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Know Where You Are Going:

How five headteachers led
innovations that go beyond the
National Curriculum and national
strategies to enhance children's
learning

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Introduction

Two years into my second headship and after an Ofsted inspection, I wished to build upon what the school had achieved to enhance children's learning. My headship experience to date had been driven by the 'standards agenda' and focused on the national strategies, the Ofsted framework and SATs. To broaden my knowledge, I attended a variety of courses and conferences and read material from different authors. Faced with an array of ideas, proposals and strategies I was uncertain which path to take. Believing that other headteachers had already travelled a similar journey, I sought to learn from what colleagues had already done. I therefore investigated how five headteachers went beyond the National Curriculum and national strategies to enhance children's learning.

The study schools

Five schools were identified by word of mouth from professionals who knew the focus of my study. The locations, intake and size of the schools visited as part of the research varied. All were popular and three had Beacon status. All five schools satisfied the following criteria, namely:

- following the National Curriculum and national strategies
- adapting the national strategies to make them appropriate for their pupils
- going beyond the National Curriculum and national strategies to enhance children's learning

Each school was visited. A semi-structured interview format was used for interviews with the headteacher of each school and with teachers nominated by the headteacher – either teachers who had played an important part in the innovations or those who could provide accurate information about the innovations.

Lessons, activities and displays were observed and documentary information was collected about each school – papers and policies that the headteacher or other teachers believed would illustrate the innovations taking place at the school.

Having visited the five schools, spoken with the key players and observed key activities, five brief case studies were produced. The case studies are available in the full report. Each case study comprises sections that describe:

- the school context: a brief description of the school and its social context
- the headteacher's motivation and vision: a description of what the headteacher was trying to achieve
- the journey taken: a description of the action taken by the headteachers to realise their vision for the school
- evidence of enrichment: the most important activities that were found to enrich the learning experience for children in that particular school
- suggestions from the staff at the school: ideas put forward by staff in their interviews or questionnaires

Lessons from the five schools

While several of the headteachers were uncomfortable in describing themselves as innovators, all accepted that their school qualified to be part of a study that looked at curriculum innovation.

The main focus of the enquiry was on how the innovations were led. The following patterns of leadership were found.

In all cases the headteachers:

- had been in post for at least eight years
- were hard-working and highly motivated
- attracted and recruited people of like minds
- had a clear vision that became the school ethos
- had a vision that became self-sustaining
- developed effective induction programmes for new teachers
- led by example and modelled what they wanted to see
- recruited or developed 'champions' to model what they wanted to see (the status and experience of these champions varied from newly qualified teachers to a university professor and an educational consultant)
- adapted the national strategies to suit the school ethos
- considered other initiatives and then adapted or rejected them

- took calculated risks
- developed clear structures and organisation
- supported others to develop their own ideas

In most cases the headteachers:

- required a 'reservoir of hope' to sustain what they were doing and stand up to opposition
- were following what they had done throughout their career

In several cases:

- the headteachers had to overcome opposition from the LEA and staff

In some cases the headteachers:

- required a significant staff change before the innovations could take hold
- only became democratic once their vision could be seen in practice in the school
- were assisted by Ofsted reports that:
 - precipitated some staff moving on from the school
 - vindicated what they were doing

Similarities and differences

The headteachers were confident that their schools were making a positive difference to pupils and their learning, confidence confirmed by Ofsted reports, word of mouth reputation, and the evidence of my visits. The headteachers had different personalities. Some sought the limelight while others were shy and retiring. The headteachers had followed different paths and their schools were very different places. Each headteacher was trying to provide the very best for children in their care, but their visions for the schools were markedly different. Each school had its own ethos and the work being done to enrich the curriculum varied from school to school. There were, however, key similarities in what had been done. Each headteacher had a clear vision of what he or she wanted to achieve, each had appointed and retained like-minded and highly motivated people, and each had continued along their chosen path in the face of changes and sometimes hostility. In all cases, the journey had taken several years and most heads say it has not yet been completed.

The key messages for other headteachers

Know where you are going and what you want to achieve even if you don't know how you will get there or when you will arrive.

- Accept that your vision may be different from that of your colleagues.
- Appoint and retain like-minded people.
- Ensure that your key staff share your core values.
- Model what you wish to see.
- Accept the journey may take a long time and may follow a winding path.
- Consider ideas, read books, attend conferences and be confident in assessing what you hear, using your own filters when deciding what to adopt.

The headteachers I visited have spent years striving for what they know to be right and the children in their schools have clearly benefited from their work and that of their staff.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the headteachers and staff of the five schools included in this research for their time, co-operation and sympathetic response to my enquiry.

Research associate reports available in autumn 2004

In Search of the X-Factor: A group enquiry into the secret of maintaining continuous school success, Marie Graham, Headteacher, Roseberry Infant School, Stockton-on-Tees

Tidying the Cupboard? The role of subject leaders in primary schools. How can subject leaders in a primary school share their talents and expertise to make a positive impact on teaching and learning in the school? David Burrows, Headteacher, Ladygrove Park Primary School, Didcot, Oxfordshire

Growing Your Own Leaders: The impact of professional development on school improvement, Penny Castagnoli, Headteacher, Beaconsfield High School and Nigel Cook, Headteacher, The Disraeli School

Leadership on the Frontline: Thriving and surviving in challenging circumstances. Lessons learned from taking part in a university-led research project based on the experiences of 18 headteachers from schools in Belfast, Liverpool and London. Paula Taylor-Moore, Headteacher, Didcot Girls' School, Didcot, Oxfordshire

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