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Teacher Leaders and Reflective Practitioners:

Building the capacity of a school
to improve by promoting research
and reflection

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Introduction

Just as a correctly set amplifier will create perfect sound, so too certain conditions prevailing in a school will allow for maximum and robust improvement. My view is that a climate in which all individuals are empowered to lead, as well as contribute to, particular strategies, all focused on learning, is the best method to harness strengths and to combine talents. The full report of this research is a case study of a secondary school which moved from the category of “specific weakness” (Ofsted 2000) to “a good school” (Ofsted 2003) by using action research to create a greater awareness of self and situation, building a self-reflective culture to nurture school improvement.

Context

When I was appointed as the headteacher of The Lord Grey School, I knew that many challenges lay ahead. Ofsted confirmed my views within two weeks of the appointment, placing the school into “specific weakness”. I believed that the effective way to immediately promote school improvement was to encourage staff to review their professional practice through some form of active reflection. Motivated individuals would form the basis of strong teams.

In partnership with the Open University, we hoped to record organisational change. As we set out to change the ethos of the school and to improve its overall efficiency, we wanted to monitor developments in teaching and learning.

In establishing links with the Open University, I was conscious of four potential strengths:

- The links with the Open University were local, accessible and relevant to school and staff development.
- The individual projects established, as part of the collaborative action research, would have practical applications.
- The Open University contacts would provide the necessary experience and guidance for perhaps hesitant staff to engage on reflective pedagogy and academic learning.
- A more flexible and open-minded working culture would develop, as teachers gained the opportunity to reflect on learning.

A number of important school factors had to be considered:

1. Standards of students’ performance and achievement had to rise. Low expectations had led to poor student performance. Reflective, resourceful practitioners within the teaching and support staff would raise expectations.
2. Staffing was a priority. In July 2000, the school had 20 teaching vacancies and the national recruitment crisis was emerging. Issues of the recruitment and retention of staff inevitably would increase as the situation worsened. For teachers to enhance their professional performance and personal development, they need opportunities to continue their own learning and to be developed as learners. Staff were encouraged to increase their self-awareness, to share ideas and to become more reflective and self-critical.
3. Students’ learning opportunities would be maximised by the creation of an enthusiastic staff wishing to reflect on best practice.
4. Increasing the capacity for the school’s improvement was crucial. Creating a collegiate, open and transparent working environment meant that the potential to effect rapid improvement was significantly improved. The foundations would also be secured for the long-term future of the school.

A new mission statement was developed to explicitly define the future direction of the school:

“To create an enjoyable, open, inclusive learning partnership, built on the small steps of life-long education with high standards of teaching and learning, delivered in a safe environment in which motivation is managed effectively and in which citizenship is promoted.”

The new school motto reflected the challenge:

“Excellence: Dare to Succeed.”

Our initial research

In partnership, individual members of staff worked with academic researchers to develop thinking about best practices. The staff analysed and discussed how to change students' perceptions and to promote a culture of improvement. A range of small-scale research projects within the school focused on "promoting organisational learning" through collaborative action research. (The findings were presented to the British Educational Research Association conference in September 2001).

Three years on from the original contact, the link with the Open University remains strong with additional staff contributing to new research projects. The school is now part of the Milton Keynes Secondary Network Learning Community. The benefit of encouraging action research is that learning is given the highest profile in the school.

Our research activity

Visits to other schools

We hoped that in releasing staff to visit peers fulfilling similar roles in other schools in the UK, they would be able to carry out a simple benchmarking exercise.

Personal reflection

We wanted to also look at the thoughts and opinions of the research team in order to provide a context for our findings.

Leadership

The research team adopted a two-phase approach to this research, examining their own leadership styles and practice and comparing themselves with staff fulfilling similar roles in other schools. The objective was to identify and test the main characteristics of educational leaders, focusing on both teachers and support staff. We believed that there was a link between leadership styles and the ability to build the capacity of a school to improve. Staff were also asked to consider how their leadership qualities had helped to improve our school.

Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL)

During the course of our leadership research, we came across the work of SEDL, based in Texas, USA. SEDL is a research and development organisation, with a remit to identify ways and means of improving educational practice. As part of their research into successful educational leadership, SEDL have identified six main characteristics displayed by successful leaders. In summary, they:

- have vision
- believe that schools are for learning
- value human resources
- are an effective communicator and listener
- act proactively
- take risks

We sought to test the validity of these assertions and examine the extent to which educational leaders display these characteristics. We therefore developed a questionnaire that was then completed by a number of educational leaders in schools which our research team visited throughout the UK.

How has the research helped to improve the school?

Throughout the research, our team has been keen to ensure that there is a practical, successful and appropriate application of our findings. It was therefore important that we were able to compare any shifts in perceptions of school improvements at the start and later stages of the research. Our aim was to try and correlate our findings with school improvements. We are in no doubt that the research and the culture of teacher leadership we have created has made a significant contribution to the movement of the school from the category of "specific weakness" (Ofsted 2000) to "a good school" (Ofsted 2003)

How has the research impacted on the individual?

In the final stage of our research, we felt that it was important to examine the ways in which the process of research, along with the subsequent findings, had impacted on the professional lives of the research team. We constructed and analysed a second questionnaire, aiming to help the team focus their thoughts on the difference which the research had made to them. Overall, the staff agreed that the research process had enhanced and helped develop their professional lives, facilitating a more reflective way of working.

Conclusion

Overall, it has been our aim to reflect on the link between leadership and building the capacity of a school. We have collectively come to the view that schools improve by harnessing the leadership qualities of all individuals. Our research has allowed us to define these qualities and to appreciate how the actual process of the research has helped to promote learning both for the individuals concerned and the organisation itself. In short, we have formulated the view that the way to build the capacity of a school to improve is by creating teacher leaders: reflective practitioners who act.

We believe we have improved the school significantly by using action research to create a greater awareness of self and situation, to enhance career development and opportunity, and to create a self-reflective and evaluative culture – in sum, a learning community aspiring towards the highest standards.

Research associate reports available in summer 2004

Building Bridges: A study of independent-state school partnerships, James Turner, Head of Junior School, Sunderland High School

Children's Voices: Pupil leadership in primary schools, Kaye Johnson, Principal, Woodville Primary School, Adelaide, South Australia

From Lost Learning Opportunities to Drivers of Attainment, Peter Rubery, Headteacher Fallibroome High School

Summary and full reports of these and previous research associate studies are available from the NCSL website at www.ncsl.org.uk/researchpublications

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- Study visits
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