

# A Head Full of Ethos

A holistic guide to developing and  
sustaining a positive school culture



Armando Di-Finizio



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To Sandra Lane: my wife, friend and mentor.

I am very fortunate.

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# Introduction

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Mae ethos ysgol yn addysg ynddo'i hun!

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While working as a head teacher in Wales, I was searching for the perfect statement to go on the wall for all to see as they entered our school. I wanted the statement to relate to our school ethos, but nothing felt right until a chance discussion with another head led to him suggesting the Welsh saying above.<sup>1</sup> It translates into English as, 'A school ethos is an education in itself.' Immediately, I knew that this was the statement I had to have, and so I proceeded, without any negotiation or consultation, to have it printed in its Welsh form and up it went on the wall without further ado.<sup>2</sup>

Ethos (the Latin word for character) is, for me, the spirit and driving force behind every good school. It is the manifestation of a school's vision and its underpinning principles. It should enable every student who passes through the school to grow and develop before going on, hopefully, to flourish in life – providing the ethos is a positive one that encourages development and growth. The principles supporting the ethos of a school cannot be ignored, and it is on this premise that I set about writing this book on leadership and school improvement.

Whether you are an early career teacher or an experienced head, on completion of your first walk around a school you will have felt its ethos. During this walk, you may have picked up hints about the nature of the school. Some of these will have been unconscious: perhaps the way the receptionist greeted you when you first entered the building, the relaxed way the staff spoke to the students or the congenial atmosphere at lesson changeover. Other aspects of the school ethos will have hit you directly: the wall displays of students' work, the posters or signs with messages (such as the one I placed at the entrance to our school), the photographs of students taking part in sport or performances, and the school vision displayed in prominent places. In short, when we consider the ethos of a school, there are

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1 Thank you Edward Jones, the head of Pencoed School (at the time of writing).  
2 The reason for having it printed in Welsh was to encourage people to ask what it meant (if they didn't understand Welsh); consequently, it has inspired much thought and discussion.

## A Head Full of Ethos

countless constituent parts and interactions which work together to form the school's character and spirit.

*A Head Full of Ethos* examines the first steps towards creating a sustainable school ethos which will become the bedrock on which a school inspires its students to flourish and its staff to grow professionally. Although it is primarily a book about headship, it is not just for head teachers. Every member of staff in a school has been appointed to help improve the outcomes for the students – and a positive and consistent school ethos is central to this. For example, if you are a head of department (or aspiring to be one), the same principles that we apply to school development can also be applied to creating a positive and productive ethos in your department.

This requires a deep understanding of the relationship between the school's vision, its underpinning principles, and how this translates into the strategic direction and day-to-day operations of the school. This deep understanding will, in turn, assist you in identifying aspects of the school that are not working so well. It will either give you the tools to deal with these impediments, which are consistent with the principles by which the school abides, or it will provide your head teacher and senior leadership team (SLT) with important feedback about the running of the school. Multi-academy trust (MAT) executives can't lead multiple schools in isolation and neither can school leadership teams; they both need the support of every member of staff.

We all have a responsibility to be critical when necessary, but in order to do this we must be in possession of, and have a full understanding of, the guiding values and principles that sustain the school vision and its systems, processes and practices. The vision, values and principles upheld by the school are the roots of its ethos; these then germinate to form its systems, processes and practices. If head teachers set out to develop the ethos of a school, or if teachers and heads of department try to contribute to the school ethos, they must bear in mind the following: the ethos of a school and the values and principles underpinning its vision are, or certainly should be, congruent with each other. In other words, working in harmony and never coming into conflict. This is one of the reasons why the subsections of this book are described as cogs (more on this below).

Congruence requires clear leadership, which we will explore in more detail in Chapters 1 and 2, but for now it is enough to say that the consistent application of a school's principles will help to form a strong, positive school ethos, leading

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directly to improved outcomes for the school and its students. Conversely, if there is no clear and consistent ethos, the school will feel disjointed (especially if core principles conflict with one another) and it will become an unhappy working environment for staff and students. Ultimately, this will be detrimental to school improvement and student attainment. At worst, it can cause a school to dramatically fall apart as, sadly, I have witnessed in the past.

For me, happiness is a wide-ranging and vital component of outstanding, flourishing schools. For the school community as a whole, it can range from the degree of congeniality and positive working relationships that exist (as we will explore in Chapters 3 and 4) to the purpose and aims of the school – that is, its nature (Chapter 2). For the individual, it can mean the level of security (in respect of physical safety or job security), individual esteem and aspiration.

This book will focus on how a school can move from being unhappy and directionless to becoming a school that has direction and purpose and is mostly happy. I certainly won't fool myself, or you, that schools can be entirely happy all of the time. However, there is no reason why it is not possible to maintain a consistent direction and purpose.

Reflecting on my three headships, I have come to realise that in each school I have focused primarily on four aspects of ethos. Each of these form a chapter in this book: insightful leadership (Chapter 1); vision, purpose and direction (Chapter 2); care and positive relationships (Chapter 3); and belonging and inclusiveness (Chapter 4). Yes, I have worked hard to develop the quality of teaching and learning in the classroom, but these foundations of ethos are where real and lasting change can happen in a whole school and to all the students. Without these four focal points, fantastic teaching and learning may exist in the school but the children are hostages to fortune. They are dependent on the attributes of their teachers, and not everyone will be guaranteed the same quality of experience in all facets of their school life.

*A Head Full of Ethos* will look at each of these four areas in turn. There is no particular right or wrong place to start because much of what I consider in this book developed concurrently. However, what each of the four topics have in common is that they all return to first principles. Consequently, this book attempts to answer the following questions:

- What are the basic principles of leadership, regardless of which model you select?

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- What are the axioms or uncontested maxims of schooling that every school vision and its underpinning principles should contain?
- What do you need to know about the basics of making, maintaining and managing good relationships?
- What are the key components that make a school inclusive and create a sense of belonging?

Understanding or reacquainting yourself with these fundamental principles will empower you as a leader or a teacher.

This book also asks you to reflect on what you believe in and how you conduct yourself. It focuses on the conscious, strategic and planned practices that reflect our ethos – for example, developing the vision, purpose and direction of the school and the way this comes together through leadership at all levels. The book also encourages you to focus on the day-to-day way you comport yourself at school and the level of care, inclusiveness and positive relationships which contribute towards a sense of belonging and which, in turn, bring the whole school community together.

It is not neat. There are crossovers here but nothing in education is neat; one of the reasons I have chosen to call my subsections 'cogs' is to reflect the holistic and interconnected nature of schools.<sup>3</sup> It is important that you keep this concept to the forefront of your mind as you progress through the book. It is also the reason why I have subtitled this book 'a holistic guide to developing and sustaining a positive school culture'. Everything connects, so we must ensure that the cogs operating in schools really do work together and don't cause abrasion or bring about a grinding halt to progress. Rather than there being a number of vaguely related but discrete tasks with conflicting values and contradictory accompanying behaviours, a successful school ethos – with all its myriad systems and practices – should incorporate the same consistent values and principles throughout. They are the oil that keeps the cogs turning.

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<sup>3</sup> I borrow the concept of cogs from Michael Fullan, who uses them in his comprehensive framework for classroom and school improvement: Michael Fullan, Barrie Bennett and Carol Rolheiser-Bennett, 'Linking Classroom and School Improvement', *Educational Leadership* (May 1990): 13–19 at 15. Available at: [http://www.ascd.org/ASCD/pdf/journals/ed\\_lead/el\\_199005\\_fullan.pdf](http://www.ascd.org/ASCD/pdf/journals/ed_lead/el_199005_fullan.pdf). Thank you to Richard Jones, currently the head teacher of Ysgol Calon Cymru, who read an early chapter and pointed me in the direction of the cog concept.

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Before we progress further, there are a few additional points to bear in mind:

- When I refer to young people, I sometimes call them students, children or young people. The reason I use these different terms – and not just 'student' – is because, at times, I want to emphasise the fact that we are working with children or teenagers. Overusing the term 'student' or 'pupil' can lead to us unconsciously forgetting that these are emotionally charged and not yet fully formed individuals. They are – for want of a better way of explaining myself – different creatures to adults, and if there is one golden rule for teachers then it is never to forget this. Why refer to young people as students and not pupils? There is no real reason other than this is the term I have been most used to using in England, where children tend to be referred to as pupils in primary schools and students in secondary schools.
- I refer to schools as schools (rather than academies) and head teachers as heads (rather than principals) for no other reason than to ensure consistency.
- I am a secondary school teacher and so all of the examples in this book are from a secondary perspective. However, the principles discussed are also relevant to primary settings.
- I have only ever taught in schools in challenging circumstances, and so many of the examples I use are from these schools. Nonetheless, the principles and practices underlying most of what I explore in this book are equally applicable and relevant to any school.



## Chapter 1

# An Ethos of Insightful Leadership at All Levels

The leadership of a school sets the bar for ethos and keeps us on track when we stray off course. Conversely, leadership can also bring about a systematic breakdown and cause a school to lose all sense of direction, leading to a loss of confidence and respect from the community it serves.

It is the head who primarily sets the scene for a school, and although they require a team behind them to create a great school, nevertheless, they can single-handedly cause it to fail. This also applies to leaders at any level: a head of department can inflict similar damage on their department and a teacher can quickly lose a productive working ethos in their classroom. In short, whether you are a school leader or a teacher just starting out, it is vital that you understand the nuances of leadership.

This chapter covers three areas which experience has led me to believe are at the core of all good leadership:

- 1 How you perceive yourself and how others perceive you.
- 2 Self-organisation, clarity and focus.
- 3 Understanding leadership and how this influences the way you work and relate to your colleagues.

To explore leadership fully and what it entails, we will unpick these three areas in the following ways:

- We begin in Cogs 1.1–1.3 by investigating the self: who you are, how people perceive you and how you model the behaviours you hope to see reflected across your school or department. Exploring these cogs will better equip you to answer the following questions:
  - › How do I perceive myself as a leader?
  - › How do others perceive me as a leader?

- › How well do I model the behaviours I want to see?
- In Cogs 1.4 and 1.5, we look at how to organise yourself as a leader, focusing on how you ensure clarity in your intentions, building a team around you and getting the most from them, and how to remain focused and systematic when it comes to school improvement and caring for your staff and students. These cogs will enable you to answer the following questions:
  - › How can I pace myself and others to ensure we do things well?
  - › How do I manage the expectations of others, especially those who hold us to account?
  - › How do I prioritise effectively and avoid the 'noise'?
- Finally, in Cogs 1.6–1.8, we explore the essence of leadership and working with people: how leadership differs to management, different models of leadership, building and leading a team and getting the most from those you lead. It is as much about understanding others – knowing their strengths and being sensitive to their needs – as it is about simply managing them. These cogs will help you to answer the following questions:
  - › To what extent am I a leader compared to being a manager?
  - › What attributes should I look for in my team? Do they complement my own?
  - › How do I enable others to grow through effective delegation?



## Cog 1.1: Sort out your ego!

I had four pressing worries as I walked tentatively towards the entrance of the school on my first day as a head teacher:

- 1 *I wanted to make a lasting impression*, describe my hopes and aims clearly and, hopefully, inspire the majority. I thought of all the heads I had worked

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under and their first presentations to staff, either as a new head or at the beginning of the year; so many of them were inspirational. Would I create that same lasting impression?

- 2 I thought about the head in my own children's school whom I knew quite well. Although she loved the job, she told me that the big difference between being a deputy and a head was that all eyes and ears are on you and *the burden of responsibility never goes away*. Even when you are lying on a beach on holiday, the responsibility is there, always creeping up on you just as you begin to relax. Every word you say will be picked up on and dissected.
- 3 The head in my previous school had left me in charge of the school for three weeks while he took part in an educational study trip. It was frightening how much you can change the ethos of a school in a few short weeks. I didn't wreck the place but there were certainly some subtle differences around the school which he noticed on his return. It brought home to me *the influence – and, dare I say it, power – a head can hold*.
- 4 I was a short, bald Italian man with a strong Scottish accent. I had struggled with dyslexia at school and university (until computers came along and transformed my life – but that is another story). Even though I had been successful as a deputy head, I couldn't shake off the memory of an assistant head who, when showing me around the school for the first time, led me into the staffroom and announced in a loud but cheery voice: 'If you're wondering who this funny little man is, whom I have been showing around, this is your new deputy head.' With a smile, she then led me off to meet some students, oblivious to my bruised ego. In short, I had a very bad case of *imposter syndrome* (something I have never really been able to shake off but have learned to live with, as we will see in Cog 1.2).

That first training day in September was top of the charts when it comes to scary. I had met most of the staff during the previous term, but not formally. This would be my first moment as a proper head teacher. The fact that the school had been put into special measures following a damning inspection report didn't worry me. Nor did that year's exam results – placing it as the seventh lowest performing school in the country – make me want to run. Nor the fact that it had the highest exclusion figures in the country. Not even that it had been closed and was due to reopen with the same staff and students as an academy. We were to move into a

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new building for the first time, with all the unknowns that would bring, but I knew I would cope with that. Just for good measure, there was also a police order in the local area that banned groups of more than three young people from gathering at any one time due to running battles with rival gangs on the streets outside the school. All of this was fine; I would handle it.

Nope, the things that worried me were all about me, me, me.

Perhaps you have decided that you want to be the head of a school or maybe a head of department. You feel ready for the role and the responsibility that goes with it. What you may not be so ready for is how best to handle the focus that will be on you constantly. How will you cope with almost everyone agreeing with you on a daily basis (to your face at least)? How will you manage being the centre of attention? How aware will you be of any changes in your own behaviour following your first successes or failures? And if the adulation is all going your way, how will you respond when someone disagrees with you? Will you recognise when your behaviour begins to change at home or with friends? These are all the little things that could tip the ethos in your school or department in one direction or another.

What I am describing here concerns the ego. The Latin word for 'I', it is often misinterpreted and misused. The standard definition for the term ego is 'Someone's ... sense of their own worth. For example, if someone has a large ego, they think they are very important and valuable.'<sup>1</sup> However, the term was first brought into common usage in the translations of Sigmund Freud.<sup>2</sup> Freud described the ego as 'that part of the id which has been modified by the direct influence of the external world'.<sup>3</sup> The id can be described as 'the impulsive (and unconscious) part of our psyche which responds directly and immediately to basic urges, needs, and desires'.<sup>4</sup> For example, when babies are born they are all id; as the baby matures, so does the ego in order to modify behaviours according to reality.

In the standard sense, I used to think that I didn't have much of an ego because I had a million insecurities and rarely pushed myself to go for promotions. What I

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1 See <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/ego>.

2 Freud actually used the German word 'es' to describe the part of the self that is responsible for decision-making: see Lauren Guilbault, 'What's the Best Way to Define Ego?', *BetterHelp* (7 May 2021). Available at: <https://www.betterhelp.com/advice/willpower/whats-the-best-way-to-define-ego>.

3 Sigmund Freud, 'The Ego and the Id', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIX (1923–1925): The Ego and the Id and Other Works* (London: Hogarth Press, 1961 [1923]), pp. 1–66 at p. 25. Cited in Saul McLeod, 'Id, Ego and Superego', *Simply Psychology* (25 September 2019). Available at: <https://www.simplypsychology.org/psyche.html>.

4 McLeod, 'Id, Ego and Superego'.

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actually had, if we use Freud's definition, was a healthy ego. As a head of department, I remember once telling a colleague that I would never go for a senior leadership role. My colleague's reply was, 'You should only think about going for the next stage when you feel ready.' This was my ego working as it should. An unhealthy ego that is not in check can lead to poorly judged actions – for example, we may refuse to be proven wrong in an argument with someone to whom we feel superior. Even though we know we are mistaken, we may argue to the bitter end. Conversely, if we feel overly inferior, we may give up too easily, even though we know we are right.

It would be fair to say that all prospective heads have a degree of egotism which enables them to feel confident, strong and, quite possibly, superior enough to apply for headships. This self-belief may stem from a healthy ego which draws on past experience or from an unshakeable and/or irrational self-assurance which may arise from an unhealthy ego. This elevated ego may have its advantages but they are limited.

The problem arises when we want to do it *our* way and close our ears to advice from others. After all, we have come into the job wanting to lead a school or department with a degree of autonomy. Many of you may have spent most of your professional life thinking that you could do it better and criticised every little thing that every head has ever asked you to do. However, during your time as a teacher and as a middle or senior leader, if you have learned anything, it should be that we are only human – everyone makes mistakes. We need to listen to advice and weigh up all sides of a debate before deciding on a course of action. Easy to say, but the unhealthy part of our ego can grasp the upper hand, resulting in us pushing ahead with our own beliefs and ignoring other voices.

This is where the tension comes in. A certain degree of ego is necessary when it comes to leadership. Someone has to have enough belief in themselves to make the final decision. In an emergency situation, we cannot wait for a democratic decision-making process to occur before any action is taken. Having said that, it is important to remember that ego shouldn't be the driver when it comes to making decisions. As soon as you put yourself on a pedestal, you lose touch with the ebb and flow of day-to-day life in your school.

Let us take an example which affected me during a heatwave in 2018. With temperatures rising above 30 degrees, the pressure was on us to allow students to wear their PE kits to school (four weeks before the end of term). Some schools

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were relenting and the national media had picked up on the story. My first reaction was to say no: everyone should remain in normal school uniform – including staff, who were starting to wear flip-flops and other attire which were not what I would have expected in a professional-looking workforce. While some of the senior team and staff were in favour of relaxing the rules, many had started to argue otherwise. Parents were also beginning to inundate us with requests. The easy option would have been to give in and let the students come into school in their PE kit. However, I remained consistent with my initial reaction and insisted that our students continue to wear their uniforms, albeit without a blazer if they wished. The heatwave carried on for the remainder of the term, but within a few days of the initial demands being made, things had died down and the students continued to come to school in full uniform.

Why did I stick to my initial reaction? Was this an unhealthy side of my ego getting the better of me or was it something else? To answer this question it is important to consider my thought processes during this situation. Not only were other schools allowing their students to wear PE kits, but I also had the pressure of many parents and staff demanding that I should relent. However, I was aware there were still four weeks to go until the end of term, and we had worked very hard that year to ensure everyone was in uniform. Parents respected our uniform policy and I didn't want it to be undermined. I was also conscious that the media push these types of stories and then they disappear quickly. Finally, I felt that many would respect the decision to stay true to our uniform policy and I certainly didn't want to set a precedent for going back on policies.

If my resolve had been purely dependent on egotism, I probably wouldn't have stood firm. However, what served me well in this instance and caused my healthy ego to work appropriately was gut instinct based on experience. There is much debate regarding the worth of gut instinct. In *Blink*, Malcolm Gladwell describes how a snap decision or judgement is often much more effective than a decision based on a rigorous analysis of the facts.<sup>5</sup> While he also highlights the fallibility of this approach, there is much merit in what he says. When I first became a head, I used to always say when something didn't go as planned that 'I wish I'd listened to my gut feeling.' Frequently, I knew the decision I was making was wrong but I went with what the majority were telling me to do.

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<sup>5</sup> Malcolm Gladwell, *Blink: The Power of Thinking without Thinking* (London: Penguin, 2005).

# A head teacher's insightful account of developing a shared vision and blending it into a school's culture and day-to-day running.

This thoughtful book examines the first steps towards creating a sustainable school ethos that will become the bedrock on which a school can build in order to inspire its students to flourish and its staff to grow professionally. This requires a deep understanding of the relationship between the school's vision and its underpinning principles, and how this translates into the strategic direction and day-to-day operations of the school.

Armando Di-Finizio weaves his experiences and the lessons he's learned from three decades of successful school leadership into an engaging illustration of the principles which have supported him in his varied settings. In so doing, he explores the key elements that contribute to nurturing a positive school ethos and cultivating a healthy teaching and learning environment.

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This is probably the most practical, useful book you will read about schools and education – and one you will return to time and again.

**Sue Hollister, education consultant and former head teacher**

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**Armando Di-Finizio** has, over the course of his career, taught in seven schools in deprived areas of London, Bristol and Cardiff. With a guiding conviction that every child can go on to flourish in life, Armando has successfully led three schools from being amongst the lowest performing in the country to achieving outcomes well above expectations. Armando's innovative practices have been successfully applied in the many schools he has worked with and supported over the years.

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