Deal or no big deal?

Schools responses to the introduction of Teaching and Learning Responsibility allowances

SCHOOL LEADERS   Report

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'Organisational cultures reflect and are constrained by the organisation's structures, and in turn structures are influenced by culture. Changing either structure or culture is constrained by the other, but also has consequences for the other. Schools that have taken personalising learning seriously have had to graft onto their existing structures and cultures some new values and norms (culture) as well as different ways of doing things (structure).' (Hargreaves, 2007, p3)

Introduction

This study explores six schools' initial response to the introduction of the Teaching and Learning Responsibility allowances (TLRs) available from January 2006. The criterion for TLRs was described as:

'A Teaching and Learning Responsibility payment (TLR) may be awarded to a classroom teacher for undertaking a sustained additional responsibility in the context of the school's staffing structure for the purpose of ensuring the continued delivery of high-quality teaching and learning for which he is made accountable.' (STPCD 2005)

The study involved detailed conversations with school headteachers looking at the opportunities and barriers presented by the requisite expectation for staffing restructuring and the disappearance of management allowances.

The purpose of the study was to identify the climate and culture of the schools' leadership through developing a typology of responses centred around questions on the leadership approach to TLR introduction.

Methods

Interviews with six headteachers took place during the autumn term of 2007 in a cross section of secondary schools/colleges. These discussions allowed key leaders to reflect on the introduction of TLRs within their school's context and to explore their perceptions of the freedom they enjoyed to innovate creatively and/or radically as part of this process. The research focus was on:

■ The degree of freedom that was offered to headteachers in introducing TLRs.

■ The potential TLRs offered for innovation, creativity and as a lever for institutional change.

■ The barriers TLRs presented to introducing innovation.

■ The initial impact from the introduction of TLRs.

Findings

The results from this research identified four broad themes which influenced leaders potential responses to the introduction of TLRs. These are:

1. radicalisation

2. creativity

3. contextualisation

4. assimilation

Radicalisation

There was no sense from the interviewees that TLRs had led to or been an impetus for any radical whole school change. Instead respondents were more likely to use terms such 'dismantling', 'simplification' and 'rationalisation' to describe reorganisation undertaken as part of the move to TLRs. For instance, one headteacher reflected that the need to maintain a traditional structure was essential not only for the continued success of their highly regarded pastoral work but also for the potential negative impact on the perceptions of their parent body of any radical change.

Nevertheless, beyond these case study schools, some evidence was found of schools where TLRs had prompted a more fundamental reconsideration of leadership structures. For instance, some schools had effectively started with a 'blank sheet of paper' and had created new staffing structures that were built on either the underlying strands or consequently developed 'deeps' of personalised learning (Hargreaves, 2004) in their attempts to achieve a strong response to the Every Child Matters agenda.

Creativity

A strongly related theme to radicalisation centred on the extent to which leaders were willing/ able to display a creative approach to introducing TLRs. This aspect drew a very mixed reaction from the respondents and reflected the full spectrum of approaches to applying creativity to what was termed a 'golden opportunity' by one of the headteachers.

At one extreme, TLRs were considered to be completely the wrong approach in taking the whole issue of accountability forward. This was because TLRs would perpetuate the duality of roles and 'would not allow for the essential early distinction' between new entrants to the profession who were 'potential leaders' as opposed to those 'destined to become high order classroom practitioners'. Yet one respondent was clear that TLR introduction provided the opportunity to take an innovative and creative approach to changing staff attitudes to 'learning' particularly by redefining job descriptions and empowering of line management.

This momentum for modifying job description/role specifications was supported by all respondents, particularly in the challenge to the traditional approach to the pastoral work of the school. Mention was made of 'regearing' or 'reworking' of the traditional Head of Year role with three of the schools already moving to 'Heads of Learning' to reflect the increased focus on student tracking. In a most interesting move, one headteacher was particularly creative in his use of the leadership spine to significantly expand the senior team, although the overall trend from respondents was that TLRs led to a 'flattening' and reduction in the senior leadership teams. It also led to a more creative use of non-teachers in senior positions. This was as a reflection of ongoing and increasing distributive leadership within institutions.

Contextualisation

Of all areas of response and perhaps the least surprising, was the reflection that the 'context' of the school was the most influential factor on each of the school leaders. The contextual situations of the six respondents varied greatly through aspects of selection, federation, reorganisation, single sex provision and local circumstance.

However there were consistent themes relating to:

- A sensitivity to the political dimension of schools. For example, a feeling that union objections to upper pay spine progression could potentially restrict the opportunity for radical change.

- Opportunities for headteachers to challenge a wide variety of staffing issues relating to:
  - Individual performance.
  - Historic resistance to change.
  - Modification of traditional and duality in roles.
  - Anomalous structural issues.

- The redefining and restructuring of accountability and line management.

- Re-emphasising the need for leaders at all levels rather than managers.

Assimilation

There was an overwhelming sense that translating or assimilating current structures into the new TLR allowances was the norm. However, their appearance on the scene allowed for the statutory consultation period, engagement with governors and consequent debate on restructuring to impact on a wide range of institutional issues, particularly allowing the headteachers to address key leadership issues relating to:

- The empowerment of middle managers through distributive leadership.

- Raising the profile of 'learning'.

- Raising the profile of 'tracking'.

- Creating the stimulus for staff understanding the need for effective 'change management' by headteachers and at all levels.

- Changing perception by renaming a number of responsibility posts without changing the nature of the role.

Conclusion

The introduction of TLRs has been driven mainly by the specific contextual nature of individual schools. An 'assimilatory' approach, replicating existing staffing structures was seen by many respondents as the most appropriate response. While some headteachers accepted that a creative, innovative or radical opportunity may have been missed, TLRs were largely seen by these leaders as a 'managerial' moment to tackle specific short-term goals particularly in redefining job description/role specification.

Responding to the contextual needs of their schools was of foremost concern for these leaders. Barriers of time and resource were not mentioned, but there was clear recognition that the need for 'shorter term' solutions limited opportunities to consider approaches that provided structures which would be productive and sustainable over the longer term.

Even though there was a broader belief in and desire for creativity and innovation, this was tempered by the need to recognise the day-to-day demands on the school and develop an approach which offered appropriate levels of 'contextualisation'. Factors in this included:

- The need to demonstrate continued improvements in performance, in response to demands from the inspection framework and the general public.

- The continued and potentially restrictive view of a headteacher's role within the profession, in the wider school community and in the eyes of our political masters.

- The sense that creativity is 'too risky' as it flies in the face of the compliant nature of current expectation.

A recently heard apocryphal tale described how groups of medical and educational professionals were transported forward 150 years in time to see the structural changes to their profession. It would appear that previous medical professionals would be 'lost in advancement' yet educational professionals would see little structural difference. Does this reflect a culture of conservatism and a general aversion to risk, or a lack of stomach and moral fibre for more a radical approaches to change? Arguably if the opportunities for change offered by TLRs and other initiatives in the future are to be maximised, more headteachers need to be encouraged to step away from the relative security of the 'contextualisation' approach and instead embrace higher risk strategies characterised by creativity, innovation and radicalisation. In this way then 'closing the deal' is not enough. Instead, leaders eyes must focus on the 'bigger deal' of how they can lever the changes required to secure the personalised education that students in their schools deserve - the moral imperative that they seek to address.

References

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