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Research Associate Summary Report

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Mutual support, mutual challenge

Exploring a model of peer headteacher learning focused
on self-evaluation and school improvement

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Background

Headship can be a lonely and sometimes difficult task. Just who do you go to when you want to raise a problem or discuss a burning issue when you are responsible for leading a school where there are serious concerns?

There has been an emphasis in recent years upon schools working in networked groups, for example, Networked Learning Communities and Primary Learning Networks. Their potential to reduce this loneliness and enhance leadership capacity has been noted.

Networks can provide the forum for colleagues to address genuinely new, and often difficult, ideas in a safe environment, away from the risk of retribution or censure in their daily place of work.

Earl et al, 2006, p 11

This study investigated how a home-grown solution could support colleague headteachers in challenging circumstances. This solution employed a collaborative approach in which support was not simply empathetic but rigorous. It enabled a group of headteachers, including myself, to meet regularly in order to analyse school issues, reflect on practice and consider self-evaluation.

Methods

A range of schools was represented within the group of seven but the majority were facing challenging circumstances.

Seven individual interviews were conducted and these were repeated after three months and then again after six months. On each occasion the same questions were used in order to assess improvements gained.

We also looked at outcomes of Ofsted inspections, where these were carried out within the timescales of the research, to assess the degree of school improvement in the member schools.

How the group worked together

The group started as a pilot leadership learning group of 14 headteachers from the same local authority who were funded by NCSL to develop a learning network.

After the pilot year, 10 of the headteachers went on to create a self-motivated, collaborative group that met regularly to discuss, challenge and analyse in order to improve practice in their schools.

Three approaches

Three approaches that ran parallel throughout the collaborative work were as follows.

- There was shared discussion and focused enquiry through the whole group meetings. We used a solution-focused coaching approach based on John Whitmore's GROW methodology (2002). This entailed members:
 - setting themselves **G**oals
 - using **R**eality questions to think and reflect
 - discussing all **O**ptions, which led to decision-making what is to be done, when, by whom
 - establishing the **W**ill to do it
- These meetings were characterised by members rigorously drawing on each others' experiences.
- Triads, consisting of three headteachers, worked on self-identified school-focused issues, for example, one group took a shared approach looking at teaching and learning.
- Relevant research was used throughout and one document in particular, *Making the Difference: Successful leadership in challenging contexts* (NCSL, 2002).

How the triads worked

- Members divided into threes and planned dates for visits to all three schools, blocking time after these for discussion.
 - The first set of visits was established to get the context of each school and to agree on the focus for learning – this was a trust-building situation – the headteachers did not know each other well nor each others' schools.
 - Subsequent triad meetings explored, in depth, issues chosen – a support network that stimulated and challenged thinking.
- The headteachers in each triad brought an objective eye to each others' issues; this helped move forward members' thinking about ways to improve their schools.
- There had to be complete trust in order for real feedback to be given; an agreed protocol set the parameters for this.
- Triads fed back to the whole group and some of the more complex issues were used in solution-focused enquiry sessions using the GROW approach.

Findings

Headteachers interviewed identified the outcomes in terms of the following.

Impact on themselves

- renewed energy:

I came to the group overwhelmed with what seemed like the impossibility of turning the school around. There was so much to do that I felt paralysed. The [group] energised me – I started working at an amazing pace without really feeling tired.

Headteacher

- professional excitement
- belief that headship was do-able
- confirmation of ideas on school improvement

- confidence to try out new ideas instead of holding back or ignoring situations
- confidence to take risks because members were not on their own
- self-affirmation: members gained belief in themselves to enable them to carry out difficult decisions
- greater knowledge of how to apply a range of strategies for problem-solving
- increased pace in making positive decisions and improvements

Impact on strategy and school improvement

- improved school self-evaluation:
 - clearer understanding of where the school was going and how
 - the development of clearer systems to identify areas where change was needed
- keeping long-term aims in mind whilst making short-term changes
- shift of the locus of responsibility from the headteacher as an individual towards the whole staff: using and extending the collaborative model so that all staff were instrumental in school improvement
- exposure to new ideas and approaches leading to improved practices, for example, restructuring teams within the school staff and making immediate changes to the school's physical environment

What worked well

The triads worked well when:

- headteachers were totally committed, that is, dates in diaries were adhered to and attendance at meetings was a priority: all understood each others' lives in school and benefited from time out to be able to think and reflect
- the protocol and programme were adhered to and time was spent after the visit, away from the demands of a busy school, to discuss the focus issues more informally

What could have been better

The triads did not work well when:

- heavy workloads and the pressure of conflicting needs caused headteachers' commitment to the group to lapse
- headteachers failed to allow time outside the meeting to discuss things in depth

Conclusion

One of the factors that became clear throughout the research was that all the headteachers who stayed within the group shared a desire for intellectual stimulation and challenge. However, the group was maintained because of its perceived benefits beyond this. It helped headteachers to:

- maintain personal sustainability: the motivation to continue to be optimistic and outward looking through personal and professional support
- affirm their ability to do a job in which colleagues reported working under intense day-to-day pressures
- rethink and re-evaluate the process of school improvement and receive support in carrying improvements through

At one level, the collaborative provided a forum for thinking and discussion, characterised by the intellectual rigour brought from the diverse membership. At another, it was the nature of the triad – both supportive and challenging, with a practical, hands-on approach – that moved the process on from the theoretical to the dynamic.

The most significant outcome of the collaborative was that during the period covered by this research four schools were involved in Section 5 Ofsted inspections. Of the four, three were previously schools causing concern (local authority category). All three schools improved to the extent that they have now been judged by Ofsted as good or better.

Into the future: how is the process being sustained?

- As colleagues move on, new members are involved who express commitment to the work of the collaborative.

- The group responds and adapts to changing contexts within the schools both on a local and national level, for example, developing effective approaches to school self-evaluation and supporting each other through the new Ofsted process.
- The members have now raised the stakes since successful Ofsted inspections and are working together to move all the schools from good to outstanding.

High trust cultures make the extraordinary possible. They energise people and give them the wherewithal to be successful under enormously demanding conditions and the confidence that staying the course will pay off.

Fullan et al, 2004, p45

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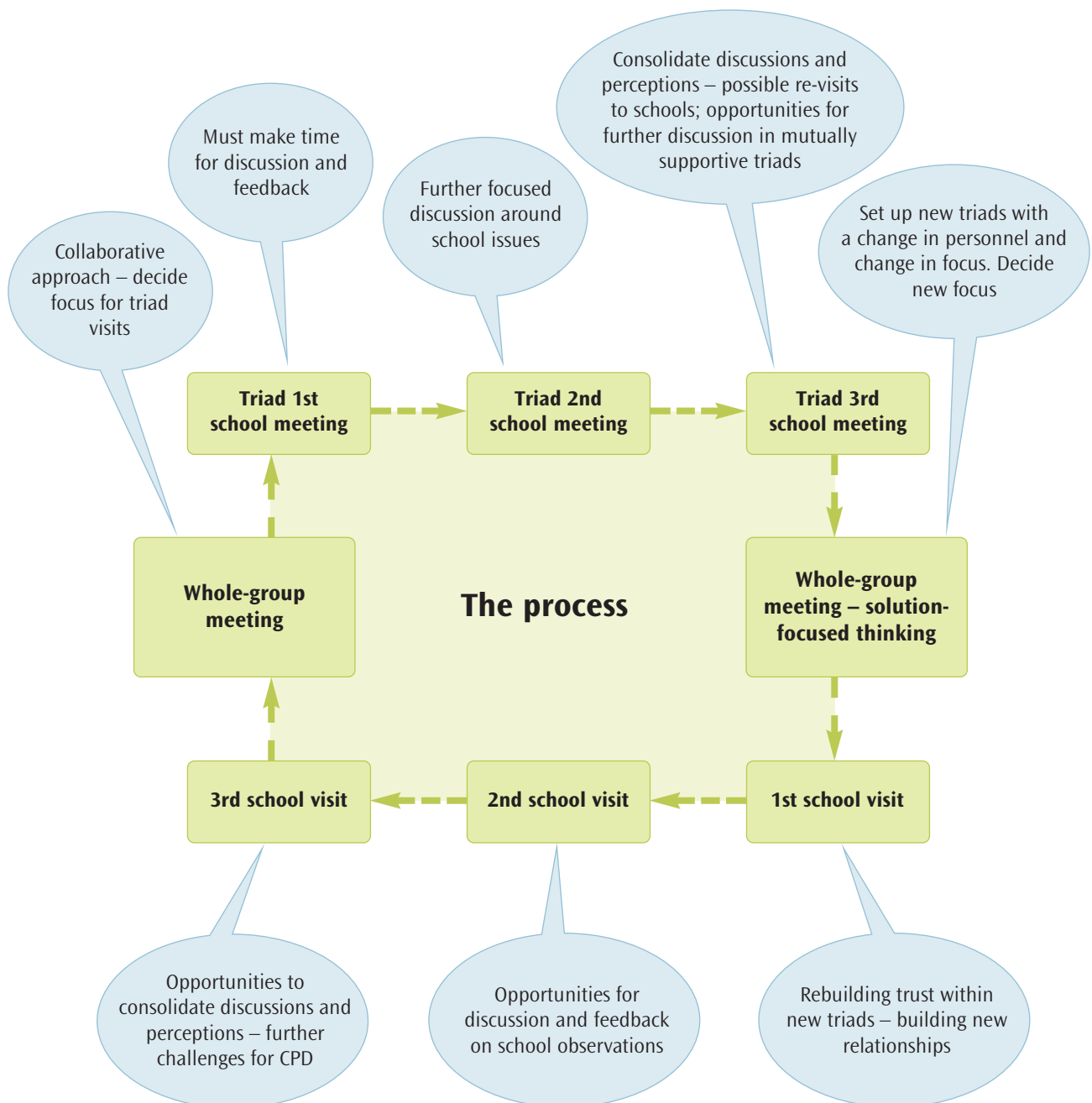
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