided, as previously shown. The London Challenge was concerned with school improvement rather than admissions, funding and other statutory responsibilities. It was both big enough to work against the localised competition within Local Authorities which led to between-school variation discussed in the Introduction and Chapter One, whilst being small enough to retain good regional knowledge and communication, as well as the ability to respond quickly in a crisis.

Through providing a central infrastructure, regional leadership by the London Challenge team also helped to overcome some potential hazards that exist in school-to-school support; for example, aggressive tendering for work or ‘empire building’ by stronger schools taking over weaker schools. This kind of predatory behaviour can occur in a highly competitive system and some schools can be very vulnerable to it.

Such behaviour cut across the grain of the London Challenge, running counter to its vision. Involvement in school-to-school support work was not supposed to be self-serving as was shown in Chapter One and Chapter Four. Motivations of money, power, vanity or competition were publicly eschewed by those involved in the London Challenge team and selection as a consultant headteacher was premised on the demonstrable avoidance of such behaviours, as well as on track record. Although there were a few exceptions<sup>29</sup>, on the whole the London Challenge team managed through careful direction to ensure that the vision and values of the policy were not eroded and that those headteachers who took a leading role were 'in it for the right reasons'. By taking care of the brokering and contractual arrangements for school-to-school support, the London Challenge team created a distance between the commissioning of the work and the headteachers who undertook it, aiming to remove such mercenary or narcissistic motivations.

Given the highly competitive nature of London's secondary school system in 2003, without a central infrastructure to lead the work and to ensure faithfulness to the strategy's values, a key question is how far would the integrity of the London Challenge have been retained? Any assumption that without leadership, the moral purpose alone of headteachers in London would have been sufficient to engage their support for the policy, is not a safe one. The empirical enquiry revealed a complex relationship between headteachers and policy: their motivations for engaging with it were not straightforward. Whilst moral purpose was strong amongst the respondents, unless a policy was also viewed to be in some way beneficial to a headteacher's work, respondents reported that headteachers tended to ignore it – with the exception of policies that were statutorily required. Some argue that this is necessary in effective headship (Gold et al., 2003) therefore other incentives for headteachers to be involved in the London Challenge were very important, including ambition to lead the system. This is explored further in the next section.

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<sup>29</sup> There were some exceptions. For retention, one governing body decided to pay the London Challenge consultancy money directly to their headteacher, Mark Elms, a primary headteacher in Lewisham – although protocol in the London Challenge was that the money should reimburse schools for the time that headteachers spent off site, thus ensuring sufficient capacity was retained in the supporting school.

The London Challenge was successful because it gained widespread practitioner support to the extent that, as was shown in Chapter One, by 2010 the majority of London secondary schools had engaged with its work in some way. As was also shown earlier, policy texts in themselves do not create change. Success happens through a policy's implementation within the field of practice. This thesis argues that in the London Challenge, leadership which understood how best to achieve commitment from the field of practice, how to organise it and how to drive it was fundamental to this success. It also argues that through the policy's success and how it was achieved, an alteration took place in the relationship between policy-makers and practitioners which further enhanced the achievements of the London Challenge. Thus, it is to the role of the policy process in the success of the London Challenge that the discussion now turns.

***Part Two: An Expert-Led System: The London Challenge as a  
'High Trust, High Accountability' Model for Education Policy-Making***

From the review of the policy process of the London Challenge in Chapter Two, it became apparent that the relationship between policy-makers and practitioners altered between the textual iterations of 2003, 2008 and 2010. Figure 1 showed that the policy moved through distinct phases of development that reflected the wider politics of the time. As shown in Chapters One and Two, over time the London Challenge began to express system leadership, a theory that emerged alongside the policy and with which it became inter-twined. It aptly illustrated the dialectical nature of policy-making. In particular, the role of the headteacher was shown to be critical at the interface between policy and practice. The incentives that London headteachers found to be involved with the London Challenge were interwoven with the reasons why the policy was successful. Not only were headteachers able to become system leaders as the policy evolved, they were able to re-frame the relationship of practitioners with policy-makers. The research showed that the consultant headteachers found ambition and fulfilment in a new role where they were permitted to express their creativity and prowess as builders of capacity in schools and expert-leaders of the system. Thus as

Coles explained, the role of policy-makers became one in which they set the conditions where this could happen.

### *2.1 The Relationship of Headteachers with Policy: Creating an Expert-Led System*

In a system where headteachers have relatively high levels of autonomy in decision-making, they have much more scope to make independent judgements which affect the success of policy. This was demonstrated in the analysis in Chapter Two, which showed that: a) the context of practice holds relative power in the policy process because it is where policy is implemented (Bowe et al., 1997); and b) practitioners in public service have relative autonomy in their work, thus they can alter policy as it is implemented (Lipsky, 2010). The research findings revealed a complex relationship between headteachers and policy.

Chapters One and Four showed that the vision for London secondary education was one of self-sustaining, system-wide improvement driven by practitioners from within – by practitioners with credibility at the cutting edge of innovation. As was seen, a principal driver was commitment to social justice and those that worked together were bound by moral purpose. However, respondents gave secondary reasons why headteachers were prepared to lend their support to the London Challenge. In a situation where headteachers through the policy process have relative autonomy, power and influence over the success of policy, understanding their motivations is very important. Aside from the ambition of the vision for London and its moral purpose which, as has been shown earlier, headteachers responded to, two other reasons were given for engagement with the policy. They were:

- professional renewal; and
- professional recognition.

Respondents reported that their motivations were often fuelled by the opportunity for professional renewal. This was important, for two reasons:

- a) Where headteachers were successful and were looking for new challenges, it revitalised them. It helped to extend their 'shelf-life' (Earley, 2006:7-16);
- b) It nurtured headteachers who were often working in very challenging contexts, retaining them and sustaining the capacity of the London system.

The later years of headship have been the subject of research by Earley in a paper analysing the motivations and development of headteachers. He notes that there were phases of headship and that between eight and ten years in, a headteacher's performance may start to plateau (Earley, 2006:3-7). Finding ways to extend one's effectiveness whilst remaining in post was important for respondents. Opportunities for professional renewal or revitalisation are important and the London Challenge provided routes for this, offering consultant leadership as an option for those whose schools were in a position to offer school-to-school support (Earley, 2006:24). Respondents reported that taking on consultant leadership was an important means of re-energising themselves, ensuring that their own effectiveness was extended and it provided a way of enriching their professional skills without moving school or out of headship altogether (Earley and Weindling, 2006). It had a dual benefit for London in that it supported improvement in schools in challenging circumstances while retaining high performing headteachers within the system, improving it further.

As well as Earley, Fullan and Simkins, Coldwell, Close and Morgan have argued similarly for the importance of nurturing experienced headteachers because of their significance in successful school improvement (Fullan, 2009:55-69) and because of the importance of capacity-building in school leadership (Simkins, et al., 2009:48). To have the means for professional renewal whilst being able to stay in post was an important factor in the success of the London Challenge. As shown earlier, working in London secondary education was challenging. Headteachers' and teachers' work in contexts of urban challenge, especially where socio-economic disadvantage is high,

has intensified in recent years (Fullan, 2009:68). Harris et al wrote that in such circumstances,

...in order to achieve and sustain improvement ...(they) must exceed what might be termed 'normal efforts' ... They have to work much harder and be more committed than their peers in more favourable socio-economic circumstances. In addition, they have to maintain that effort in order to sustain improvement as success can be short-lived and fragile in difficult or challenging circumstances. (Harris et al, 2006: 11).

The level of skill and expertise required from headteachers in contexts of high socio-economic challenge like those of London in 2003 required networks of support and development to help sustain leadership. Fullan recognised that “ ... the capacity to be this good requires understanding and skills beyond the preparation and in-service development experiences of most principals” (Fullan, 2009:68) and so the London Challenge provided an environment where coaching and knowledge transfer from one head to another became the established mode of sustaining and developing London's leaders. This professional renewal for some and professional support for others, either to extend or to build leadership capacity, was reported by respondents to be of key importance.

Having the means of recognition for one's skill as a headteacher was another strong motivating factor for engagement with the London Challenge policy, as reported by respondents. There were a variety of reasons why, mostly to do with the acknowledgement of expertise which was important both for the credibility of the London Challenge and for the confidence in the system which such professional recognition created. This recognition came through designation as a consultant leader – a status which in the London Challenge was conferred on the basis of track record and commitment to moral purpose. The London Challenge's model of consultant leadership was taken on by the NCSL in 2006 to create the roles of the NLE and the LLE and to accredit them.

Whilst respondents were modest about their status attached to the role of NLE, there was no doubt that belonging to a cadre of recognised, expert leaders was important to them. Meetings amongst this peer group acted as professional development and those that attended took professional gratification from being part of this valued network. Its existence has attracted professional jealousy and allegations of the existence of a hierarchy amongst headteachers or a 'clique', as well as adulation by the media. NLEs sometimes have been referred to as 'superheads'. Such language attached to headship is unfortunate. To use such terms about headteachers is to 'Disneyfy' the role (Bryman, 2004b:5-13) – a tendency in popular discourse about education, which sensationalises headship and urban challenge, over-simplifying the task of raising attainment in such contexts and sometimes leading to false expectations from parents, governors and pupils.

Leadership studies in education for some years have contested such 'great man theory' as a sensible approach to effective system-wide headship (Coleman and Earley, 2005:9; Harris, 2003:1). In an article entitled 'Not Everyone is Sir Alex Ferguson', Lupton discussed the difficulties with reliance upon a few exceptional individuals to lead schools in challenging circumstances, arguing that the answers for school improvement in such contexts were more systemic (Lupton, 2012). Respondents reported that the London Challenge team recognised this, shunning attributions of greatness to the role of consultant headteacher and concentrating on building capacity within the system as the best means to achieve system-wide school improvement. Nevertheless, even if it was very much a secondary motive for engagement with policy, the possibility of attaining such recognition for some headteachers drove their commitment to the London Challenge.

There have been questions about the true altruism of public service professionals (Lipsky 1980; 2010). Le Grand has also written about incentives in public service (Le Grand, 1995; 2007). In his theory of 'knights and knaves', Le Grand wrote that public service workers in England, such as teachers, were legitimated as 'knights' – public-spirited altruists – during the establishment of the Welfare State following World War

Two. As public servants, it was believed they could be trusted to work in the public interest (Le Grand, 1995:149–160). However, several decades later the behaviour of many public service workers had led to distrust, for example in the case of the William Tyndale Junior School referred to in Chapter Two.

In the minds of many, the case of William Tyndale became symbolic of what happens when education practitioners have too much power and it raised questions about teachers' professionalism and the autonomy of headteachers (Riley, 2009:50-54). The previously 'knight'-ly teachers and headteachers came to be seen as 'knaves' – self-interested workers (Le Grand, 1995:155). Whilst the idea that the consultant headteachers who were involved in the London Challenge could be so self-serving flew in the face of the perceptions of respondents, nevertheless there is 'form' in the past, which should be recognised. Added to this, as the research showed, is the fact that headteachers engage with policy very selectively (if they do not ignore it as irrelevant) and so the incentives for London headteachers to join the work of the London Challenge and to honour its moral purpose were very important in London's success.

Becoming a leader of the London system suited the ambitions of many London headteachers, reported respondents. "*Playing on a bigger stage*" and having the means by which one's "*creative power*" could find expression were both useful to policy-makers in the creation of system leadership for London as well as providing career fulfilment for consultant headteachers. It was a symbiosis that helped to establish a new policy-making relationship for London. Not only could the consultant headteachers lead the system for school improvement, they could move beyond policy prescription and into the domain of policy co-construction as the London Challenge evolved. Another reason for the success of the London Challenge was the involvement of practitioners in the policy's development.

## *2.2 Co-Construction and Professional Ethics in Education Policy-making: A New Model for the Twenty-First Century*

Chapter Two's analysis of the policy process showed that it is dialogical, interconnected at many points. Whilst in the 1980s and 1990s, the wider policy framework for education exerted a controlling force on the field of practice, it has been shown that as the London Challenge evolved the relationship between policy-makers and practitioners altered, becoming one that was more representative of co-construction (Datnow, 2006:106-108). It reflected a growing view in policy study that successful policy implementation in education requires an approach that "move(s) beyond traditional distinctions between policy makers and implementers and teaches that both are consequential sets of people who shape how a policy is designed and implemented" (Honig, 2006:17).

The alteration in the approach of policy-makers towards their work with practitioners occurred concurrently with the evolution of the London Challenge. One can see this in the review of policy study in Chapter Two, which showed that the concept of system leadership developed alongside the London Challenge's work. It is reflected in the work of McLaughlin, who was developing at the time of the London Challenge a concept within education policy-making which she called 'systems learning' (McLaughlin, 2006:209-228). McLaughlin argued that the system should be considered as a unit of change (McLaughlin, 2006:226), explaining that successful education policies "seek sustained change in practice and culture, not episodic attention to goals or targets" and that "innovation in public policy rarely is the consequence of radical shifts but rather the result of incremental improvements that are incorporated into existing routines and norms" (McLaughlin, 2006:227). To achieve this, she argued, one needed a more complex understanding of system relationships in education policy-making which would allow the establishment of a 'collective mind' in order to effect system-wide improvement.

One sees this in action with the London Challenge, as was shown in Figure 1. The policy's evolution showed incremental changes not radical shifts in improvement and

demonstrated a changing relationship between policy-makers and practitioners which was more intricate and responded to the more complex requirements of education, in particular the development of ‘joined up’ public service. Respondents reported that initially, the London Challenge was focused on government interventions but as it evolved it became about sustaining the systems and structures for improvement. The civil service team gave permission for trials, building upon successes and acting opportunistically to grow and develop the work of the London Challenge that enhanced the capacity-building nature of the policy.

McLaughlin’s point about the establishment of a ‘collective mind’ is important and has resonance with Fullan’s assertion about the role of a ‘guiding coalition’ in system leadership, an idea borrowed from Barber in his book ‘Instruction to Deliver’ (Barber, 2007 in Fullan, 2009:193-194). All leaders within the London Challenge at every level began to work together to fulfil the vision which Brighouse had set out and which the London Challenge team helped to faithfully enact, using the language and story of hope. In this way, Fullan’s two worlds – of the policy-maker and the practitioner – described in Chapter Two, went into partnership through the London Challenge team and worked together for the policy’s success. It was a concrete expression of Fullan’s longed for goal for system leadership (Fullan, 2001:267) and it created what Woods termed a “*high trust, high accountability*” model for policy-making in education.

Trust was reported by respondents to be an important component of the evolving relationship between policy-makers and practitioners in the London Challenge. Whilst there is not scope in this thesis to provide a conceptual analysis of ‘trust’, trust is cited in much of the recent literature as being highly significant in the effective leadership of school improvement (Day et al, 2011:197-222; Kruse and Seashore Louis, 2009:34-35, 146-147; Leithwood et al, 2010:53). Usually in the literature, the trust that is referred to is that which teachers, parents or members of the local community invest in the headteacher. In the co-construction of the London Challenge, the trust was between the policy-makers and the consultant headteachers. As was

shown, trust grew to such an extent that it changed the nature of the policy-making relationship. For example, one of the respondents commented that levels of trust became so high that eventually “*Sue John (Director of the London Leadership Strategy) could do just what she liked*”.

Twigg in his interview stated that policy-makers realised at the time of the London Challenge that previous approaches needed to change and so the environment was ripe for a new way of envisioning education policy-making. As shown in Chapter Two, the days of ‘command and control’ and ‘top-down government’ with ‘bottom-up initiative’ were no longer suitable for the new supercomplex social terrain of the twenty-first century and so the role of government was to provide the right conditions for practitioners to lead policy development. As Bangs et al. have pointed out:

Government policy-making is most likely to be effective when it is shaped by the principle that a government’s role should be to provide the conditions for change rather than trying to legislate the behaviour. (Bangs et al, 2011:181)

Thus, Coles who with Brighthouse was the original architect of the London Challenge, took the view as time went on that his role was to “*create the space, structures and support*”, to “*create the culture*” so that practitioners can “*do it for themselves*”.

The way in which this was achieved by the policy-makers in the London Challenge team was to set a framework of conditions for ‘high accountability’, which focused rigorously on standards of performance. As shown in Chapters One and Four, the performance of the consultant headteachers was measured through improvements in schools’ key performance indicators such as GCSE results, Ofsted inspection judgements and attendance. Government policy-makers created the expectations, the accountability structure and systems of regular feedback whilst trusting the practitioners in the team, giving them the autonomy to set the initiatives and strategy through which improvements would happen. In this way, policy-makers and practitioners established what Hopkins described as a ‘creative tension’ (Hopkins, 2012:167) through this ‘high trust, high accountability’ framework. They became ‘co-

constructors' of the policy and consequently, the London Challenge achieved the transition from national prescription to professionalism which Hopkins has described as the desired aim of system reform (Hopkins, 2012:165-167).

System leadership had system reform by practitioners as its ultimate goal. However, to get there the system needed leadership capacity (Hopkins, 2012:166). Hopkins pointed out:

Transition from 'prescription' to 'professionalism' is not easy to achieve. In order to move from one to the other, strategies are required that not only continue to raise standards but also develop social, intellectual and organisational capacity. (Hopkins, 2012:167)

Between 2003 and 2010, leadership capacity was systematically built through the work of the London Challenge until it became an exemplar of system leadership in its fullest expression. The London Challenge's leadership developed the social, intellectual and organisational capacity to achieve this, built incrementally and carefully in a sustained way through the school improvement model that was constructed, the vision and values that were created and the infrastructure and team leadership which was established to direct the policy's work. Thus a system was created and governed in which school leaders led self-sustaining school improvement in London as well as becoming leaders of system reform, co-constructing policy alongside government.

There was something more within the work of the London Challenge which is important to note about its particular approach to system leadership. There was significant power invested in the consultant headteachers of the London Challenge through their status as NLE, leader of system reform and co-constructor of policy. Although the literature on system leadership refers often to the moral purpose of system leaders, there is little to suggest where it might come from and how one might avoid its corruption. As was discussed earlier, the potential for 'knavery' amongst headteachers is a real one.

What the London Challenge team created to deal with this was a set of expectations concerning the social, intellectual and organisational capacities required of individuals, as well as the system. Consultant headteachers were expected to conform to a set of values, skills and behaviours which were present in the shared language of the London Challenge team, its training and its literature. Whilst not explicitly set out by the London Challenge in a coherent code of conduct for individual system leaders, they can be traced in the way in which the team operated and talked about the policy. In setting them out here, I have referred to other theorists' writing where there is wider evidence than just the London Challenge of the importance of each one, again showing the dialectical relationship between the policy and its wider context. They were:

- *The expression of moral purpose*: moral purpose sat at the core of a London Challenge's work (Higham et al., 2009:29). It was about “‘raising the bar and closing the gaps’ in terms of student learning and achievement” (Hopkins, 2007:9). It also included a commitment to issues of wider social justice and the desire to break down economic and social barriers for students and commit societies to investment in young people (Hargreaves and Shirley, 2009:77-82; Hopkins, 2007:9-11).
- *The commitment to schools other than their own through taking responsibility, which includes – but which is greater than – accountability*: the London Challenge took responsibility for the educational well-being of all pupils within the region in which they worked or amongst a group of schools with which they worked (Hopkins, 2007:153; Higham et al., 2009:18, 27; Hargreaves and Shirley, 2009:80-81). They were not just accountable – they stood alongside their colleagues in other schools and shared the responsibility for the achievement of all (Hargreaves and Shirley, 2009:101-3).
- *The requirement to develop a more sophisticated set of behaviours, capabilities and skills in leadership are required than in single school*

*leadership*: London Challenge consultant leaders were required to have ‘adaptive’ skills, reflexive behaviours that could engage with an extensive range of diverse people and ways of strategic thinking that could respond to a wide number of contexts (Hopkins, 2007:158; Higham et al., 2009:25, 27-29; Hargreaves and Shirley, 2009:95-99).

- *The desire and capacity to develop and regenerate whole communities through learning and achievement*: London Challenge consultant leaders had to be prepared to take on a variety of roles to transform communities, engaging all stakeholders in support of regeneration through learning (Hopkins, 2007:161-5; Hargreaves and Shirley, 2009:77-79, 104-7; Higham et al., 2009:29).

These values, skills and behaviours permeated the work of the London Challenge team and the consultant headteachers as they worked together to create and re-create the strategy of the London Challenge. In many ways, they present a framework for professional ethics in consultant leadership. This is important. In a policy environment where the mediating role of the consultant headteacher at the interface with policy has such power and autonomy, a framework of professional ethics acts effectively as a safeguard for the values and vision of system leadership. In a competitive, market-based London secondary school system, the potential for perverse incentives to operate amongst headteachers in such a climate is very strong and so this thesis argues that having such a code of ethics to govern the work of individuals is imperative to mitigate against this.

### *Summary*

At the end of this discussion, what has been learned from the London Challenge about successful policy for system-wide school improvement? There are a number of points to make. First, the engagement of practitioners in support of a policy is essential, for all the reasons previously discussed. The London Challenge showed that this happens most effectively when:

a) a vision is created for what the policy is setting out to achieve, accompanied by narrative and metaphor and founded in an authentic and passionate commitment to social justice;

b) a corporate allegiance to the vision and its values is constructed, together with a regional identity that can build networks of professional support and development.

Practitioners have a strong utopian affinity with 'hope', given that education is premised on the idea that one is creating something better through one's work. Understanding well the context and history of a region like London was important in setting the values of the vision, so that the competitive divide between schools could be transcended and capacity could be built across the system in the interests of all London's children.

Second, strong regional leadership is also important, both in the form of figurehead leadership and in the form of a central team to provide the infrastructure for a policy's work. Both forms of leadership are important. Figurehead leadership provides the inspiration and force to galvanise support for the policy, from practitioners and policy-makers. The team leadership enacts the policy, directing and quality assuring its work and ensuring faithfulness to its vision and values. The central brokering, matching and deployment processes, as well as good regional intelligence and the ability to respond quickly to a crisis were all important components of the policy's success.

Third, the position which headteachers hold in the policy process is a powerful one and so understanding their motivations for engagement is important. The London Challenge showed that although for those headteachers who undertook the policy's work, moral purpose was a driving force nevertheless other incentives helped. They included professional renewal and refreshment, professional development either for

themselves or their schools and professional recognition. In addition, the opportunity to lead the system was attractive to the ambitions of some.

Fourth, in successful policy-making, the role of policy-makers is to create the right conditions within which headteachers can co-construct policy and lead system reform. Those conditions require a framework of high accountability, within which headteachers can have the trust of policy-makers and the autonomy to create the right strategies for improvement. Those strategies will be designed to build the social, intellectual and organisational capacity for system-wide improvement. They will include: leadership, regional infrastructure and systems for engagement. Importantly, they will also include a code of expectations governing the individual professional values and behaviours of system leaders to ensure that the moral purpose of the system is preserved.

This thesis has argued that a case study of the London Challenge offers some useful lessons for policy-making in education. The successes of the policy are connected to the policy process and the way in which it was understood and managed by those who led the London Challenge. It was a master-piece of policy-making which had a significant impact on standards in London secondary schools, the benefit of which could still be seen in 2011, after the policy's end. In the conclusion, the thesis examines the legacy of the London Challenge in 2012 and how what has been learned can be applied to a new policy context.

## Conclusion

### London's Challenge in 2012

My study of the London Challenge has been a professionally rewarding journey through a number of domains of learning from which I have gained considerably, both as a practitioner and a scholar. I began my career two decades ago and made a vocational commitment to London schools, especially schools in challenging circumstances whether situated in the inner city or the urban outer ring estates. I have since taught in four different parts of London, each with their own challenges ranging from the alienation and social exclusion experienced by young people living in some of London's most complex estates (such as the White City estate in Shepherd's Bush, the Ferrier and Kidbrooke estates in Greenwich and the World's End and Sands End estates in Battersea) to the edgy, adrenalin-fuelled East End where poverty and disadvantage are sandwiched between the extreme wealth and prosperity of the City of London and Canary Wharf.

The schools where I have worked reflect very much the social and political challenges in London education. The relationship between a school and its 'place' described in Lupton's research and explored in this thesis has been visible in every post I have taken. In fact in order to successfully raise standards as a school leader and classroom practitioner, I have tailored my professional practice to the context in which each particular school was situated. It underlines the importance of 'place' and context in educational leadership (Riley, 2012).

Equally, the effect of place on between-school variation in London was visible in standards. At the commencement of my career, the GCSE results for 1993 at the school where I took my first teaching post were 9% A\* - C. In my second post in 1998, taken in a school experiencing rapid 'turnaround' through the appointment of a new headteacher who saved it from impending closure, results for 1997 were 11% A\* - C. Although tremendous gains were made in the following 3 ½ years which placed the school in the 50 most improved schools nationally, each summer on results day I

would walk to my school from the station across a small green and encounter jubilant pupils from another nearby school where GCSE results were consistently 70% or more and where the level of socio-economic challenge was radically different. The distinctions between the schools and all that they symbolised were painful.

Looking back at this picture from the position which London secondary schools are now in, it is hard to believe that standards prior to the London Challenge were so low. In 2011, only three London secondary schools were below the floor target of 35% 5+ A\* - C with English and maths and, as has been shown, Wyness (2011) in her statistical study found that London schools out-performed those in every other region in England by some distance when taking into account contextual factors. Whilst there is still significant social polarisation visible in London schools (Jenkins et al., 2007), what the London Challenge has shown is that it is possible through a rigorous, well-constructed and comprehensive policy approach to raise standards and improve performance in schools even where the level of challenge is highest and the barriers to learning are considerable. This is not straightforward requiring a level of skill, expertise and stamina in such situations beyond usual exertion (Harris et al, 2006; Fullan 2009) and, as the headteacher interviewed for my IFS in 2005 stated, it can sometimes feel like one is only “tinkering at the edges” in the face of structural inequalities and social class. Tackling the effects of social exclusion and disadvantage on pupils’ achievement is problematic but possible if the right political and professional support is given.

My doctoral research has been driven by a desire to achieve several things. First, I needed to understand more about the socio-economic and political dynamics behind the visible, physical reality of what I was dealing with in the classroom and the school on a daily basis. I wanted to know more about London, its demography and economy and how they impacted on my work. Understanding the relationship between ‘place’, secondary schooling and social polarisation was very important in interpreting the complexities of London and appreciating what they meant for pupils, parents, employers, communities and their leaders. All such citizens are

‘stakeholders’ in schools and a ‘democratic professional’ (Whitty, 2002) in school leadership in London should take account of their experiences.

Second, I wanted to understand the policy process in education. I have ‘grown up’ as a professional in an environment where central government policy intervention in schools was the norm. The Education Reform Act was passed in 1988, four years before I joined the profession and so the introduction of standardisation of assessment, measurement and data analysis, the introduction of the school performance tables in 1991<sup>30</sup> and Ofsted inspections in 1992<sup>31</sup> served to contrast strongly with my experience as a London pupil in the 1970s and early 1980s. The many policy interventions achieved little success in London, as was shown in the thesis – variability persisted in 2002 at the start of the London Challenge. I wanted to understand why and to work out how a successful policy might be created for London.

Third, I was inspired by the launch of a ‘special’ policy approach for London in 2002. I ‘lived’ the experience of the London Challenge in different ways from that point on, interacting with it from the periphery as a practitioner in one of the schools in Priority Group 3 as well as from the centre as a consultant leader. Through my thesis, I wanted to apply a historical and theoretical perspective to my experiences and to gain objectivity in the study of what constitutes successful policy-making in education.

Finally, I hoped to make a contribution to my profession. I set out on a discovery of new knowledge, integrating my professional experience as a practitioner with scholarship. The learning process was dialogical – there was an iterative and experiential relationship between practice and research. Despite the limitations of practice-based research, explored in the methods chapter, I have argued that a practitioner’s perspective on the London Challenge and its policy process has intrinsic value. This longitudinal case study examining the evolution of the policy

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<sup>30</sup> Through the Citizen’s Charter, 1991 (Public Administration Select Committee, 2008).

<sup>31</sup> Through the Education (Schools) Act 1992 (HM Government, 1992).

revealed new information about how the London Challenge was formed and implemented, showing the dynamics of the policy process and demonstrating how they affected the policy's implementation in the field of practice.

The research found that in successful policy-making in education, the co-construction of policy by policy-makers and practitioners is very important. It is the role of policy-makers to create the right conditions by establishing a 'high accountability, high trust' framework and supporting practitioners to build the social, intellectual and organisational capacity for system-wide school improvement. In the case of London, leadership, regional infrastructure and systems for engaging school leaders in the work of the policy were essential components of the policy's success. Especially important for London was the compelling vision of collegiate commitment to moral purpose in the interests of social justice for all London's children. The research suggested that to avoid the moral hazards associated with a competitive London school environment, system leadership needed to take on a coherent code of ethics to govern professional purpose, behaviour and practice.

At the end of this thesis, as an 'engaged scholar' (Boyer in Riley, 2008:3) it is my responsibility to engage in the fourth part of its cycle – which is teaching about what I have learned. So far, I have disseminated the findings through teaching two classes on Masters' degree courses at the Institute of Education and giving a presentation at the International Congress of School Improvement and Effectiveness in 2012. I have presented two seminars at the Institute of Education attended by self-selecting audiences. I have written a journal article and I have already engaged directly in debate with key policy-makers including ministers and shadow ministers regarding the new policy context for education. Further, I have used my findings to inform my professional colleagues at my own school in the light of strategic planning for a new era in London education.

There is also a professional imperative to apply what I have learned to my future practice. This brings the conclusion of the thesis to two final points: 1) the application

of what I have learned to future practice; and 2) recommendations for the further study of what I have learned through the thesis.

*1. Applying the Findings of the Research to a New Social and Political Environment: The Challenges for Secondary Education in London 2012*

The findings of the thesis have a resonance for London in 2012 which has both a new policy environment and an economic context that has changed considerably.

Although there are opportunities, the changes create some challenges for London secondary schools in the absence of a co-ordinated, regional approach to school improvement. In this conclusion, I have identified two which seem most pertinent in the light of this research. The first is to do with enhanced competition in the London secondary school system introduced through the Academies Act (HM Government, 2010). The second is to do with the structural and ethical challenges of school improvement work in a dispersed system that operates on a national rather than regional scale.

*i) The New Policy Environment for London*

Since the end of the London Challenge, there have been fundamental changes to the social, philosophical and political landscape for education. The ongoing effects of the financial crisis of 2008 – 9 have altered London's economy and public service provision, whilst the policy context for education has changed fundamentally. The financial crisis has had a profound impact on London's public services in conjunction with the change of government in May 2010. Although the Coalition Government did not cut main school budgets, its political drive in public service was to 'reduce the state' (Taylor-Gooby and Stoker, 2011:14; Olssen et al., 2004:134-197). Local Authorities had budgets cut and during 2011 high numbers of redundancies reduced services. Many of the services in London that supported regeneration in some of the most impoverished communities as part of the London Challenge were withdrawn. For example, most of the funding was removed for extended school provision and other kinds of multi-agency work that were referred to in the London Challenge text

of 2003 as necessary for regeneration and support of socio-economically disadvantaged communities.

The education policy context has also changed remarkably quickly. The Academies Act 2010 (HMSO, 2010) was passed soon after the May election. It had two key implications for London in the light of the research findings: a) it refuelled competition in education through school expansion, the over-supply of pupil places and giving schools not under Local Authority control independence with regard to their admissions<sup>32</sup>. Through the new Act, ‘additional schools’ (known popularly as ‘Free Schools’<sup>33</sup>) could be set up as state-funded independent schools; and b) it created the opportunity for existing schools to transfer out of Local Authority control and become Academies<sup>34</sup>. This created a much more dispersed education system, with much more autonomy for schools. By September 2012, it was predicted that 50% of London state maintained secondary schools will have become independent of their Local Authority<sup>35</sup>.

This was followed by the first White Paper of the new government, ‘The Importance of Teaching’ published in November 2010 (DfE, 2010b). This White Paper placed the work of consultant headteachers and the model of school-to-school support at the heart of the government’s school improvement strategy. Yet, all the important leadership components of the London Challenge and the infrastructure it provided had gone. The vision, regional commitment to moral purpose, the brokering, matching and deployment of consultant leaders and the framework of high accountability for results had disappeared, as had the mechanism for policy co-construction and direct communication between policy-makers and practitioners. The

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<sup>32</sup> An Academy or additional school becomes responsible in place of the Local Authority for admissions. Although under the Act, Section 1:5(c) pupils for all abilities must be catered for (unless the school was selective prior to becoming an Academy), there is no direction to have a comprehensive intake and so an Academy could feasibly slant its admissions in favour of more able pupils.

<sup>33</sup> Under the Academies Act 2010, Additional Schools may be opened by any person who has permission from the Secretary of State. Such persons could be parents, religious groups, existing trusts or academy chains etc.

<sup>34</sup> New Academies under the Act could be any school whereas previously, the Academies programme was for secondary schools only and intended to address what was regarded as school failure.

<sup>35</sup> May 2011 meeting of consultant headteachers.

central brokerage of school-to-school support, the deployment and the quality assurance of NLEs was left by the NCSL to its regional co-ordinators and although the NCSL set up a ‘fellowship’ of NLEs to advise the government on various aspects of policy, the co-construction of policy that was seen in the London Challenge model has vanished.

*ii) The Effects of Competition Combined with the Impact of the Financial Crisis on School Improvement in London*

In the absence of the London Challenge, the implications of the policy changes combined with the effects of the financial crisis are two-fold:

- a) *The Structural Breakdown of School-to-School Support in London:* The potential for reversion to the situation in London that existed in 2002 before the London Challenge is a real one. The research showed that the dynamics of competition between London’s secondary schools had a direct link to spiralling social polarisation because there is an inherent relationship between a school and the place where it is located. This was why the London Challenge in 2003 drew upon ‘joined up’ public service to support communities in areas of London where anomie and alienation were felt to reside. In the context of cuts to public services and increasing inequity, without the ‘system glue’ – i.e. a strategic, regional approach to organised school-to-school support in London and a strong leadership to drive corporate moral purpose – from where would the compunction come to work together in support of more vulnerable schools?

The London Challenge team provided the means of quality assurance for the work in London, as well as an immediate means of support and advice if difficulties arose. Deployment was well-organised, based on local intelligence and matching between headteachers and their schools was carefully undertaken. Brokering of partnerships and contracts was carried out by the team, both ensuring that the accountability was rigorous whilst avoiding

financial negotiation between the headteachers involved which might detract from the moral purpose, trust and reciprocity that was important to their working relationship right from the outset.

A key difficulty within a dispersed school system is obtaining the same high standard of rigour and quality in the London Challenge's work. A collection of 700 isolated NLEs distributed across the country without close direction, monitoring and quality assurance is unlikely to yield the same results as the London Challenge, which relied on its strong regional knowledge and identity in pursuit of a common moral purpose. The extensive accountability to government for London Challenge advisers and consultant headteachers in their work was very important and this does not feature at present in the new policy environment. As has been shown, the challenges of 'scaling up' an approach that is work-based rather than centrally driven particularly affect the quality of an individual leader's support of another – for example, in coaching – when there is no effective means of close quality assurance (Simkins, 2009).

Hargreaves (2010, 2011) and Hill (2011), in two 'think-pieces' and a report for the NCSL proposed solutions to the problem of infrastructure for system leadership in the new policy context. They expanded on the 2010 White Paper, exploring the role of 'Teaching Schools' as the organising structure for the work of consultant leaders. Whilst Hargreaves and Hill presented a coherent strategy for the use of Teaching Schools to provide the infrastructure, to whom those schools were to be accountable and how their work was to be monitored appeared very vague. The incoherence around the governance of Teaching Schools and their accountability needs attention and rigorous systematisation, as West-Burnham (2011:12) pointed out.

More difficult still perhaps is the potential for erosion of the values and vision of the London Challenge which, as has been shown, was an essential part of the policy's success. The assumption that Hargreaves and Hill make is that

system leaders can be just trusted to act autonomously and ethically in the interests of the whole system – that the moral purpose of the headteachers who are responsible for a Teaching School and its alliance will be sufficient in a competitive system to ensure high quality, fairness and rigour. In this research, it has been contended that it is not clear this will be so. Hill (2011) reported that moral purpose was high on the list of motivations for involvement in system leadership but the fact that the intention is there does not mean it will be enacted, as this thesis has shown.

- b) *The Ethical Breakdown of School-to-School Support in London:* The structural problems that exist in the current situation for London also present ethical challenges. As was shown in the research, the utopian vision for London that inspired practitioners, created by Brighouse and the London Challenge team, with its strong regional identity and clear moral purpose was a powerful motivation for transcending competition amongst London schools. The combination of figurehead leadership, robust infrastructure and team leadership of the London Challenge which drove the policy, was a potent cocktail of forces which underpinned the successes of London, helping school leaders to step across the competitive divide.

Proponents of system leadership such as Fullan (2011), Hargreaves and Shirley (2009), Hopkins, Higham and Matthews (2009) have argued for the importance of moral purpose in system leadership. Fullan in particular has written repeatedly about this. The London Challenge provided the means by which moral purpose was enacted in London, led by school leaders. Without it, although ‘moral intentions’ might exist, as Fullan pointed out: “Leaders who get it know that intentions by themselves don’t matter. Moral purpose, no matter how fervently held and expressed, is not a strategy” (Fullan, 2011:76).

Thus, of particular concern in the light of the findings, are the incentives for system leaders to act in the spirit of moral purpose and to engage in system-

wide school improvement. The altruism of public servants has been questioned by Le Grand (1995, 2007) and Lipsky (1980, 2010), as was shown in this research. In a system based on school autonomy, where a small number of headteachers can wield considerable power and influence within a currently unstructured situation, there are dangers. The London Challenge team not only drove London's system-wide moral purpose, it ensured that those who became consultant leaders were those who were committed to social justice and the moral imperative for school-to-school support.

Thus, this thesis argues that some form of strong, coherent regional system leadership which can harness the profession's otherwise latent moral purpose is essential to combat as far as possible in the current climate the potential for increased social polarisation linked to schools in London. If one believes that social justice is important and that education is a public good that benefits our whole society economically, socially and spiritually then there is a 'moral imperative' to act – to find a way of building on the legacy of the London Challenge, system-wide to continue the improvements that have been made.

The successes of the London Challenge have demonstrated that a system infrastructure which is regional with good local intelligence, led by key education practitioners reporting to and working alongside knowledgeable central government representatives within a 'high trust / high accountability' relationship is essential. However, if the system is to overcome the tendency to fragmentation and polarisation which, as has been shown, unfettered competition in London can encourage, then the model has to include a vision and professional values built on moral obligation to all a region's children. The nature of the system's 'accountability' must go beyond current generally held perceptions of the concept, which are often limited to standards of achievement in individual schools against which performance is measured by Ofsted and the DfE through monitoring of schools' exam results and contextual data (Gilbert, 2012:6-7).

The concept of ‘accountability’ must involve a commitment by all parties in the system to inclusion, social justice and fairness for all if secondary education is to continue as a public good, notwithstanding private benefit to the individual. Christine Gilbert wrote in a thinkpiece for the National College of School Leadership (2012) that there needs to be a broader definition of accountability within a more autonomous, systems model for school organisation that includes accountability downwards to pupils, parents and the community as well as upwards to government. It is a view of schools’ accountability that embraces the notion of the ‘democratic professional’ (Whitty, 2002) in which educators have an obligation to involve all their stakeholders in the leadership and development of their schools.

The democratic participation of citizens in school organisation has been a cherished value in state maintained education in England since the second world war. Then, there were important principles underpinning why Local Authorities were given the responsibility of governing local schools and the education they provided in the 1944 Education Act rather than leaving this to central government. Thinking was influenced heavily by experience of the war which saw, amongst other things, the negative impact of dictatorship and centrally controlled schooling. During post-war reconstruction, the ‘Welfare State’ established universal free secondary education which was offered by the state but governed by local democracy with representative participation to avoid the problems then associated with central control (Wedderspoon, 1966; Timmins 2001; Chitty, 2009). It was an important part of the belief that education was a public good that should be open to all and outside of party political interference.

Whether intentional or not, local democratic involvement in education is being structurally removed in its previous form as more and more schools become academies and free schools, often with reduced governing bodies. Whilst Local Authorities have not always faithfully adhered to democratic principles and acted authentically in relation to their secondary schools – many have been politically entrenched hence the removal from Local Authority control of a proportion of

schools in the first years of the London Challenge policy – nevertheless, the principle of democratic professionalism which enshrines schools’ accountability to their pupils, parents and the local community is important.

Hargreaves, in his most recent thinkpiece on system leadership (2012) discussed the significance of culture in mature, self-improving systems in which he argued that high levels of public trust and social capital are very important; that to forge the right culture is a necessary pre-requisite for success in a de-centralised school system. The London Challenge showed how it is possible to do just that – to create such a culture across Local Authority boundaries and amongst a group of over 400 disparate secondary school headteachers, many of which were set in apparent competition with each other. One of the principal hooks, as was shown in the thesis, was the professional buy-in to the values of the vision set out by Brighouse and later Woods, which espoused moral purpose and a commitment to local communities, especially the most vulnerable.

The London Challenge demonstrated new and innovative ways of working outside Local Authority boundaries to create a mature, democratically professional, self-improving system. Its regional approach, good local intelligence and regional figurehead leadership that was practice-based but in close communication with central government was essential to create the right culture and values to sustain close alliances and partnerships of schools in the interests of all the region’s children. There is no desire in this thesis to return schools to Local Authority control, nor is there any wider political will to do so. Such a mode of system organisation for schools is no longer appropriate in the current context. A new means of democratic participation by society in education needs to be found if it is to remain a public good. This thesis holds that the London Challenge found the ingredients which, when combined together, could do this successfully. It commends the model as an exemplar by which the school system can achieve Hopkins’ goal for ‘every school a great school’ (2007, 2012) and move education from prescription to professionalism, thereby establishing the mature, self-improving system that is being sought.

## *2. Further Study*

Moving forward from this research, the conclusion suggests that four areas of further study are needed in the new climate for London education. The problems that have been highlighted and the recommendations need to be tested empirically.

First, there needs to be a re-examination of school-to-school support in London as a continuing programme of system-wide school transformation within the new policy context. In a competitive school context, can school-to-school support survive without regional leadership?

Second, the accountability framework for school-to-school support in a dispersed school system needs to be re-examined. To rely entirely on the 'knight'-ly intentions of all headteachers is not safe, as has been shown. How the infrastructure is built and to whom system leaders are accountable is crucial.

Third, moving from a system of 'prescription' to 'professionalism' (Hopkins 2012), in a policy environment that offers more professional freedoms to schools and their leaders and at the same time more competition, the moral imperative to act ethically in the interests of all children is prime. The discussion proposed a set of professional values, behaviours and expectations derived from the London Challenge that could provide the basis for an explicit code of conduct that would govern the work of all system leaders. Such a proposal needs further testing.

Finally, one of the critical findings of the research was that the success of the London Challenge was in large part due to the way in which the policy process was managed. This thesis contended that in the London Challenge the relationship between practitioners and policy-makers was re-framed, establishing a kind of 'accord' between them following several decades of practitioner control by government. The London Challenge brought together the two worlds of policy-makers and practitioners (Fullan, 2001) into a partnership of policy co-construction. In this way,

the London Challenge established a new paradigm of education policy-making. This thesis argues that this paradigm for education policy-making yields success, as shown by the London Challenge. It argues that this is how policy-making for mature school systems, such as London, should be.

## Appendix One

### The Interview Schedule

#### *The Interviews*

Interviews were semi-structured and conducted face to face. They were recorded with the permission of the participant and transcribed prior to coding. There were nineteen in all. There were two sets of interview questions.

#### *Questions*

The over-arching research question was:

*Using the London Challenge policy as a case study, how is education policy mediated in London secondary education?*

The sub-questions were:

- *Was the role of the practitioner important in the success of the London Challenge? If so, how and why was it important?*
- *How should policy-makers frame their relationship with practitioners when shaping education policy if they are to maximise the success of a policy like the London Challenge?*

#### Stage One: the Policy-Makers

#### *Interview Questions*

1. What was your role in the formation and implementation of the London Challenge policy?

2. How did you become involved in the formation and implementation of the London Challenge policy?
3. What were the key factors, in your opinion, which led to the creation of the London Challenge?
4. How was the policy text created?
5. Was the role of the practitioner important in the implementation of the London Challenge?
6. How successful do you think the outcomes of the London Challenge were, if at all? Did they match your expectations? Why / why not?
7. What could future policy-makers learn from the London Challenge, if anything?
8. Which were the most important policy initiatives of the London Challenge, in your opinion?
9. Is there anything you would change about the London Challenge policy if you were to create the initiative again?
10. Is there anything else you would like to add?

### Stage Two: The Practitioners Who Implemented the Policy

#### *Interview Questions*

1. What has been your involvement in the London Challenge policy? What has been your school's involvement?

2. Why did you decide to become involved in the London Challenge?
3. How did you / your school decide to implement the London Challenge policy?  
What influenced these decisions?
4. How successful were the outcomes of the London Challenge policy, in your opinion? Did they match your expectations? Why / why not? What about for other schools?
5. What, if any, have been the benefits of your involvement in the London Challenge, for your school, for other schools and for you? Give reasons / an explanation. Have there been any negative effects?
6. Did you notice the evolution of the London Challenge from 2003 - 2010? Can you explain this evolution?
7. What were the most important policy initiatives in the London Challenge and why?
8. What could policy-makers learn from the London Challenge to inform future policy-making?
9. Is there anything you would change about the London Challenge if it were to be implemented again? Why / why not?
10. Is there anything else you would like to add?

## **Appendix Two**

### **The Research Sample**

#### **Policy-Makers and Practitioners Involved in Developing the London Challenge**

Professor Tim Brighouse – former Chief Education Officer for Birmingham who was appointed as the first Commissioner for London Schools. He changed the title to Chief Adviser for London Schools and held this position until 2007, when Sir Mike Tomlinson took over.

Professor David Woods – who formerly worked with Tim Brighouse in Birmingham and who joined the London Challenge team as a London Challenge Adviser. He was appointed as the third Chief Adviser for London Schools, succeeding Sir Mike Tomlinson.

Stephen Twigg, MP – formerly Minister for London Schools until 2005. He was re-elected to parliament in 2010 and appointed Shadow Secretary of State for Education in 2011.

AP1 Former ‘Director of Adult Learning’ in Greenwich Local Authority, who was appointed to the post of ‘Pro-Director for London’ at the Institute of Education, London University.

AP2 Former headteacher who was seconded to the Department for Education and Skills in 2004 to work as regional adviser for teachers’ CPD for London and Surrey. She moved to the London Centre for Leadership in Learning at the Institute of Education in 2008.

- AP3 Former teacher and then academic at the Institute of Education who took on part-time work for the Department for Education and Skills to establish the Chartered London Teacher programme, a post which ended in 2008.
- CS1 Senior civil servant at the Department for Education who was appointed to create the London Challenge in 2002 and who became leader of the London Challenge team.
- CS2 Civil servant who worked as part of the London Challenge team from the outset in 2002.
- LA1 Former teacher and headteacher who became Director of the Basic Skills Agency. After this, he became Director of the Primary National Strategy following which he was appointed to the post of Director of Children's Services in an inner London Local Authority in 2006. In 2008, he became Chief Executive of the same Local Authority.

#### **London Challenge Programme Leaders**

- LCPL 1 Director of the London Leadership Strategy (Secondary)
- LCPL 2 Former Programme Leader Moving to New Headship
- LCPL 3 Former Programme Leader VI P (Post-16)
- LCPL 4 Former Programme Leader Good to Great and Going for Great
- LCPL 5 Current Programme Leader Good to Great and Going for Great

#### **London Challenge Consultant Headteachers**

- LCCH 1 Consultant Headteacher, Female, Bromley
- LCCH 2 Consultant Headteacher, Male, Bromley
- LCCH 3 Consultant Headteacher, Female, Tower Hamlets
- LCCH 4 Consultant Headteacher, Female, Camden
- LCCH 5 Consultant Headteacher, Male, Tower Hamlets

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