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Research Associate Summary Report

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Does the Net work?

How can a networked learning community promote and develop leadership?

Summer 2006

Introduction

Networks of schools are becoming increasingly important in education as the benefits of collaborative learning are recognised (DfES, 2004). The network that forms the focus of this study developed as a result of the enthusiasm and vision of 23 headteachers from a range of educational establishments in the Huntingdon area under the banner of transforming learning communities. The network is called HuntSNet, and three years on it continues to respond to the local and national agenda in its aims to meet the needs of its stakeholders.

This study investigated how HuntSNet encouraged the leadership development of its members. The definition of leadership used here incorporates the notion that people are inspired to work willingly towards group goals (Yukl, 2002; Northouse, 2004). The nature of this study also gave an insight into how a network can be developed and sustained.

Methods

HuntSNet's work is wide ranging and its membership very broad. A variety of methods was therefore used to collect information regarding its structures, activities and impact on leadership.

This report uses the following sources:

- questionnaires completed by members of the leadership teams of HuntSNet establishments
- interviews with a sample of headteachers
- analysis of the attendance and participation of:
 - staff within network activities
 - pupils in enhanced curricular opportunities
- additional documentary evidence, including that relating to an action research project

Structures in HuntSNet

HuntSNet's foundation was based on a clear statement of purpose and intention developed by the 23 headteachers. Initially, an audit undertaken by the newly appointed facilitator produced a list of priorities based on information from each participating school. From this, the network's structures were determined at a network launch conference for headteachers. Five working groups were identified to fulfil the aims and vision of the network, namely:

- ICT
- inclusion
- continuity
- people and partnerships
- creativity

Headteachers volunteered to chair each of these groups.

Wider representation came from headteachers choosing to join one of the groups and subsequently, senior leaders, special educational needs co-ordinators and governor groups were added. Most recently, membership of the groups has been opened to any member of staff from the network establishments. A strategic group comprising all the chairs was also formed.

A non-teacher facilitator was appointed to ensure effective communication within and between working groups, for example by collating and distributing agendas, taking and distributing minutes and co-ordinating the organisation of the many network events. The facilitator is also involved in bidding for specific grants.

Findings

Attitudes and involvement in HuntSNet groups

Points made in the questionnaires completed by headteachers and deputy headteachers included the following.

- HuntSNet provides a forum for headteachers' leadership development and continuing professional development (CPD).
- The network's structures and the work undertaken allow headteachers to keep up to date with important educational issues.
- Headteachers expressed an appreciation of the 'critical friend' element of the network.
- Planning and organising pupil events provided leadership development opportunities for subject leaders and other staff.
- Headteachers and other staff in small schools benefited from meeting, discussing and planning with others.
- Headteachers felt that involvement in major CPD events arranged by HuntSNet contributed to leadership development for a number of their staff.

The togetherness of the group in working towards agreed goals has added to my leadership experience and expertise.

Headteacher

Headteacher perspectives

The real strength of the group is continued co-operation in organising and sustaining a range of activities that improve learning and raise achievement across all phases.

Headteacher

Headteachers interviewed made the following points.

- Working groups provide a diversity of opportunity and representation.
- The network provides a powerful voice, especially for smaller schools.
- There is mutual trust and openness between all the schools.
- The support offered by all members of HuntSNet provides a real sense of belonging.
- The network functions through professional respect, motivation and participation.
- The vision for senior leadership in schools has been widened.
- The HuntSNet website increasingly provides an effective communication tool.
- HuntSNet has provided a medium through which schools can respond strategically to local and national initiatives.
- The network is set up to embrace change and broaden its appeal with varied activities and focus.

Attendance and participation of staff and pupils in network activities

The main points to arise from the review of data relating to this were as follows.

- All schools had representation on two or more groups, with average attendance of 60 per cent.
- Attendance at the half-termly headteacher meetings was higher than 60 per cent.
- There have been three shared professional days focusing on key development areas.

Shared development opportunities, eg assessment for learning (AfL) have been excellent and had a real impact on our school.

Headteacher

- The AfL action research projects that followed a shared professional day enabled leadership capacity to be developed in the schools.
- Collaborative learning events have been well supported by schools and enjoyed by large numbers of pupils. For example, an event that took place annually for three years involved 1,200 children.

Issues and actions

Three examples of issues to which the network needed to respond were as follows.

- Attendance in specific groups was diminishing. Action was taken to evaluate and reflect upon the causes and consider solutions at the half-termly headteachers' forum. This resulted in changes to group membership and/or headteacher intervention to assess the reasons for non-attendance and secure the commitment of members.
- At the biennial review, it was felt that there was a need to extend participation to other members of the school communities in order to embed the work of the network across staff teams and extend leadership opportunities. Positive action to involve more staff within schools beyond the leadership team has resulted in much wider participation, so for example ICT co-ordinators may now take a lead in transition-related projects.
- The network recognises the need to increase effectiveness and evaluation (for example, the impact on learning). In response, every working group has now built in self-evaluation activities to all action plans to ensure increased rigour, for example using post-activity questionnaires that are completed by teachers and/or pupils.

Conclusions

HuntSNet activities have allowed senior leaders to develop their leadership skills and have also given a large number of other staff leadership development activities through:

- developing and sharing the vision for the network
- CPD for all teaching staff and a growing number of non-teaching staff
- staff taking leadership roles in developing and implementing group action plans
- headteachers and other staff chairing and/or having membership of groups
- headteachers enabling, encouraging and supporting their staff to participate
- evaluating network impact and outcomes through self-evaluation activities

Hints for building and sustaining successful networks

The following points have contributed to its success, and may be applicable to other networks:

- a clear commitment from all headteachers and governing bodies, indicated for example through its inclusion in school improvement plans and by providing funding
- a commitment to the network's autonomy to create local solutions
- a clear and shared vision for the network that is represented in its written aims and values
- regular evaluation and impact of network activity alongside a biennial conference that reviews the work of the previous two years and informs updating of the action plans for the following two years. This includes redefining the structure (for example of working groups) and strategy according to need
- enabling and promoting active participation by large numbers of staff

- providing CPD for staff, for example using whole-school and network conferences
- encouragement of a creative approach for staff and pupils, for example through music festival and arts projects
- clearly defining the facilitation role and allowing time for this to be done, for example by appointing a network facilitator

The influence of the network has been reflected in the development of two primary strategy learning networks for literacy and numeracy. These are comprised of schools from HuntSNet and have got off to a very effective start due to the well-defined operating procedures and expectations established.

Network sustainability has been achieved through maintaining the relevance to, and interest of, participants by changing the focus of groups to respond to both national and local priorities and by maintaining the voluntary nature of participation.

Acknowledgements

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References

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- Northouse, P G, 2004, *Leadership Theory and Practice*, London, Sage
- Yukl, G A, 2002, *Leadership in Organizations* (5th edn), Upper Saddle River, New Jersey, Prentice-Hall
- More information about HuntSNet is available at www.huntsnet.org.uk.

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