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Research Associate Summary Report

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One step ahead of the game

Leading change in ICT in support of pupil learning

Summer 2007

Context

The report *A New Approach to School Leadership* (Knight, 2007) recommends that the traditional leadership model for headship should be revisited as school leaders accept and embrace change. Headteachers need to adopt a more strategic rather than operational focus, and move away from 'spending time unblocking toilets, filling dishwashers and avoiding their leadership responsibilities.' (Milne, 2007). At the same time, a recent independent report into school leadership (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2007) suggested that there is a clear sense among school leaders that their role has become more challenging and complex.

Meanwhile, in the pre-budget statement in December 2006, the Chancellor of the Exchequer Gordon Brown referred to the need for Britain to become 'the most educated nation in the world' (HM Treasury, 2006), and in January 2007, Christine Gilbert, (Gilbert, 2006) of the 2020 Teaching and Learning Review Group, reported how personalised learning will transform education in the future. The latter identified the need to take ICT into account in redesigning the infrastructure of schools in order to provide greater opportunity for personalised learning and extending learning opportunities at home.

This research project examined how the headteachers of five primary schools are using technological advances in order to improve the quality of education for their pupils. It explored the use of ICT, describing headteachers who embrace change and enjoy the challenge of being modern leaders in modern schools.

Schools were selected to reflect a balance between church and community, urban and rural, and male and female headteachers. In order to sample schools with established good practice in ICT, three schools were chosen from the ICT Register, one school was recommended by Becta and one was a local school with an 'outstanding' Ofsted report.

Background and introduction

In the summer term of 2006, a case study group of five people comprising headteachers and co-ordinators was interviewed about how they had sought to make their schools 'one step ahead of the game' in the use of ICT. The selected schools were from a variety of social settings and differed in size. The headteachers were also dissimilar and had differing visions for how they wanted their schools to develop.

The potential of ICT is so wide that all five schools were using it in different ways. Collectively, they offered a range of personalised learning opportunities for instance using media such as a virtual learning environment, learning platforms, multimedia presentations and animation. ICT was also used to monitor student progress through assessment for learning and achievement tracking. ICT was thus variously embedded across the curriculum, in assessment and in communications. Individually, each school developed by following its own passion and reflecting the needs of its school community. If there was one common factor that linked them, it was the enthusiasm and commitment that the five headteachers brought to their jobs.

Because the schools were so diverse, the use of ICT had developed differently in each instance. All the headteachers recognised the need for change and to develop continually, in order to improve provision in their schools. There were some similarities in the way this group of headteachers managed the changes demanded by introducing new technology.

Leadership characteristics

The interviewees shared a number of leadership characteristics. These included:

- a passion for education and school leadership
- a commitment to the achievements of children, pedagogy and raising self-esteem
- an interest in ICT as a tool for learning rather than a desire to follow the latest trend or to adopt new technology for its own sake
- excitement about the future and belief that their school is improving and will continue to improve
- an understanding of their particular school, the children, the parents, the staff and the community and an appreciation of strategies needed to bring about change
- the ability to articulate vision, to share with others and to assimilate different views in order to develop a sense of cohesion and direction
- an awareness that they don't need to be expert or lead practitioner but that they do have to have sufficient knowledge to recognise a good thing when they see it
- a readiness to listen to the views of others, from within or outside the school
- a healthy scepticism and desire to see things in action
- a sense of innovation and challenge and a desire to keep their school one step ahead of the game

Leadership strategies

The study showed that to turn vision into reality, the headteachers identified strengths in their workforce, the wider community and pupils, in order to make the most of the people and resources available to them. They involved stakeholders and kept governors informed and involved. In these schools, development planning was a dynamic process that included many interested parties. Headteachers did not lead in isolation. They had faith in their staff, saw their strengths and looked for opportunities to empower others.

They were prepared to invent new jobs, for example, employing people specifically to support developments in ICT or introducing new job specifications as the needs of the school changed. They provided appropriate support to make projects work. Some headteachers involved in this study had innovative ideas about how to provide different levels of technical support, and used continuing professional development in areas such as getting the most out of software, developing and using the technical skills of teaching assistants and managing websites.

Implications for leadership

The findings of this work highlighted the following key implications for leaders in this field. These are:

- ICT is expensive. To get it right it takes time and a lot of money. Headteachers need to be entrepreneurial and creative in securing sufficient funding to support this activity.

Headteachers need to:

- understand what a teacher needs to do in order to use new technology while being aware that they don't need to be able to do everything themselves
- stay in touch with how children learn to see the value of what is available
- understand the demands on teachers, and work within an appropriate timeframe, properly resourced and with suitable training
- be adaptable. If something does not live up to expectations, have a rethink
- be aware of the importance of timing, know when staff are ready for new initiatives and avoid increasing stress levels unnecessarily
- keep parents and governors involved and informed of new developments
- take as many opportunities as possible to look at what is going on in other schools

Conclusions

The strength of the headteachers involved comes from their understanding of their schools, teachers and the way children learn. These heads understood and respected the need for change and had long accepted change management as part of their daily life, particularly with the pace of change in ICT. Headteachers understood the need to prepare children for their future in a very different world, and recognised the role ICT could play this. Equally, they sought to avoid change for change's sake, and looked instead to introduce changes that could add value to the students' learning experience, a view epitomised by the following quotation:

ICT is not seen as the be-all and end-all or the main way that children are going to learn but it is seen as supporting approaches that will help children learn better, by enabling children to think clearly and communicate effectively. We are interested in empowering children to do things for themselves, to think for themselves, to understand their own learning needs and to do something to address those learning needs.
(Headteacher)

All the headteachers interviewed demonstrated the ability to look outward from their schools and to see what was happening in other schools locally and further afield. Each school was different and responded to the needs of the children and community to which it belonged. No school reflected the full potential of ICT but each had developed strengths in response to need. Visiting other schools, exchanging ideas and involvement in programmes such as SLICT or the ICT Register allowed headteachers to look outward and see what was available so that informed decisions could be made. To be one step ahead of the game was enough.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my appreciation to all those who gave their time in contributing to this study.

References and further reading

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