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Working Smarter Together:

The development of an enquiry team across 12 schools

“The best way to encourage teachers to share knowledge within a school is to get them to share knowledge with others outside the school, improving teaching and learning through partnership working between schools.” (Bentley 2002)

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Introduction

This is a summary of a full report which describes a challenge – how to embed action learning through practitioner enquiry across a network of schools formally recognised as a ‘small Excellence in Cities Action Zone’. The context for this report is a small action zone’s effort to exemplify how theory can impact upon practice through the development of practitioner enquiry teams.

The action zone profile

Within the action zone schools we wanted to build:

- a perspective which understands leadership expertise as extending beyond individual leaders
- an infrastructure of shared resources, collaborative learning and support for leadership opportunities
- multiple contexts for pupils and teachers to assume leadership roles
- ‘capacity’ for future learning, school improvement and managing change

The zone included one infant, one junior, one secondary and nine primary schools. Within the LEA three of the schools were seen as ‘high performing’, two were in ‘special measures’ as a result of OFSTED inspections and the remainder were underachieving by national standards. Prior to the formation of the zone there were no significant school-to-school relationships. Most of the headteachers and senior staff were recruited relatively recently. One outcome of meetings between the headteachers and the zone team was an aspiration towards ‘working smarter together’. A strong element of this would be empowering ‘leading links’, ie nominated teachers, to focus upon an area for school-based enquiry which would lead to improvement and impact across schools.

The development period

Over the development period of three months, key priority areas for improving pupils’ learning were agreed with the headteachers. A feature of the action planning was a focus on clear pupil outcomes, and a commitment to building leadership capacity within and across schools. A product of the zone’s developmental stage was the commitment to an ‘innovation strand’, that is, new approaches to entrenched issues.

The ‘leading links’ would support the development and, with the zone team, ensure the dissemination and further development of outcomes.

Recruitment, induction and professional development

It was possible to identify substantive themes and strands in the applications of the leading link teachers. This served as a valuable resource for the zone team in clarifying their understanding of the teachers’ perceptions of teamwork and guiding the process of induction and professional development in relation to working as an inter-school team.

The main challenge was how to organise and facilitate the bonding of the 12 leading link teachers, and how to build upon and develop their current knowledge and skills so that they would feel confident to pursue school-based enquiry. Integral to our planning was a partnership with a local university and an educational consultancy.

A framework for development was agreed at our meetings with the teachers and a planned model of adult learning promoted by the zone team. The model incorporated what Munro (1999) advocates as a necessary set of conditions for change in teachers.

These are:

- learning through meaningful and active processes
- valuing tacit knowledge about learning
- framing challenges for learning
- engaging in collegiate, collaborative activities
- engaging in self direction and systematic reflection of practice
- exploring and demonstrating new teaching approaches

The framework for professional development identified four areas of learning:

- a coaching model
- classroom observation for improvement
- action learning for team development
- dissemination strategies

These components, delivered by a local university, a consultancy and the zone team, provided the structure to enable effective practitioner enquiry for school improvement.

The enquiry project

The collective enquiry project focused on improving an aspect of teaching and learning in relation to their own classrooms. In discussion with the zone team it had emerged that all leading link teachers expressed concerns about the limited opportunities for collaborative learning amongst pupils. They agreed that an enquiry project would be used to identify how interactive whiteboards might enhance collaborative learning amongst pupils. The interactive whiteboards were a means to an end – not an end in themselves.

- The zone team would provide on-going support by demonstrating the use of the whiteboards, giving feedback to teachers on their use of the equipment, and supportively challenging the project's progress.
- Leading link teachers would identify the area of enquiry from school/class data and compile a learning log of the progress of improving professional practice in their classroom/school.
- The enquiry would be reflective and self-evaluative with judgments based upon evidence, and open to peer scrutiny.
- There would be a collective onus to utilise the project's findings in order to promote greater understanding of the work through active dissemination of the outcomes.

Lessons learned

- Over a relatively short period of time (two terms) teachers can develop as action learners. They need to start with a defined, limited project.
- Professional development is meaningful when it develops the individual, relates to school improvement and impacts within the classroom.
- Professional empowerment stems from collaborative work with peers, the distribution of responsibility, accountability and available resources.
- Reflective practice, practitioner research and coaching through teachers working together help to enhance the craft skills of teaching and encourage innovation.

- An enquiry team across schools encourages a wider scope for solutions and action related to generic challenges and support for specific contextual issues.
- Effective support is best provided at different levels – within school, from peers and externally from trusted outsiders.
- Improving the classroom observation skills of teachers encourages peer observation and coaching for improvement.
- School development is best served through an alignment between personal, interpersonal and organisational learning.
- Teachers can be motivated and energised through an approach that provides a supportive framework for collaborative learning.
- Enquiry teams cutting across traditional school boundaries have the potential for work that is exciting, challenging and important. The team of 'leading links' worked together for the greater good of the zone (network) while individuals remained focused on enquiry for improvement at a school level.
- Working together with the zone team created a collective confidence amongst headteachers and teachers for developing ideas, creating leadership opportunities and building a platform for innovation.

The major learning from the project has been that it is possible in a relatively short period of time to establish an enquiry team across a network of schools. This generated work processes and relationships which have met personal and professional needs. It allowed teachers the opportunity to grow professionally and become powerful learners, and to feel empowered in turning ideas into working practices contributing to whole-school improvement.

References

- Bentley, T (2002) **What can be learned from previous networking initiatives?** (Presentation at the launch of the Networked Learning Communities)
- Munro, J (1999) **Learning more about learning to improve teacher effectiveness**, *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, 10(2), 151-171

Research Associate Reports Available in Autumn 02

Two Heads Better than One? Building a cross-phase school of the future, Alison Banks, Catherine Finn, Smita Bora, Karen Lee and Carol Watson, Chafford Hundred Campus, Thurrock

Working Smarter Together: The development of an enquiry team across 12 schools, Trish Franey, Networked Learning Communities

Open Windows: Becoming an e-learning school, Moyra Evans, formerly Denbigh School, Milton Keynes

Leading from the Classroom: The impact of the assistant headteacher in primary schools, Peter RJ Smith, Swallowdale Primary School, Melton Mowbray

Passion and Intuition: The impact of life history on leadership, Richard Parker, Lodge Park Technology College, Corby

The First 100 Days: An enquiry into the first 100 days of headship in a failing school, Patricia Brown, School Development Adviser, Hertfordshire

Team Talk: Sharing leadership in primary schools, Alison Kelly, Hooe Primary School, Plymouth

The Intelligent Gaze: Leadership, lead learners and individual growth – a reflective enquiry, Steve Kenning, Callington Community School, Cornwall

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- Team enquiries
- Bursaries
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