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How are English Secondary Schools Interpreting their Freedom to be Different?

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Introduction

This study was inspired by the growing debate surrounding the need for diversity and variation in approaches to schooling. This trend is in turn underpinned by the recognition that change at the local school level is not only desirable but essential if the changing needs of students are to be met.

This recognition has already been embraced to some extent by policy makers. For instance, *A New Specialist System – Transforming Secondary Education* describes the DfES's strategy for secondary schooling, including a limited, managed deregulation of the secondary school system and an increased number of specialist schools. At the same time, this and other more local initiatives have been accompanied by a framework of accountability and responsibility, which has limited the extent to which real diversification has occurred.

The publication in 2003 of the government's Green Paper, *Every Child Matters* further focused attention on the need for improvement in the school system, not least in terms of its organisational structures and fundamental terms of reference.

This study is intended to contribute to this ongoing debate by seeking to provide an outsider's perspective on the issue of how English secondary schools are currently interpreting their freedom to be different. More specifically, it focuses on:

- heads' freedom to lead creatively
- the possibilities and constraints for leadership that Transforming Secondary Schools introduces
- what heads perceive to be their greatest creative achievement
- initiatives heads would have liked to pursue but were unable to

It is based on formal interviews with nine serving headteachers, undertaken during late 2003. It also draws on a large number of conversations and interactions with heads, Ofsted inspectors and LEA advisers.

The remainder of this summary outlines individuals' insights and reflections on the issue highlighted above. These themes and ideas are described in detail in the full report, available at www.ncsl.org.uk/researchassociates

Findings

There was no universal agreement amongst the headteachers interviewed as to whether or not they had freedom to innovate. Some were more confident than others of their authority to do so because of personal conviction or evidence of support from quarters such as the governing body or the LEA. At the same time there was an evident tension about the extent to which authority was truly given to headteachers.

The individuals interviewed displayed a strong commitment to change that seemed to be motivated by an innate desire to improve the quality of education their students received, rather than by the broader Transforming Secondary Schools agenda. Headteachers were changing the practices and policies of their schools because they believed the present ones were inadequate. However they also identified those external forces that prevented them innovating — a lack of funding, the presence of the National Curriculum, the Ofsted inspection framework and the expectations of the local community were foremost amongst these.

An implicit aspect of these headteachers' greatest achievements was a recognition of the need to address both national goals and local challenges. At the heart of this was a desire to address the broader educational requirements of their pupils.

Emerging themes

At national level, there is clear, formal encouragement for limited in-school innovation, for instance within *Transforming Secondary Education*. There also appears to be practical encouragement, for instance through incentive grants, the establishment of a DfES Innovation Unit, networks focused on encouraging innovation and a commitment to delivering an improved future rather than replicating the past.

However at the school level, headteachers who were interviewed in this research viewed the agenda differently, and in general did not appear to feel encouraged to innovate. Instead they identified a range of factors which limited their ability to introduce change. These included insufficient finance, curriculum restrictions, inspections, league tables and other accountability measurements.

It was suggested to me in informal conversations that this lack of freedom might exist only in headteachers' minds and as such may not be a reality. However, there is evidence to support the idea that such constraints are tangible. Collectively, many of these constraints point towards the existence of a culture fundamentally at odds with the notion of school transformation. As seen by those heads interviewed, foremost amongst these is the existence of a blame culture surrounding education, which often results in schools displaying a greater dependency on central authorities and a reluctance to innovate.

Few would deny the need for accountability. However others would argue that it is even more important to build a supportive culture within which schools are able to grow, explore and experiment with new ideas and ways of learning, and within which they are encouraged to look for new solutions.

More broadly, the fact that there are guidelines as to what can be changed is not missed by headteachers and often serves as a further disincentive to innovate. While some argue that the emergence of specialist schools goes some way towards achieving the greater diversity the English secondary schools system needs, others say it is diversity within a narrow framework.

Despite these reservations, those headteachers I met continue to find ways to innovate within their schools. There are several areas of particularly fertile ground in this regard – approaches to teaching and learning, curriculum development, the distribution of leadership opportunities, the use of ICT and community involvement. For the headteachers that I interviewed, change was part of their daily life.

The examples of in-school innovation outlined to me in the interviews represent significant changes in thinking. However they do not as yet indicate the emergence of a more fundamental paradigm shift. Many schools are tinkering within the framework but few are stepping outside and radically changing their approach to schooling. My view would be that in order for this to take place, some essential change to the culture within which education takes place in England needs to occur. There is not yet a culture that challenges the status quo, which invites new and radical initiatives and yet does not undermine the substantial gains made in so many areas. My perspective as an outsider suggests that the school system needs a reformed professionalism that is supported by national agendas, which can manage ambiguity and which is not afraid of making mistakes. Collectively it needs the real will to change.

Research associate reports available in spring 04

Improving Schools Facing Challenging Circumstances: Perspectives from leading thinkers, David Ansell, General Manager Operations, The Smith Family, Australia

The School as a Professional Learning Community: Perspectives from Tasmanian and English schools on the essentials for creating a community of learning in a school, Annette Hollingsworth, Principal of Cressy District High School, Tasmania, Australia

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