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Research Associate Summary Report

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Picturing preferred futures

Using case studies to investigate solution-focused approaches to school improvement

Summer 2007

“Clearly both problems and solutions do exist. However it is not always the case that they are connected or dependent on each other.” (Mahlberg 2004)

Schools spend a lot of time investigating the causes of perceived underperformance within areas of the school and then set about rectifying those problems. Could it be that by developing an approach which focuses on goals rather than problems, we could better spend our energies? A solution-seeking organisation that plans development to achieve goals, rather than analysing failure, is a solution-focused one.

Introduction

This study investigates the application of solution-focused methods to the area of school improvement. The study comprises three UK schools and one in Sweden which all practise solution-focused approaches to school improvement in varying degrees. The purpose of the study was to identify:

- The amount of staff collaboration and co-operation in all aspects of school improvement, particularly within teams, to build a sense of ownership.
- The involvement of all staff in their own personal development, through mentoring and modelling built on strengths not issues for development
- The extent to which the specific tools of solution-focused working were used.

Method

In each school a series of semi-structured interviews took place with staff at varying levels within the school. Interviews allowed a degree of analysis and reflection about the involvement of the interviewee in whole-school improvement, team participation and personal development. In particular, interviews explored to what extent the tools of solution-focused working had been used.

Findings

The research locates solution-focused working within the context of strategic leadership, learning-centred leadership and distributed leadership models. It argues that the gap between the leader’s vision for the school and the commitment of all staff to achieving this vision is where many organisations become culturally unstuck. All the schools within the study had developed their own approaches to closing this gap with different interpretations about how solution-focused working could help them do so. It is felt that the solution-focused approach, based on constructive dialogue and goal-setting at an individual and group level, gives a number of tools to enable staff to be involved in designing and achieving the vision.

It is clear that tools alone will be less effective if they are not applied within a positive culture. Within an education system focused on analysis of pupil performance results and league tables, many staff are fearful of being identified as failing. One of the issues facing school leaders is how to foster a culture of success where staff are confident to put their head above the parapet. It is felt that the following are necessary prerequisites:

Commitment and collaboration

All schools within the study reflected on the need for a leadership team to be committed to adopting a solution-focused approach. The use of many of the tools for encouraging staff contribution can quickly be negated if staff believe their contribution is not appreciated, they risk criticism or the leadership team is paying lip service to consultation. Having a member of the leadership team driving school improvement in a solution-focused way appears a successful approach to incorporating personal and team goals into school improvement.

Staff collegiality in the decision-making process has led to a greater diversity of ideas for all aspects of school improvement. Where staff are able to develop their own solutions to the issues facing them and the school as a whole, it was clear that they felt a greater commitment to those solutions.

Applying solution-focused tools

The tools used in solution-focused working are directly applicable to whole-school improvement. The use of four specific solution-focused tools were fundamental to the success of the approach. These approaches were evident in varying degrees in different school contexts. The four tools are:

- **Exception finding:** identifying those times when success was achieved. Using this tool as a structural part of team meetings was found to be effective in helping identify strategies for future success rather than analysing failure.
- **Celebrating progress:** recognising the small steps taken to achieve the overall goal. People at all levels of responsibility felt that recognising the little things they have done towards strategic whole-school goals helped those goals to stay alive during the year. Schools felt that frequently revisiting these goals during team meetings secured a greater commitment to their achievement.
- **Scaling:** using scales to measure progress towards the goal. This was felt to be very important for allowing staff to take ownership of their progress and improvement. Where scales were used frequently in staff meetings to identify 'where on the scale are we now', 'where do we want to be' and 'how do we get there', staff felt not only a sense of ownership of the goal but that they had a direct influence on achieving it.
- **Picturing preferred futures:** goal-setting to identify where you want to be in 12 months time. Where schools adopted this approach to goal-setting it appeared that not only did the goals become clearer but that all staff felt positive towards their achievement rather than negative towards perceived failures to date.

Valuing relationships

One of the overriding themes from all those interviewed was the notion that by incorporating solution-focused methodologies to meetings, staff appeared to believe that peer relationships had improved and there was a greater sense of shared purpose. In addition, staff also stated that they had a greater appreciation of the work and successes of other members of staff.

Feeling valued is difficult to quantify. However phrases such as "we enjoy working here", "I feel I am accepted as a person" and "staff are happy to come to work" kept reoccurring throughout the interviews with staff at all levels of all four organisations.

Conclusions

- Where the leader demonstrates a belief in staff by allowing them the opportunity to find their own solutions to issues, commitment to improvement appears to be greatly enhanced.
- Recognising the strengths of staff appears to allow school leaders opportunities to build positive solutions in collaboration with them.
- Solution-focused tools allow a framework for collaboration and potentially give staff a number of "skills" in managing team and department interactions.
- Solution-focused working formalises opportunities for staff to feel their contribution is valued and enhances relationships in a mutually supportive school ethos.
- Any of the three elements of commitment, tools and relationships can be successful in bringing about school improvement, but all three in partnership give the greatest potential for success.

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