

A U T U M N 2 0 0 4

Growing Your Own Leaders:

The impact of professional
development on school improvement

Penny Castagnoli, Headteacher, Beaconsfield High School
and **Nigel Cook**, Headteacher, The Disraeli School

“It’s important to recognise what people are good at, to focus on their strengths.”

Gill Race, Headteacher, Bourton Meadow

Context

These findings are drawn from interviews and surveys of schools that comprised the first phase of the Buckinghamshire Professional Development in Schools Project.

The aim of the project was to establish and develop a network of schools to act as models of good practice in staff development that could be replicated by other schools.

Schools were invited to apply to become part of the project; each school was required to conduct self-evaluation of their professional development provision. The quality of this provision was, in part, tested by our research.

The range of practices identified by schools included some or all of the following features:

- strengths in induction, monitoring, tutoring, peer training and coaching
- effective use of performance reviews and staff portfolios
- a supportive environment for initial teacher training
- a willingness to explore innovative ways of increasing capacity in initial teacher training
- an interest in action-based enquiry into learning

Methodology

Findings were based on in-depth interviews with headteachers and staff from 11 schools from the project. In addition to interviews, we used data provided by the project co-ordinator to identify the strengths of each school at the start and to evaluate progress at the end of the first year. Reference was made to LEA profile data and Ofsted reports, as well as external accreditation such as Investors in People.

Key questions for the investigation

- What is important for you as a leader when you plan for improvement in your school?
- What actions have you taken to facilitate professional development?
- What are the essential characteristics of effective professional development in schools?

We hoped that the tentative answers to these questions would give us an indication of how much emphasis in terms of time and resources schools should place on professional development in Buckinghamshire schools.

“Our warm and welcoming atmosphere encourages positive relationships, which foster trust, respect and a willingness to take risks. Our whole-staff approach to professional development supports school improvement...”

Dick Millington, Chepping View Primary

The findings

Our interviews with the headteachers and other staff in the schools suggested that the climates in the project schools had much in common. At the end of the first year of the project, the following statement was drawn up as a statement of Professional Development School identity:

“A Professional Development School exhibits the gains in students’ learning to be had from all staff continuing to be learners themselves, enriching their professional knowledge and securing advances in effective practice. These schools have strengths in induction, mentoring, tutoring, peer training and coaching. They are a rich environment for initial teacher training and work collaboratively with HE and other schools in providing placements. Action research, professional reviews, portfolios and planned opportunities for learning are key features.”

From our interviews, the following findings stood out:

- In all the schools, there was a clear vision about learning on the part of the headteacher. Heads tended to talk about how children learn rather than how teachers teach. Learning was seen as something that all members of staff do too.
- Standards were emphasised. This is not to say that all the schools had high academic results; the expectations of the school were high and pupils made good progress. Standards of behaviour, display and commitment were also high.
- The school’s vision was supported by appropriate structures and processes, such as staff induction, and performance management practices and expectations were made explicit. People were clear about their role in the organisation. The schools had sought accreditations for their work in staff development. Investors in People was common, as was Charter Mark.
- Emphasis was placed on the importance of recruiting and developing the right people. The professional development co-ordinator’s role was crucial, as were identified mentors. Many schools had also recruited advanced skills teachers.

- Schools were proactive in seeking out local and national initiatives in teacher training. They considered sustainability by building succession planning into all processes; this ensured that the impact of changes in personnel was minimised. A partnership approach with local ITT providers and other schools enabled them to use the Graduate Teacher Programme, the Registered Teacher Programme and the Overseas Trained Teacher Programme to good effect.
- A sense of excitement was evident in all the schools. There was a certain ‘buzz’ and a sense of ownership that seemed to come from a caring team. People talked about learning. Action research, Best Practice Research Scholarships, NPQH and masters programmes were being undertaken.

“Organisations can transform when they can establish mechanisms for learning in the dailiness of organizational life.”

Michael Fullan: *Leading in a culture of change*

Conclusion

Our research findings indicate a link between good practice observed in schools and key outcomes relating to successful professional development of staff. The following were found to be essential:

- The leadership team must prioritise staff development and training. These need to be reflected in targeted developments in the school improvement plan.
- A champion to take the lead is essential – the professional development co-ordinator. Other key people need to be identified, trained and then empowered to do the job.
- Issues of sustainability must be addressed. Getting the right people takes time and money; you need to keep them as long as you can and you need to train new people to take over when they leave.
- This type of staff development programme is complex and multi-faceted. Time for implementation needs to be recognised and built into the planning. There are no simple answers – working on one aspect alone does not work!

“Personal relationships are important. Staff have to know that we consider their welfare in any innovations.”

Sue Tanner, Chalfonts Community College

Features of a good staff development programme

- Training and development are key aspects of the school improvement plan and the training plan reflects the development priorities of the school.
- Training and development happen on the job as well as on courses.
- Trainers (eg heads of department) receive training themselves. Time allowance is made for them.
- Regular time is set aside for staff development interviews.
- Training takes place at all levels from senior managers down.
- Process is important – ie 180° or 360° appraisal.
- There is involvement in ITT at departmental level.
- Time and training for NQT mentors is available.
- Professional development portfolios are used.
- There are targeted training programmes – eg early years of teaching/middle management.
- Peer-assisted training is employed.
- Targeted training funds are devolved to departments, which are accountable for the outcome.
- Coaching skills are taught.
- Professional standards are linked to everyday practice.
- Promotion happens from within the organisation.
- Mechanisms to create successful professional development are established for support staff through to leadership.

Headteachers' 12 Top Tips

“The soft stuff is the hard stuff...”

Fullan: p.39

Consider the following:

- Make your expectations very clear. Realistically high expectations lead to high performance.
- Find ways to value your staff. Arrange for tea/coffee at break; get a dishwasher. Arrange for a reflexologist to visit! Provide equipment to enhance the job, eg laptops.
- Create occasions when your staff can get together socially weekly volleyball or termly meal.
- Encourage sharing good practice; put up a notice-board in the staffroom about learning
- Wherever possible, reward – eg give time
- Cut meetings to a minimum; insist on agendas
- Create team areas so people can work together
- Teach coaching skills, use mentors and buddies to support staff
- Think about how you can induct people as quickly as possible.
- Know your school and, in particular your staff; be visible and accessible.
- Set up the systems that support what you want to achieve.
- Keep it real – link standards to everyday practice

References

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Research associate reports available in autumn 2004

In Search of the X-Factor: A group enquiry into the secret of maintaining continuous school success, Marie Graham, Headteacher, Roseberry Infant School, Stockton-on-Tees

Know Where You Are Going: How five headteachers led innovations that go beyond the National Curriculum and national strategies to enhance children's learning, John Grove, Belleville Primary School, Battersea, London

Tidying the Cupboard? The role of subject leaders in primary schools. How can subject leaders in a primary school share their talents and expertise to make a positive impact on teaching and learning in the school? David Burrows, Headteacher, Ladygrove Park Primary School, Didcot, Oxfordshire

Leadership on the Frontline: Thriving and surviving in challenging circumstances. Lessons learned from taking part in a university-led research project based on the experiences of 18 headteachers from schools in Belfast, Liverpool and London. Paula Taylor-Moore, Headteacher, Didcot Girls' School, Didcot, Oxfordshire

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**National College for
School Leadership**
Triumph Road
Nottingham NG8 1DH

T: 0870 001 1155
F: 0115 872 2001

www.ncsl.org.uk

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