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Thinking Headteachers, Thinking Schools

How three headteachers are leading
their schools towards becoming
communities of enquiry

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The first steps

When this research was started in the winter of 2002, ‘thinking skills’ was a phrase that held promise of a focus on how children learn, as opposed to a focus upon the delivery of centrally-prescribed lessons. A spark had been kindled into a flame in our minds and we followed the collection of ideas that clustered around the phrase. We sought to bring these thinking skills to our schools, staff and pupils. Yet for thinking skills to advance from a jumble of techniques to a clear way of helping children learn, there needed to be a greater understanding, and a vision for our schools in which the notion could thrive. Part of this understanding was that thinking skills on their own were not enough. The focus needed to be on more than skills; it had to be on developing effective learning – a far wider concept. Thus, the notion of a ‘thinking school’ was born. This project is a search to put flesh on the bones of this term.

The method

We carried out interviews in our schools, which we recorded on digital video. This gave us speedy recall and access to body language as well as verbal content. Interviews were undertaken in each school with the following:

- headteacher
- governor
- class teacher
- learning support assistant
- parent
- a group of children

In this way we explored how far the vision and the headteacher’s view of the school was shared, to assess the impact of the head on their school and to look at specific leadership issues. We each examined the data from the interviews for commonalities and emerging patterns. We looked particularly for indicators that showed a specific focus for each school on thinking and learning to learn. We increased the reliability of their findings by allowing others to review our interpretations. In our case we grounded our interpretations by working independently then reviewing each other’s work. We were fortunate to be able to use Professor Robert Fisher to review our ideas as we progressed, modify our research through informed debate.

Thinking schools – sustaining the common mind

When we were considering curriculum innovation in our schools, we looked carefully at issues of sustainability. We found nine key themes related to sustainability emerging from the evidence of interviews, visits and debate with the three schools involved in this study.

1. Whole-school effective thinking approaches have been adopted that change habits and dispositions of thinking and learning, rather than simply teaching thinking strategies and tools. All staff have an underlying understanding of the pedagogy behind the approaches – they know why they are doing what they are doing.
2. Curriculum redesign has centred on the importance of developing children’s meta-cognitive awareness and on integrating new initiatives whilst maintaining the coherence of the overall framework. Nothing has been put forward as an ‘add-on’ to an existing curriculum.
3. Each school community values and demonstrates full pupil involvement and accountability. Pupils are given an authentic voice in the school community.
4. There is a strong, central shared set of beliefs and values to work to in each school and all involved are fully committed to it.
5. All staff are, to varying extents, action researchers in their approach to learning and teaching – they are creative and critical thinkers themselves.
6. Whole-school continuing professional development is a strong feature of each community and staff continue to develop and integrate appropriate strategies and approaches into their work.
7. There is evident trust between colleagues in each school community.
8. Staff are passionate about what they do – evidenced by the ‘fire in the eyes’ of staff members when they talk about what they do.
9. There is authentic community involvement in each of the three schools. Those interviewed stressed the importance of including the local and wider community, and identified ways in which this is practised. Those in the community expect the school to continue to work in an innovative way.

Thinking schools – leading your community

We propose that a key element in any definition of a thinking school is concerned with its ability to lead its community. We conclude that community leadership can act as an appropriate initial stimulus to begin the journey to becoming a thinking school. The interviews with the headteachers undertaking the study revealed three common themes.

1. Education is about personalised learning. One head spoke of their deeply held belief that many children deemed failures within the education system were in fact good learners who could use academic skills to great effect in their personal lives. Schools will be failing children if they are unable to engage learners with the curriculum and teaching they value.
2. The importance of children's self-image. In particular, they expressed the notion that education must be concerned with building resilience within children to enable them to succeed in a rapidly changing world. This included ideas that children would need to learn, unlearn and relearn concepts, skills and knowledge throughout their lives. Making mistakes should be recognised as external to the image of the self. Education should boost the self-image of learners and seek to minimise personal feelings of failure.
3. The importance of teaching techniques that involved a great deal of negotiation and discussion with learners. The outcome of such negotiations should be that the curriculum is no longer something for teachers to hand down to learners, but a communal task of effort where the teacher acts as model learner.

Thinking schools – leading thinking and learning

The following summarises our findings in relation to leading thinking and learning in schools:

1. The need for fearlessness and moral purpose

In each of our project schools, it was found that the head was guided by values, beliefs and a strong moral purpose. All had entered teaching with a strong belief that they could make a difference and had become headteachers as part of this quest. In all three schools, staff described the headteacher's lead in taking on new ideas and creating a climate where it was permissible to take risks. The teachers felt strongly that the headteacher's lead had given them courage and had enabled them to develop their own skills and expertise.

2. Differing styles of leadership

In the case study schools, quality of leadership was constant, but the styles of leadership varied according to the needs of the time and place. Leadership styles evolved as the expertise and responsibility for developing the ethos of the school became more widely spread. In each case, this spread varied as new members arrived and key figures left but, as the ethos was devolved throughout the organisation, there were more people to say 'this is what we do around here'.

3 The recognition of adults that they must model being an active learner

A common factor discovered in observation and interview was that all three headteachers believed themselves to be the lead learner and researcher, and felt the need for their staff to have access to high-quality professional development. All had arranged for teaching and other staff to attend a wide range of in-service training, both on a whole-school and an individual basis. Governors spoke of the importance of research and the lead the headteachers had given.

4. The recognition of pupils that they are active participants in their own learning

All three schools have long traditions of school and class councils. All pupils interviewed felt very strongly that they were listened to by the adults in the school and that their views were often acted upon. Pupils from all three schools gave examples of changes that had come about because of school council proposals. Pupils were also involved in interviewing new staff and had input into the school improvement plan. Pupils could explain very clearly their meta-cognitive processes and strategies and preferences for learning; when they liked to learn alone and when in a group, for instance, and the advantages and disadvantages of each. Children believed that school was preparing them well for their future lives by enabling them to become confident learners who were able to use their skills to discover new information. They were also aware of the wider range of skills they were developing.

Conclusions

The three elements in our model of a thinking school are:

- constructivist leadership
- sustainability through community of enquiry as a way of life
- learning together through school and community enrichment

Having begun the journey a while ago, we reflect back upon the steps along the road. Our vision of a thinking school is proving to be achievable, part of the movement that sees schools moving from being respondents to centralised reform, to leaders of their learning community. If a community can learn, it should be no surprise that a school can think.

Acknowledgements

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