

Leading Learning:

Instructional leadership in infant schools

The headteachers in these infant schools demonstrate their commitment to learning for staff as well as pupils by promoting reflection, collaboration and leadership at all levels and by developing a range of teaching approaches

Sue Benson, NCSL Research Associate,
Headteacher of Nettleham Infant School, Lincoln



The headteachers in these infant schools demonstrate their commitment to learning for staff as well as pupils by promoting reflection, collaboration, and leadership at all levels and by developing a range of teaching approaches.

This study considers how heads use an instructional perspective in their practice, focusing on the strategies they use to impact on classrooms to improve teaching and learning.

This study is based on interviews with headteachers of infant schools that OFSTED has identified as 'particularly successful'. The majority have also been awarded Beacon status.

The Context

".... The changes imposed upon the UK education system and indeed most other 'developed' educational systems have radically altered the role and responsibilities of the headteacher or principal. In particular, the devolution of responsibility for local management of schools in many systems has resulted in the headteacher or principal becoming a manager of systems and budgets as well as a leader of colleagues. Also the increasingly competitive environment in which schools operate has placed a much greater emphasis upon the need to raise standards and to improve the outcomes of schooling." (Hopkins 2001)

In addition to the issues outlined by Hopkins, recent initiatives introduced by the Government, such as performance management and the literacy and numeracy strategies, have been considered by some to be overly prescriptive.

The study, whilst taking into account the unique qualities of schools and their leaders, highlights generic aspects of leadership practice which are used to improve teaching and learning in the current context.

Reflection

"Reflective practice is founded on the assumption that increased awareness of one's professional performance can result in considerable improvements of performance. Specifically, reflection on teaching has been advocated by many as a means to question teaching/learning events in order to bring one's teaching actions to a conscious level, to interpret the consequences of one's actions, and to conceptualise alternative teaching approaches."

(Blasé and Blasé 1998)

All of the heads in the study promoted the need to reflect as a basis for improvement in practice. It is seen to be an essential element of professional learning at an individual as well as a whole school level.

Vicky, one of the heads interviewed, used a reflective approach to support a new staff member who was experiencing problems. Heather, another head, described reflection as 'something that permeates the whole place' through informal discussion and by asking colleagues for advice. Beth described how she develops reflective thinking as a basis for improvements to teaching and learning in her work with a new reception team. "I encourage them together to evaluate what they've done and what's not gone right, to work with their colleagues, or myself to say 'how could that be improved?'"

Collaboration

"Studies of innovation show that sustained improvement in teaching often hinges on the development of 'teachers as learners' who collaborate with one another to study teaching and its effects." (Blasé and Blasé 1998)

All of the heads in the study promote collaboration as a basis for school improvement. Lynda, for example, described how teachers plan as year-group partners and in small groups as well as with the whole staff for subject development.

Judy developed the idea further by building time for collaborative planning into the staff meeting. Blasé and Blasé note that good principals use a variety of strategies, including consistent modelling of a teamwork philosophy, to encourage collaboration.

Jan considered that the most significant thing she has done to improve teaching and learning was to develop a collaborative working culture. She successfully used the leadership group as a model to promote collaborative working across the range of school teams – driving whole school decision-making as well as smaller groups. Jan said: “I think people like working together. It gives them more confidence and, of course, it cuts down on the work.”

Leadership at all Levels

“The principal of a successful school is not the instructional leader but the co-ordinator of teachers as instructional leaders.” (Blasé and Blasé 1998 quoting Glickman 1991)

All of the headteachers involved in the study use the expertise of staff in a variety of ways to improve teaching and learning. Beth and Jasbir, for example, described how their deputies model highly effective teaching.

Other heads use their deputies to develop policy and practice. Judy uses her deputy to carry out classroom observations, which include feedback to staff. She also works with her deputy to develop the effectiveness of aspects of teaching and learning such as classroom groupings or behaviour management.

Other headteachers use teachers and classroom assistants to develop teaching and learning across the school. Jasbir and Lynda, for example, use the knowledge of their expert class teachers by giving them a mentoring role. Janet also uses the staff’s expertise to introduce new teachers to the school’s way of working. Heather and Lynda use their teaching assistants to lead developments, Heather through an initiative to develop joint planning between teaching and support staff and Lynda by using her classroom assistant to train other support staff.

A Range of Approaches

“We have found models of teaching in abundance. There are simple procedures that students can easily respond to; there are complex strategies that students acquire gradually through patient and skilful instruction. Some aim at specific objectives, while others are casual and emergent. Among them, they address a great variety of objectives in the personal, social and academic domains – our major responsibilities as teachers.”
(Joyce, Calhoun and Hopkins 1997)

All of the heads studied promote a range of teaching approaches to improve children’s learning. Heather is developing enquiry methods of learning as part of the work towards her performance management targets. Sally’s commitment to a range of learning opportunities has led to the consideration of accelerated learning methods.

Judy has worked with staff to extend opportunities for children to learn collaboratively. She feels that this approach to learning, “focuses on the processes, enabling children to articulate, to say, for example, ‘I think we should be doing this’ or ‘look you can do it this way’ or ‘if you put this and this together you can do that’.”

Conclusions

“Fundamental to the core purpose of the school, student learning, is the notion that those who are responsible for student learning should also be learners themselves – not just subject experts but people who make mistakes, are anxious, fail, are exhilarated by understanding and filled with awe when something new is discovered.”
(West-Burnham and O’Sullivan 1998)

The headteachers of these very effective infant schools show a commitment to learning for staff as well as pupils. It seems, indeed, that professional learning underpins the work of these heads. It is demonstrated in their efforts to promote reflection, collaboration, leadership at all levels and the development of a range of teaching approaches.

The full study explores how reflection in schools can be developed through dialogue and through professional conversation during feedback sessions. It addresses how collaborative work can be developed to include coaching as a powerful means of developing practice.

The full study also shows how headteachers of very effective infant schools model and promote confidence and professional esteem to enable them and their staff to take risks in order to build on their improvements in teaching and learning.

The full study can be used by school leaders as a framework to reflect on practice, to promote dialogue and to gain practical ideas for school improvement.

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Comments to the author:

BensonSueJ@aol.com

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Amanda Hatchett
National College for School Leadership
Jubilee Campus
Wollaton Road
Nottingham
NG8 1BB



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Leading to Success: Judging success in primary schools in challenging contexts, Stephen Englefield, Headteacher, Brownhill Primary School, Leeds

No Regrets? Starting secondary headship, Alan Sieber, Headteacher, Tarporley Community High School, Cheshire

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