Chapter 1

Introduction

Why a strategic and sustainable approach is necessary

Achieving success for children in terms of how they develop academically, socially, physically and spiritually is the aim of all schools. How do we achieve that success both in the short term and long term? How do we ensure that success is sustainable? It is important to understand sustainability not as a continuation of the status quo but as sustainable improvement. Sustainability might be considered as the ability of schools to continue to adapt and improve to meet new challenges and be successful in new and demanding contexts. This sustainability should be seen in the context of improving, not depleting, individual and organizational health and well-being. The challenge is that the short-term and the long-term agendas should be compatible and not contradictory.

The ability both to manage the current situation and provide strategic leadership for the future can be seen in examples provided by both primary and secondary schools. For example, in a primary school the need is to provide a child entering nursery with a variety of learning opportunities for her to develop during this year, while at the same time rising to the challenge of developing an understanding of what a successful learning environment will need to provide for that child in six or seven years' time when she is in Year 6. The school will also need to pay attention to ensuring that those who work in the school enhance the skills and abilities necessary to meet the challenges of a rapidly changing environment. Similarly, a parent whose son has successfully completed secondary school and whose daughter is about to start might say: 'My son had a great experience; just give the same experience to my daughter.' The challenge for the school is to reflect on the best of the previous approach while at the

same time seeking to provide an education that in seven years' time will provide the abilities and skills for the daughter to engage in a rapidly changing world.

In the domain of leadership and strategy, we have been able to improve practice by drawing on a wide range of sources from the business sector over the last few years: Gratton (2000); Collins (2001); Kaplan and Norton (2001); Mintzberg (2003); Hughes and Beatty (2005); Laljani (2009) and Northouse (2010) among others provide examples from the business world that give a sound literature base about the dynamic nature of thinking about leadership and strategy. In the educational world, there is similar interest in the factors that contribute to longer-term success as witnessed by Michael Fullan in his *Leadership and Sustainability* (2004), in which he articulates how schools can build sustainable longer-term development. His more recent accounts of putting that sustainable change into practice at the system level (Fullan, 2010) and the individual level (2009) are excellent perspectives. Andy Hargreaves and Dean Fink (2005) join this emerging literature in their book *Sustaining Leadership*, which seeks to provide insights into the challenge of moving away from short-term results-driven agendas, to sustainable longer-term educational development. Hargreaves develops the argument further in his work with Dennis Shirley in *The Fourth Way* (2009). Davies (2007) brings together ten leading authors to further develop the concept of sustainability. All these authors provide a commentary on how organizations can build longer-term sustainable development. It is important that strategy is underpinned by moral values, and a 'passion for education' that is based on moral values is critical. A key issue that is addressed by Tim Brighouse and in *Passionate Leadership in Education* (2008) and by Robert (Jerry) Starratt when he discusses 'Ethical Leadership' in *The Essentials of School Leadership* (2009). In reflecting on strategy in the educational world, writers such as: Caldwell (2010); Cheng (2010); Davies and Davies (2010); Eacott (2010); Glanz (2010); Thompson (2010) and Quong and Walker (2010) draw on extensive strategic leadership research from the field of education to build new and insightful ways of creating strategic perspectives for consideration by school leaders.

This book provides insights into how a school can build longer-term success and sustainability by developing strategic capability and capacity to become a strategically focused school, which can be defined as:

> *A strategically focused school is one that is educationally effective in the short term but has a clear framework and processes to translate core moral purpose and vision into excellent educational provision that is challenging and sustainable in the medium to long term.*

The book does not take a traditional view of strategy in terms of those at the top of an organization undertaking a strategic planning exercise using a number of mechanistic techniques. It is about all those who work in school both understanding how to do the day-to-day tactical activities such as planning lessons, organizing schedules and timetables, and *also* stepping outside the box and being aware of the bigger issues such as the developments in learning and how they impact on the school, and the increasing impact of technology and its impact on the role of the teacher. It is about providing a way of doing the 'now' and concurrently addressing what should and could be.

Developing strategic thinking as well as operational competence is an ability that we should develop in all staff in a school. Strategic thinking is not necessarily aligned to an individual's role in the school's hierarchy, nor does strategy necessarily come at a stage when the management process has been mastered. I believe, from my research, that leaders in schools, classroom leaders and subject coordinators or faculty leaders, as well as deputy headteachers and headteachers, can operate in two modes concurrently. They can choose to undertake a current task but also see how that task is part of a larger strategic educational picture. To me, how we distinguish between administration/management and leadership is how individuals both operate in the 'now' of the current school year, while challenging and creating new ways of doing things for the future. We need to develop leaders in our school who can have a vision but also translate that vision into action.

This book explores a model of strategy which comprises the *strategic processes* that schools can engage in to develop capacity for strategic development, *strategic approaches* they can deploy to enact the strategy and *strategic leadership* which is necessary to drive and facilitate the whole-school development. The aim of the three-element model is to provide a framework for sustainable long-term success.

This book draws on my work with a large number of headteachers and their staff over the past 30 years in the UK and overseas. This has provided me with a number of 'leadership voices' which I have included in the text to link ideas and practice together. More recently, a major dissemination and refining of my work has taken place through the strategic leadership courses I have run with colleagues at the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust. This has given me the opportunity to work with several hundred leaders and draw insights from them to refine my strategy approach.

One of the frequent sayings from my childhood is 'hard work never killed anyone'. Experience has taught me that excessive hard work does! What we need to do in schools is move away from adding

additional activities and from a steadily increasing workload, and to stand back and look at the bigger picture. By defining the strategic context and prioritizing activities, there is the possibility of concentrating activity and working in a more effective way.
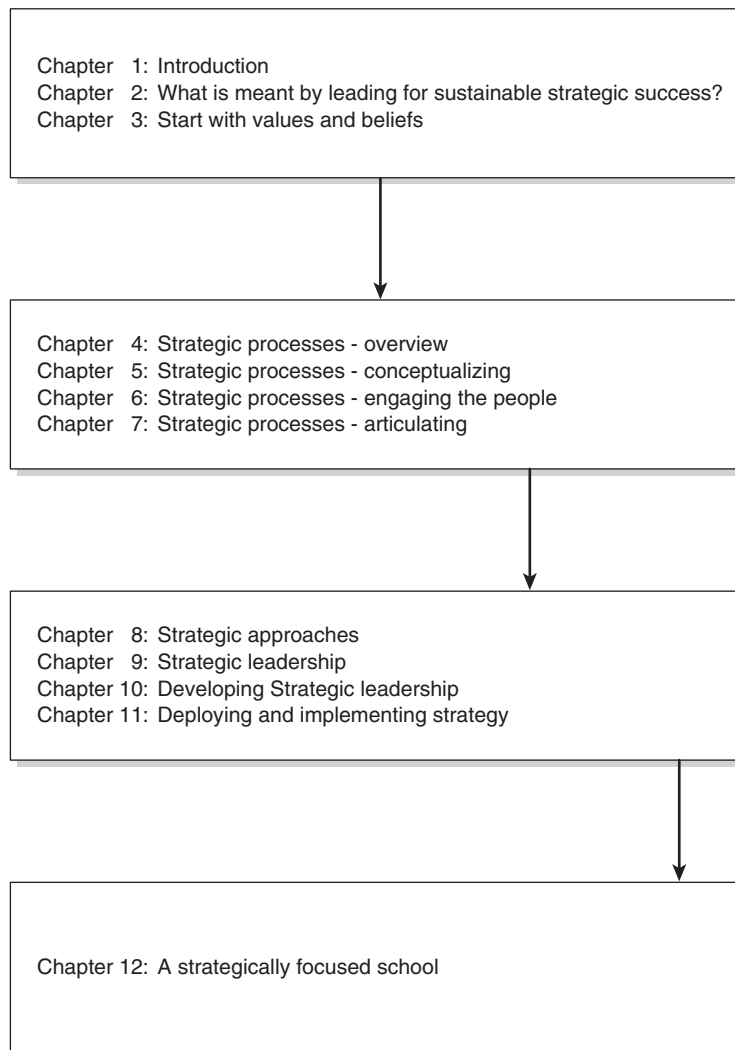
Key questions

In the following chapters, the book aims to answer the following questions:

- What is meant by leading for sustainable strategic success?
- What does a school mean by values and beliefs?
- What are strategic processes?
- What are strategic approaches?
- What is strategic leadership?
- How do we develop strategic leadership?
- What is an effective strategic implementation?
- What do strategically focused schools look like?

This set of questions provides the framework for the following chapters, as outlined in Figure 1.1.

In Chapter 2, the book starts to define what we understand by leading for sustainable strategic success. This chapter explores the nature of leading a strategic and sustainable approach as a means of delivering success in the medium to long term. It undertakes initial definitions of strategy, success, sustainability and leadership, as a means of building a common understanding and language for ideas and proposals in the rest of the book. It then moves on to explore a model that will help schools form a coherent and deliverable strategic framework for their actions. The model (shown in Figure 2.4) links strategic processes, strategic approaches and strategic leadership in a dynamic interrelated way to develop strategic capacity and capability in the school.

Chapter 3 argues that the essential first stage for schools, before they move into strategic development, is to clarify and clearly articulate the school's values and beliefs. This stage is based on the view that strategy should not exist in a vacuum; it must be based on a set of values and beliefs. When difficult choices have to be made, it is vital that alternatives are set against how well they fulfil the school's values. Similarly, when one looks at the values that the school articulates, they should not just be something that the school articulates for the external world but those values must infuse the whole school's working practices, including the strategic development

Chapter   1: Introduction
Chapter   2: What is meant by leading for sustainable strategic success?
Chapter   3: Start with values and beliefs

Chapter   4: Strategic processes - overview
Chapter   5: Strategic processes - conceptualizing
Chapter   6: Strategic processes - engaging the people
Chapter   7: Strategic processes - articulating

Chapter   8: Strategic approaches
Chapter   9: Strategic leadership
Chapter 10: Developing Strategic leadership
Chapter 11: Deploying and implementing strategy

Chapter 12: A strategically focused school

Figure 1.1   *Chapter schematic*

process itself. Setting these values in place, and reviewing and updating them is the critical first stage in the development of a strategically focused school.

In Chapter 4, the book articulates the model employed in defining strategic processes. Processes are *the* critical factor in making strategy a reality and a force for real change in schools. There are a number of leadership and management maxims which are useful to consider here. For example, *how* we undertake something is as important as *what* we undertake in building long-term success. This idea draws attention to the process of building strategic capability and leads to

the maxim of 'process is policy'. This latter statement suggests that policy is not formed and then implemented, but that it is the interaction of the evolving process and the people involved that forms the policy. The 'how' of strategic processes can be divided into three elements that build a strategic direction and activity for the school. These process elements are conceptualization, engaging people and articulation.

Chapter 5 considers how the *conceptualization* element focuses on the processes of reflection, strategic thinking, analysis and creating new ways of understanding, by creating mental models of the new reality.

Chapter 6 suggests that the *engaging people* part of the process starts with a critical review of the importance of strategic conversations, to facilitate increased strategic participation which, in turn, leads to enhanced levels of motivation and builds strategic capability. Chapter 7 looks at the *articulation* part of the three process elements and highlights oral, written and structural means of communicating and developing strategic purpose.

Chapter 8 examines the strategic approaches a school can utilize and deploy. It considers four approaches. Initially, it looks at the proactive and rational linear approach of *strategic* planning, which is the traditional approach to strategy. It assumes that the school understands the goals it wishes to achieve, how to measure the outcomes and how to plan the journey to achieve those outcomes. The methodology of this traditional approach underpins much of the school development and school improvement literature. It then contrasts this approach with the reactive approach of *emergent strategy*, which is a means of harnessing current experience to formulate future strategy, as seen in situations where schools 'learn by doing'. Patterns of success and failure emerge if the school is a reflective and learning organization and the school will repeat the successes and not repeat the failures. Thus, a pattern of strategic actions emerges from experience, which can be welded together in a more coherent strategic framework. Emergent strategy can be considered to be a reflective and reactive process initially, which draws on experience to build future patterns of behaviour. The chapter looks next at the role of *decentralized strategy* as a model of strategic development. Decentralized strategy is seen when senior leaders outline key directions and outcomes for the school, but delegate the details of implementation and policy to other staff in the school. This is dependent, as an approach, on clear values and a high level of trust between the various partners in the school. Finally, Chapter 8 looks at the powerful approach of *strategic intent* as a means of building capability and capacity to leverage significant strategic change. Strategic intent is a

means of setting clear objectives (intents) that the organization is committed to achieving, but recognizing that it is necessary to build capability and capacity to fully understand how and when they can be achieved. This is a combined process of strategic direction and strategic learning.

Chapter 9 looks at the nature and dimensions of strategic leadership within the school as the key to driving the strategic processes and approaches to successful outcomes. The chapter examines what strategic leaders do in terms of direction setting, translating strategy into action, aligning people and the organization to the strategy, determining effective intervention points and developing strategic capabilities within the school. The chapter then moves on to consider the characteristics which strategic leaders display and whether these can be developed in others. It focuses on characteristics of strategic leaders, such as: they challenge and question; they have a dissatisfaction or restlessness with the present; they prioritize their own strategic thinking and learning; they build new mental models to frame their own and others' understanding; they display strategic wisdom based on a clear value system; they have powerful personal and professional networks, they have high-quality personal and interpersonal skills and display emotional intelligence (EQ).

Chapter 10 considers how we can develop strategic talent in our schools. It considers what is strategic talent and how we might develop it. It considers how to develop leadership learning in schools in effective and powerful ways. It argues that talent development requires a clearly defined structure of leadership roles which grow in responsibility and impact. The chapter sees that the talent development process needs a clear understanding about the characteristics and behaviours associated with success at each level of leadership. It takes a new conceptual framework and looks at how schools can attract, develop and nurture strategic talent in schools. Using a 'talent management' framework, it highlights the fundamental challenge of reconciling current performance with future potential – the issue being that good operational managers do not always have the potential to be strategic leaders. It considers how schools can identify strategic talent and ensure that enough is done to develop and mature that talent so that it is ready to take on senior strategic roles with competence and effectiveness.

Chapter 11 considers the challenge of *implementing* policy. The chapter focuses on the challenges of translating strategy into action and the key elements of strategic timing and abandonment. Mintzberg (2003: 79–84) uses a definition of strategy as 'seeing', such as seeing ahead; perceptively, he also uses strategy as 'seeing it through'. Many schools have elaborate plans but how many of them

get significantly implemented? Davies and Ellison (2003) use the saying 'the thicker the plan the less it effects practice'. Attention needs to be paid not only to developing the strategy but also to its implementation, so that it successfully focuses the school's activities.

Chapter 12, the final chapter, explores the characteristics of successful strategically focused schools. It draws together nine themes that contribute to building strategically focused schools, suggesting that they should:

1 develop a culture of sustainability
2 balance short term and long term
3 develop strategic measures of success
4 be morally driven
5 focus on learning: children – adults – learning for reflection and improvement
6 pay attention to strategic processes and approaches
7 be a strategic talent developer
8 be part of networked systems; and
9 develop strategic leadership across the school that is sustainable.

Throughout the book, use is made of the 'leadership voices' of headteachers from my research to articulate key ideas. Suggestions are made to share good practice from the research. The purpose of this book is to encourage all those who work in schools, and those who work with schools, to move beyond the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) inspection approach of planning through short-term targets, in order to set those plans within a strategic framework.

While I, and other educationalists, recognize the value of short-term planning, I believe such planning can be effective only if it is set within a more holistic planning framework. To that end, this book provides a means of examining how a school might build on its current school improvement or school development planning, by building a strategic dimension. I see this dimension as a strategic framework that will include a written element but, more importantly, will include strategic processes and approaches to involve the staff in defining how the school is developing and where the school is going.

Two of the challenges facing all school leaders are summed up by quotes that I have used over the last twenty years; they are still pertinent to today:

So the urgent drives out the important; the future goes largely unexplored; and the capacity to act, rather than the capacity to think and imagine becomes the sole measure for leadership. (Hamel and Prahalad, 1994: 4–5)

> We are all prisoners of our past. It is hard to think of things except in the way we have always thought of them. But that solves no problems and seldom changes anything. (Handy, 1990: 54)

How do we move beyond simply responding or reacting to the urgent? To think differently, to create an improved future for the school, involves building a strategic framework for a school. How to establish that framework to enable a strategic dialogue to take place forms the structure and contents of the rest of this book.