

A U T U M N 2 0 0 2

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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Abstract

This report builds upon a recently published paper, *The Smart Story: The challenge of leadership in the urban school* (Franey, 2002) and relates it to a new challenge and development – how to embed action learning through practitioner enquiry across a network of schools formally recognised as a small Excellence in Cities action zone.

The report describes the initiation period of development where teachers are inducted and professionally socialised into a 'cast of mind', drawing upon the skills necessary to lead classroom enquiry for school improvement. An important notion throughout the report is that of distributed leadership in schools.

After the introduction which identifies the context and the key influences on the zone team's understanding of leadership the report is presented in three chapters.

Chapter 1: Building Shared Meaning looks at the core purpose of schools working together in the action zone including an overview of the work with headteachers in the developmental stage of the zone's establishment.

Chapter 2: Making Change our Friend draws lessons from the management of change literature and offers a preliminary analysis of the action zone in terms of its ability to develop greater leadership capacity.

Chapter 3: Collaborative Linkages documents the process of capacity building for improvement across 12 schools. The mechanism for this change involves the development of an enquiry based team of teachers from each of the 12 schools in the zone called 'leading links'.

What is meant by a leading link teacher?

The salient features of this role are to ensure a close partnership between the zone team and schools through:

- exercising leadership – thereby contributing to distributed leadership
- communicating the values of the zone to all staff, parents and pupils
- actively contributing to the collection of data to inform future actions
- training and development – which ensures specific approaches are utilised across schools and individual schools
- research and development – which focuses on practitioner enquiry as a means of generating improvement within and across schools
- participation in team building approaches – which over time will extend collaboration amongst staff beginning a process of distributing leadership within their schools and across the zone

To return to the theme of Chapter 3, this documents the initiation and implementation stages of the process of working with the leading links in the zone.

The report draws upon three sources of information:

1. the themes within the letters of application of the leading links
2. a focus group, identifying the 'drivers' and 'barriers' affecting their role. Views on other issues are also identified
3. the research process undertaken by the leading links

These are complemented by my own personal observations over 12 months.

Finally, the conclusion identifies the lessons learned. It considers how the project might have been improved, looks at its wider implications and suggests a number of conditions necessary for inter-school teacher enquiry based teams.

Introduction

The context for this report is rooted in a small action zone's effort to exemplify how theory can impact upon practice through the development of practitioner enquiry teams. The development is set within the international and national context of school improvement and transformation. This theme was the focus for keynote speakers Viki Philips (Superintendent, Central Pennsylvania, USA) and Michael Barber (former Head of the Standards and Effectiveness Unit) in the Learning from Success Conference held in Birmingham in September 2000. Both speakers expressed an aspiration towards a "different level of school system" – improvement for transformation and improvement to transformation. This is characterised by high expectations, high challenge, standards, innovation, diversity, opportunity, accountability and tackling disadvantage. Action zones are one mechanism within a wider governmental agenda to achieve these goals. Whilst there is no blueprint, they are concerned with standards, school effectiveness, community involvement, and partnerships with stakeholders. Although it is true that zones' practice within the first tranche of education action zones (EAZs) has met with criticism (Blunkett 2001; Dickson et al 2000), the second round of zones are described by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) (1998) as a mechanism for giving "local partnerships the freedom and resources to propose collaborative and innovative strategies difficult to put into practice at the level of the individual school".

Commentators continue to document the dual challenge of zones – to operate a localised agenda within a government framework and the need to satisfy both a wider standards and innovation agenda. (Clarke 2001; Carter 2002)

This report serves to present an important development in education – team and practitioner enquiry as a mechanism to meet the dual challenges of local and wider agendas.

1 Building shared meaning

“The task of leading and managing in education begins to resemble more closely a conception of leadership which includes leadership outside of formal roles, sees power as multi-dimensional and multi-directional, empowers others to have power and is concerned with collective activities and values.” (Hall, 2001)

The zone team’s own thinking on distributed leadership was informed by Jackson (2002), Hargreaves (2001), Fullan (1998), Spillane and Thompson (1997).

Key characteristics of our understanding of distributed leadership were:

- a perspective which understands leadership expertise as extending beyond individual leaders (Perkins, 1993)
- an infrastructure of shared resources, collaborative learning and support for leadership opportunities
- the generation of multiple contexts for pupils and teachers to assume leadership roles
- to build capacity for future learning, school improvement and managing change
- that strength, resilience and capability reside in distributed intelligence, communal learning and shared leadership
- that these should be learning-centred leadership built around a commitment to empower
- to create the context for leadership through shared values and expectations

This chapter looks at the process conducted over a three month series of meetings whereby the headteachers of the schools in the zone reached a shared conceptual understanding of how best individual schools might work together.

It is necessary to outline the nature of the schools in the zone. The 12 headteachers worked in varying challenging contexts including urban deprivation, school amalgamations, special measures interventions and local education authority (LEA) pressure to improve standards. The majority of schools had low academic standards. Most of the headteachers and senior staff were recruited relatively recently. There was no history of co-operatively working together. Nine out of the 12 schools were characterised by the following factors:

- social deprivation
- lack of related educational opportunities
- high crime rate
- challenging behaviour
- poor parental expectations
- high pupil mobility
- staff recruitment (Englefield 2002)

Furthermore, in line with recent research into leadership in challenging circumstances the headteachers suggested that the time they spent managing tensions and problems

often directly related to the school context (Elmore 2000; Louis and Marks 1996; Harris 1999; Jackson 1997).

Over a series of meetings with the zone team, headteachers acknowledged a strong element of their leadership tasks as being “living with unpredictability and conflict”. An emerging outcome from those meetings was an aspiration towards working smarter together. This was to be associated with the development of an alignment of schools in the zone through a shared vision based on values and beliefs communicated by direction, words and actions. A strong element of this would be evidenced by moving the schools forward through empowering leading links to focus upon an area for school based enquiry which would lead to improvement within the classroom, school and potentially impact across schools.

The ambition was that over time distributed leadership would be a hallmark throughout the schools within the zone. Furthermore, there was an acknowledgement of the need for alternative criteria for judging success within and across schools in challenging contexts. In the view of the headteachers, the complexities presented in such circumstances require a solutions-focused approach to raising achievement and attainment which focused on the interconnectedness between pupils learning, staff learning and learning for leadership.

Over the development period of three months, key priority areas for improving pupils learning were agreed with the headteachers. Schools were allocated to a priority on the basis of existing school data and discussions with headteachers. Major features of the action planning were a focus on clear pupil outcomes and a commitment to building leadership capacity within and across schools. A product of the developmental stage of the zone’s establishment was the commitment to an ‘innovation strand’. This was to harness creative thinking amongst staff in schools. There was a strong belief in supporting innovation through zone funding. It was understood by the headteachers that submissions to the zone for innovation funding clarified the benefits to pupils and centred on new approaches to entrenched issues.

Drawing upon the work of the Accelerated Schools Movement (1986), the zone team used the developmental stage to support the view that the interaction between the individual and a change process across schools is a process whereby sustained personal, professional and organisational growth through an enquiry process is concerned with the transformation of schools through growth and learning. The metaphor applied is that of ‘big wheels and little wheels’:

Big wheel components include taking stock, keeping a shared vision, setting priorities, governance and using an inquiry process.

Little wheels are informal innovations initiated by individuals or teams which interact with ‘big wheels’ to produce long term change. (Brunner and Hoffenberg, 1992)

Behind this was the intent that innovation would become a way of life within the schools. The leading links would support the development and, with the zone team, ensure the dissemination and further development of outcomes.

This interaction between big wheel/little wheel thinking was pertinent to our situation in that organisational changes in the way 12 schools worked was going to occur over time. 'Little wheel innovations' by groups and individuals gave staff an outlet for making short-term change which may have long-term impact. This was to benefit the individuals, teams and pupils involved. Also, focusing on innovation through an enquiry process within and across schools gave all school members an opportunity to take responsibility for making improvements and changes in their daily activities which would have the potential to benefit others. Having a 'loose tight' structure to innovation with funding allocated to pressing situations that required action encouraged a creative "making of the new and the rearranging of the old" (Bentley, 1998). It is the potential for the 'little wheel' activities being effective and interacting with and influencing the big wheels that creativity – "the ability to modify self imposed constraints" – impacts through innovation (Ackoff and Vergara 1988).

At the end of the developmental stage of the zone's establishment a number of crucial events and decisions were made in collaboration with the headteachers:

- a shared set of values was agreed to underpin the work of the zone
- three strategic overarching goals around which the priorities for action were clustered
- an operational structure was established which incorporated the appointment of leading links
- a commitment to extending understanding of leadership for learning
- a belief in powerful learning was articulated
- the view that we would adopt a solutions focus approach to the challenges in our schools was accepted
- sharing ideas, practices and ways of working across our schools was taken as essential
- to begin a process of articulating through words and actions an understanding of working smarter together

2 Making change our friend

“Openness to change calls for adaptability. Stars in this competence relish change and find exhilaration in innovation... they are open to new information... comfortable with anxiety that the new or unknown brings... flexible to take into account multiple perspectives.” (Coleman, 1998)

This chapter draws upon selective sources from the management of change literature. This is related to my own observations of significant aspects of professional behaviours and characteristics of schools in the zone.

Whilst the adage that ‘change is always with us’ is a cliché, it does not distract from the essential truth of the maxim. How schools have faced the demands for change is very much an open question. Certainly, resistance to change has been well documented. Faikner, Stiefel and Baurer (1991) comment perceptively about schools and change, “If a healthy respect for and mastery of the change process does not become a priority, even well intentioned change initiatives will continue to create havoc among those who are on the firing line”. It can be argued that the absence of a respect for and mastery of the change process resulted in schools becoming reluctant to welcome change, seeing imposed actions as fleeting interventions by others impatient for results. The argument here is that the failure within the change process to interconnect ideas, practices, values and expectations results in schools left to implement initiatives with little investment in their goals or a will to see success. Whilst a case might be made that recent national reform initiatives (eg literacy strategy) presenting a prescribed approach through provision and in-service training has driven up standards, this has been at the possible cost in teachers’ belief, motivation and the collective will for schools to become a community of learners.

In contrast to such imposed change, researchers (Hopkins et al (2001); Stoll (1997); Fullan (1993); West-Burnham (1998) enquiring into effective school improvement are agreed in their view that school improvement is more likely to benefit pupils through an alignment of the individual teachers to the organisational capacity of the school.

Individual learning, understanding the capacity to act is the prerequisite to organisational development and improvement... there is substantial evidence to indicate a high correlation between profound professional learning and successful improvement. (West-Burnham, 1998)

The National College for School Leadership’s (NCSL) research report, *Building Capacity: Developing your School* (Hadfield et al, 2002) highlights a generic approach to capacity building which is based upon Michell and Sackney’s (2000) model of capacity for a learning community. This focuses on the three pivotal capacities of personal, interpersonal and organisational development which “mutually influence one another and growth in each category is built upon prior growth in itself and other categories – building a foundation for subsequent growth – foundations between capacities are permeable and borders expandable”.

For the zone team the issue of building capacity across 12 schools was how best to influence the three pivotal capacities – personal, interpersonal and organisational – which would lead to change both within and across the schools.

During the developmental stage of the zone, my own observations indicated to me that:

- there were strong pockets of excellent practice in all three pivotal capacities. There was however no recognisable pattern to this. There was excellent practice in some schools and some classrooms. Practice tended to be isolated with no means of dissemination or sharing
- leadership was essentially located within formal roles. There were limited opportunities for professional learning which encouraged leadership through “creating experiences in which teachers participate in decision making, have a shared sense of purpose, engage in collaborative work and accept joint responsibility for the outcomes of their work” (Lambert, 1999)
- possibly as a consequence of an unrelenting standards agenda in determining success, there were indicators that individuals and schools viewed themselves as powerless victims of circumstances and time
- training and development was determined by the delivery of national strategies or agendas with little or no opportunities for learning with and from other colleagues
- classroom practice was strongly influenced by a narrow conception of OFSTED criteria
- school teams were organisational structures which were often linked to teaching phases rather than generative opportunities to kick-start creative thinking
- action research conducted in the past by teachers was evident but there was no impact upon the school system or any of its sub-systems

The simple act of bringing headteachers together effected an openness, candour and high level of professional dialogue. The meetings between the zone team and the headteachers witnessed the latter's desire to reassess the values that had inspired them in leading their schools, a willingness to engage in learning with and from each other, and a commitment to the zone team to the development of teacher enquiry as a lever of transition leading to improvement.

There was also a collective interest in and engagement with NCSL programmes such as the New Visions Pilot Programme for Early Headship (www.ncsl.org.uk/newvisions) and major initiatives such as Networked Learning Communities (www.ncsl.org.uk/nlc). The more active headteachers within the group were committed to supporting others through a change process which would put learning at the core of their schools. There was a recognition that building capacity at school level, zone level and the wider level was about developing connections within and interconnectedness with and through staff, pupils and parents. Clearly there were aspirations to move beyond “understanding new things in the same old way” (Sergiovanni, 2001) to working in partnership with each other and the zone team, and to redefining individual and collectively held meanings in relation to the practice involved in personal, interpersonal and organisational aspects of capacity building.

3 Collaborative linkages

“Improvement in teaching is a collective rather than individual enterprise, and that analysis, evaluation and experimentation in concert with colleagues are conditions under which teachers improve. As a result teachers are more likely to trust, value and legitimise sharing expertise, seek advice and give help both inside and outside the school.” (Rosenholtz, 1989)

The Smart Story: The challenge of leadership in the urban school (Franeý, 2002) documented how the relationship between organisational values, a focus on learning and an inclusive approach to leadership had impact beyond a Beacon school to a group of partner schools. The agents for that change were the team of teachers accepting a responsibility for the individual, team and pupil learning in response to a need for change.

This imperative for action encouraged... opportunities for pupils and teachers to face challenges, seek solutions, take initiative.” (Franeý, 2002)

Implicit within their actions was the teachers’ growing ability to lead change within their own institutions. The headteachers in the partner schools actively encouraged a staff culture which encompassed developing, promoting and disseminating learning around key areas such as leadership, teamwork, teaching, assessment.

The four schools within the partnership showed a commitment to leadership. This encouraged an ongoing dialogue within and between schools with regard to the processes, actions and outcomes for raising achievement and attainment. School improvement through a site-based model complemented by principles of partnership is the foundation of the Beacon school initiative.

Within *The Smart Story*, headteachers working together, sharing knowledge, understandings, and concerns released the opportunities for leadership growth within and across schools. It was understood by all four headteachers that their schools would only develop and continue to improve through the day-to-day actions of empowered individuals. While empowerment has many interpretations, the theoretical description of capacity as the “development of social, academic, intellectual, professional and other forms of human capital” is synonymous with an understanding of individual empowerment. It is through individual empowerment that the capacity for leadership at both the individual and school level can be extended. Jackson (2002) and Stoll et al (2002) hold that successful growth in leadership – capacity building – is centred around a context which “invites leadership” and that the essential role of a leader is to “harness, focus, liberate, empower and align leadership towards common purposes and, by so doing to build and release capacity”. (Jackson, 2002)

The work reported here stems from a strong belief in the benefits of an inclusive, distributed view of leadership which in turn is based upon the learning of individuals and teams through a process of collaboration. This chapter documents the story of 12

practitioners who elected to be part of a collective endeavour to work within and across schools.

This project occurred at a time when the National Agenda is beginning to incorporate evidence informed practice, innovation and diversity. Barber (2002) refers to this as a “shift from improvement to transformation”. Schools are now beginning to work alongside each other in clusters, professional learning communities, EAZs or networked learning communities. This offers a potential for educational transformation through innovation. It is within this context that the chapter traces the development of a group of teachers becoming a team of enquiry practitioners. More specifically, the chapter:

- offers a limited profile of the schools in the zone
- emphasises the importance of the recruitment process of the teachers who were to be leading links – whose applications informed how the zone team planned their induction and professional development
- presents an interpretive summary of the substantive themes within the applications on the topics of teamwork
- reports upon the programme of induction and professional development in coaching, classroom observation for improvement, action learning and dissemination strategies planned by the zone team and provided by them along with a local university and an educational consultancy
- discusses how the zone team established and supported the action enquiry of the teachers who were leading links
- presents the main findings of a focus group of the leading link teachers – who identified the drivers and barriers to their work within schools on school improvement

Finally, other findings of the focus group highlight the benefits of the enquiry approach and the impact of the enquiry on their own teaching, along with their enhanced understanding of the notion of leadership.

The DfES continuing professional development strategy, *Learning and Teaching*, launched in September 2001, established its main approach as “learning from each other – learning from what works”. The document accepted that the enormous contemporary challenges meant that maximum support was needed for teachers’ professional development in achieving the highest standards and meeting the challenge of change. It acknowledged the need to bring about a transformation in the culture of professional development across the profession. A framework for professional development and underpinning principles formed the basis of a consultative document for schools and individual teachers (February 2000). The responses from schools conveyed 90 per cent support for the suggested principles which in essence exemplified three different and interrelated aspects to training and development: the individual teacher’s needs and aspirations; the needs of the school; and national strategic priorities. Significantly, 90 per cent of respondents agreed that professional development should be centred on raising standards in the classroom, with “opportunities to learn from and with other teachers, in their own and other schools by observing colleagues... through collaborative enquiry into real school improvement problems... by taking part in coaching or mentoring” (DfES, 2001). The impetus for collaborative practitioner enquiry has also come from other sources including the work of Rosenholtz (1989), Fullan

(1991), Carter and Halsall (1998) and Hopkins (1993). The common strands in these works is the value placed on an enquiry approach which takes account of process and outcomes within a school context of achievement and professional learning.

The challenge for the zone team was to create a fusion between current theory and policy in relation to teachers' professional development and school improvement and to utilise these ideas to scaffold induction and professional development of the leading links to maximise their learning. We took solace from the view that "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).

Zone profile

Within the zone was 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 remaining schools were underachieving by national standards. Prior to the formation of the zone there were no significant school-to-school relationships. Professional development opportunities were often curtailed by resource and organisational inhibitors, eg limited classroom cover. Training and development activities, eg mentoring and classroom observation, were centred on formal roles, eg induction mentoring. In broad terms, this was the given situation faced by the zone team. With the learning extracted from *The Smart Story* and a commitment to individual empowerment, the development of a team of enquiry practitioners – one from each school began with the recruitment process.

Recruitment

The recruitment process consisted of an invitation extended to all staff in the schools (see Appendix 1). This autobiographical process was designed to seek out specific information about candidates; their understanding of the notion of teams drawn from theory or practice, and the knowledge derived from their past team experiences. For the zone team there needed to be a commitment to a 'moral purpose'. A belief in closing the gap between high performing schools and lower performing schools through "learning in the setting where you work, or learning in context, learning which has the greatest payoff because it is specific, and applied to the situation". (Fullan, 2002)

The importance of applicants' experience of teamwork was critical in establishing a connection between their reality and the aspirations for an enquiry approach to teamwork.

Interrogating their applications provided an opportunity to convey their stories of 'experiences of working in a team'. The series of NCSL Leading Edge seminars exploring interpersonal intelligence (in November 2001 and March 2002) highlighted the importance of increasing the emphasis on narrative as a means of creating meaning and understanding. This theme of story telling as a mechanism for communicating ideas, meaning and renewal is a central feature in leadership – "The penalty for failing to listen is to lose the context, values and beliefs which underpin our actions". (Du Pree, 1989)

The zone team was aware of this and wanted to capitalise upon it in the recruitment process. An analysis of the written submissions for the leading links' positions identified emerging themes:

- team work was essentially an adaptive structure which enabled the school to function effectively

Comments included:

"I work as a team of three to plan prepare and evaluate pupils work."

"I work as part of a key stage team which involves planning and evaluations."

- All applicants had a theoretical understanding of teams. A number referenced various sources: Robbins (1993), Moxin (1993) and Bellain (1981). Teams were generally defined as groups of people working collaboratively towards a shared goal
- there was a significant emphasis attached to interpersonal behaviours as being conducive to the success or failure of the team
- all accounts acknowledged the significance of interpersonal behaviours as being conducive to the success or failure of the team

Comments included:

"They must be willing to share ideas and show trust and respect. They need to be flexible and open-minded."

"Share explicit values while taking an honest and open approach based on trust and respect."

"The team was not working effectively as there was no listening, communicating or valuing ideas – one member of the team took a lead role – we were four individuals working ineffectively."

- 25 per cent of the respondents had experience of using an enquiry approach in relation to improving classroom practice

Comments included:

"I took part in a two year project and have applied the results into the classroom and introduced practical approaches to raising achievement."

"I enjoy action research work and relish the challenge of working collaboratively with others."

By way of contrast, an understanding of team work in the context of professional learning and its potential for leadership growth wasn't referred to by candidates. Teamwork was related to tasks. The overall impression from the teachers was that leadership was synonymous with a person(s) in a position of formal authority. Notions of distributed leadership, or even a reference to non-traditional models of leadership, were absent

from the candidates' thinking as reflected in their applications. Nonetheless, the motivation for applying to be a leading link conveyed a belief that working collectively to affect practice would extend their learning and the learning of all pupils.

Typical comments were:

"I am committed to the zone vision – 'every adult a learner, every child an achiever'. My involvement will extend and challenge my personal learning."

"I will value the opportunity to work with teachers from other schools to learn together and share good practice."

"I should like to put into practice a commitment to teams and team working, which I believe is critical in the development of learning communities over the next decade."

Interpretative summary of themes in applications of leading links

It is possible to extract and 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 guided the process of induction and professional development in relation to working as an inter-school team.

The salient strands and themes were:

- the social dynamics of individuals within a team aided or obstructed the completion of a task
- observation of self and individuals within a team was part of professional reflective practice
- it was evident that while teamwork may have had short-term impact within the classroom there was no substantial integration or impact into the school as a whole
- there was an understanding that 'social intelligence' was a prerequisite of effective learning
- the notion of perceiving teamwork in relation to leadership opportunity or its potential for capacity building within school was not referred to
- there was a linkage between extended opportunities for professional learning as a leading link, pupil learning and school improvement. Clearly, this was a motivating factor in applications
- a number of longer-serving teachers had taken part in action research
- valuing professionals working together, motivation to be part of a change process and a belief in the importance of the leading link new role were shared views by all teachers
- in their accounts, teachers stated that the role would facilitate supportive professional relationships, enable them to try out new ways of teaching and promote new ideas within their school

The written accounts from the 12 teachers presented an authentic practitioner viewpoint of teamwork. They conveyed aspirations for their own learning and a confidence in relation to working as an inter-school team. Importantly, in relation to their new role, they conveyed the ability to reflect, clarify and affirm the significance of their team working experiences. Claxton (1986) and West-Burnham (1998) are of the view that this is a process of social constructivism through which meaning is formulated through personal experience and that it is this self knowledge that is brought to a new experience that is essential to effective learning.

These autobiographical stories provided views about experiences of team working which would influence the zone team's planning in relation to "needs analysis, coaching partnerships, the contextualisation of programmes and professional learning techniques" (West-Burnham, 1998). Whilst the sample of teachers views is limited it can be assumed that they are not untypical accounts of professional experiences.

Within the current context of increasing awareness that schools improve not only through the individual teacher but through 'social capital' – through distributed leadership and organisational linkages within and across schools – the zone team was optimistic about the potential of the appointed leading links.

We were sensitive to overambition but wanted to follow Green's (2001) aspiration that schools should be 'leaderful communities' which have built improvement capacity through what MacBeath expresses as "distributed intelligence, shared leadership and communal learning". (2001)

Against a backdrop of educational reform which in the 1990s was characterised by "informed prescription" (Barber, 1999), a belief in moving towards "informed professionalism" (Barber, 1999) resides the positive exhortation that "teachers in the end will change the world of the school by understanding it." (Stenhouse, 1975).

Apsland et al (1996) extends this view by highlighting the importance of integrating research into successfully building social capital. The 12 leading links depended upon establishing the connections between their past experience of team work and future enquiry based teamwork which would be a significant aspect of their role. Moving from informed prescription to informed professionalism would require a commitment to learning at many levels, actively working within varying contexts in order to think strategically to improve learning through drawing upon collective expertise and experience. Influenced by this, it was with a sense of hope that the zone team set about planning the induction and professional development of their colleagues, the leading link teachers.

Induction and professional development

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 as a powerful improvement process. Integral to our planning was the partnership with a local university and an educational consultancy.

The applications, especially the teachers' accounts of teamwork, had proven invaluable to the zone team. They heightened sensitivity to the teachers' present views, identified professional needs and allowed us to plan at the appropriate level. Additionally, the teachers displayed enthusiasm for a new way of working with, on behalf of, and through others. Woven into the fabric of their responses were their intuitive views on interrelated learning processes – social, intellectual and pedagogical. In subsequent discussion with the teachers they expressed the view that in the past a narrow emphasis on teaching had undermined the social and intellectual aspects of learning. In their opinion, this had hampered both teachers and pupils ability to be creative – “to apply information in another context – to get to deeper levels of understanding through rearranging old ways to make new ways – new knowledge”. From our meetings with the leading links it was clear they believed they could increase their schools' capacity to bring about change, to be part of a different way of working and to effect school improvement.

In order to capitalise on this energy a framework for development was agreed at our meetings with the teachers. Essential to this development was a planned model of adult learning promoted by the zone team. This model engaged the leading links in a process of learning which took informed professionalism as its hallmark. The zone team proposed a framework for knowledge sharing within the team itself and within their individual schools. 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 in their classrooms

Implicit within these conditions are the social, intellectual and pedagogical components which Resnick and Hall (1998) report in their evidence from a New York study describing learning for systemic goals as:

Intensely active – taking place through continuous and varied interactions. Isolation giving way to dialogue, questioning and experimentation... people relating to each other through their learning, as learners, so that children can learn.

Having negotiated an adult model of learning with the teachers – one to which they could subscribe – it was now necessary to establish a framework for professional development which would inform their thinking, and help us create what Kotter (1995) terms “short-term wins” as well as progressing towards school improvement.

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.

Inherent within these components were the necessary social and intellectual prerequisites which would provide a positive mindset to meet the demands of collaborative enquiry learning.

It is beyond the scope of this report to detail the content of the four components of the framework. However, it is worthwhile to convey a flavour of the work in each area. Learning for the leading links as conceived by the zone team was based on a model of theory-demonstration-application-feedback-coaching (Joyce and Showers, 1988; Wallace 1996). Their professional learning had to be designed around implementation as well as knowledge and skills. In consultation with our training partners and the leading links it was agreed that the components of the training had to impact on job performance, pupil learning and school improvement. There was flexibility in the arrangement to allow for individual and team learning needs as they arose.

Coaching

Coaching was a pivotal feature in translating training into learning and improved practice. The educational consultancy introduced different models of coaching within a theoretical framework. Throughout there was an emphasis that coaching rested upon the dynamic of the relationship between the coach and coachee. Live coaching was demonstrated. Of importance was the completion of, and reflection upon, a motivational questionnaire designed to maximise how coaching might develop an individual. The utilisation of vignettes to illustrate how a particular coaching style could be used to support different levels of motivation and skills in colleagues provided a useful professional tool.

Feedback from this component included:

"I found the motivational questionnaire awesome... all staff need to use this."

"I never knew how to ascertain levels of motivation and skills and therefore appropriate actions to them."

"In the demonstration he (trainer) never told her what to do. His language was not judgemental but open ended – feeding back enabled her to come to her outcomes."

Classroom observation for improvement

Essential to this process was the format of theory-demonstration-application-feedback. Time was spent by the leading links with the zone team to interrogate the data from classroom observations, reflect upon its meaning, and consider how it might be used, with other information, as a possible basis for enquiry research. Leading links observed one another.

Action learning

An induction session for the NCSL Research and School Improvement Group (in September 2001) on action learning raised the zone team's awareness of the potential of this way of working for developing the team of leading links. It was particularly pertinent to our situation and its demands in that it is a means of:

Accelerating peoples' learning so that they can handle difficult situations more effectively by creating a situation where relevant people get together to solve problems... by creating conditions where people learn best within the constraints imposed... each person discovers and tests their strengths and develops new ones. (Carter, 2001)

If collaboration amongst the leading links was to transcend 'cosiness' and become a pursuit built upon professional learning, action learning would be the mechanism for driving this forward. In accord with the format of theory-demonstration-application-feedback, it was decided to present to the teachers for discussion and reflection the key elements of action learning. This was to give them a conceptual understanding of the process. Following Weinstein's (1995) key elements were identified as:

- action learning is a continuous process of learning and reflection supported by colleagues
- individuals learn with and from each others' experiences and work together to speed up the learning process
- the process is underpinned by a belief in individual potential, takes an active stance towards life and demands the tendency to think, feel and be positive towards the pressure of life
- action learning releases and reinterprets the accumulated experiences of people in the team
- action learning develops the individuals and/or the organisation and frees human creativity, vision and ability

These key elements relate directly to the negotiated adult learning model formulated with the leading links at the outset of their induction and professional development. Working together using an action learning approach required that the team considered each individual school and its specific school context and aspired to an overall improvement across all schools. This presented opportunities for collective discourse, collaborative learning and learning to learn in an expanded sense – "learning to learn from others and learning to learn with others by giving the learner opportunities to share experiences with others" (Salomon and Perkins, 1998). While the application of their learning would essentially take place within their schools it was important that as a team they had

opportunities to share thoughts and reflections with others in order that their learning was reinforced, and supportively challenged. This occurred at our regular meetings.

A notable feature of the action learning approach was to extend their experience of interrogating action research in order that the leading links would develop their own self-critical skills. In the spirit of action learning, examples of published teacher research were examined to illustrate the benefits of action enquiry in improving professional practice, and self-understanding.

After what was intended to be a thorough preparation period the time now came for our energies to be focused. This was to be done in two ways:

- for all leading links to engage in a collective six week enquiry – this was to be the Interactive Whiteboard Project
- to formally apply for DfES Best Practice Research Scholarships to engage in practitioner enquiry concerned with the key priorities identified in the zone action plan

The rationale behind the two stage approach was agreed on the basis that the short-term enquiry would generate confidence in an enquiry approach which was concerned with research and implementation as well as enhancing knowledge and skills. If the leading links were to have high impact and high transfer in relation to work in and beyond their own school their training and development had to “build up a repertoire of examples, images, understanding and actions” (Schon, 1983) that they could readily draw on when faced with a new or difficult situation. The support by the zone team during the preparation period had to be maintained now that the initiation stage was implemented.

The Interactive Whiteboard Project

The collective enquiry focused on improving an aspect of teaching and learning in relation to their classroom. In discussion with the zone team it had emerged that all leading links expressed concerns about the limited opportunities for collaborative learning amongst pupils. The enquiry was therefore to identify how the use of interactive whiteboards might enhance collaborative learning amongst pupils. The interactive whiteboards were a means to an end, not an end in themselves.

With the interactive whiteboards installed in each of the leading link teacher’s classroom, time was spent with the zone team reaching an agreement about the zone team’s responsibilities and the principles of the project enquiry. This was agreed as:

- the zone team would continue to provide ongoing 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 links 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, self evaluative with judgements 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. Related to this was a commitment to train colleagues

(Titles of individual enquiries are in Appendix 2.)

Dissemination

A feature of the leading links' accounts of teamwork in their applications had been the limited dissemination, if any, whenever they had been involved with what might be seen as innovative or enquiry practice.

Following commentators such as Stoll and Fink (1996) and McGill and Beaty (1995), the zone team, with the leading links, decided upon a multifaceted approach to dissemination of the enquiry outcomes which took the form of:

- a collective journal (format designed as part of an A-level student's coursework) containing the enquiry reports. One copy would be available for each school
- a staff meeting/governors meeting to demonstrate the use of interactive whiteboards and improvements to teaching and learning
- qualifying as an on-site interactive whiteboard trainer through a distance learning arrangement with the supplier
- a With and Through Others Day – invitations were extended to local LEA representatives, teachers and LEA staff from other authorities. The purpose was for the leading links to make presentations on the role, the team and their enquiry focus

Views of leading links

In order to engage with the reality of their developing role it was necessary to gather information and probe for meaning. Focus groups were used to achieve this. These consisted of two groups of six leading links. The groups helped to gain a deeper understanding of perceptions, feelings, concerns, motivations and opinions in relation to three aspects of their role:

- the drivers which helped in the role of leading link
- the barriers which hindered the role
- an assessment of the general impact of the role

The focus group sessions lasted two hours during which there was significant interaction, spontaneous responses and high levels of involvement from the participants. In keeping with the advantages of focus groups (Howe, Degeling and Hall, 1990) the participants conveyed insights and facts relating to their role. The homogenous group situation helped teachers to feel safe when disclosing information about their experiences and beliefs. Additionally, the mutually supportive setting engaged the leading links challenging responses to gain insight in relation to the focus questions.

Drivers in their developing role

The overall notion which acted as a driver to their role was that of a newly-found professional empowerment. Sergiovanni (2001) encapsulates their views when expressing the power of teachers learning together:

Functioning as communities of practice, sharing a common body of knowledge, learning and working together to expand knowledge and use it more effectively.

Further clarification of this can be represented by the following points made within the focus groups and the illustrative comments of the teachers.

“My energy and motivation are renewed and I feel as though I have been involved in a collective creative enterprise.”

“There are no right answers to our complex situations. Working together has given us the confidence to try out ideas use my previous knowledge and present myself as a learner to my pupils.”

“I am sure we all feel inspired to energise others. Working like this has not been about control or telling us what is right but about kindling a sense of achievement, belonging and a feeling of control over one’s professional life.”

The role had given them the opportunity to examine themselves in a way which resulted in feelings of greater control. Typical comments from the group were:

“I can see how the big picture is moving beyond curriculum coverage to the why and how of learning.”

“This leading link role has renewed my belief in myself as a professional. It has rekindled my reasons for coming into teaching.”

This sense of control was traced to the support of the zone team, the support they had for one another and the professional development programme organised by the zone team.

“You (team) understand the need for us to be honest. I appreciate the openness and trust that has built up.”

“My perceptions about other teachers in other schools has totally changed – we all face the same difficulties and we are supporting each other.”

“I feel privileged to have undergone this training and development. It has focus on current needs and there is a flow of learning between us.”

As important was the collective view that the role had re-motivated and energised the teachers.

“I am different, more positive, thinking about my classroom practice – making changes.”

“I felt I was stuck in a tunnel now I am moving towards a bright light – I am learning.”

In some cases, a driver had been a changing and more positive relationship with the headteacher. A greater awareness and understanding of the importance of leadership by leading links was translated into a creative alliance with school managers.

“I meet with my headteacher weekly to talk about my new role. I am inputting to a staff meeting and doing a demonstration to governors.”

“I have negotiated taking a parent session on how we use the interactive whiteboard with their children.”

The sense of wider horizons was also talked about by the majority of the leading links. The opportunity of sharing their work with colleagues from an LEA in the Midlands was powerful in generating an individual and collective sense of pride and focus for celebration.

“This was a really impressive session – so much has happened.” (LEA visitor)

Those teachers who were undergoing or about to undergo OFSTED inspections spoke of their newly-found willingness to participate in discussion with inspectors about their work as a leading link.

The project’s focus on learning and enquiry contributed to further drivers. Without exception the teachers were of the view that they had developed a greater understanding of themselves as learners, and were more able to take a problem solving stance when faced with professional difficulties. They were more willing to reframe situations.

“I understand the importance of the children understanding that I am a learner too. I talk to them about how and what I am learning. They talk to me about their learning. There is a mutual understanding of what we need.”

“I might have been really anxious if something had gone wrong in the classroom. Now, they can see that I am learning too. We make mistakes and that’s OK – we learn from them. Working together I know that I have the support to find a solution.”

Finally, for the teachers the enquiry approach highlighted how beneficial technology can be for influencing learning conditions and how data collection did not have to be restricted to numerical methods. A number of leading links used video as a source of information.

“Watching my lessons on video with my coach I could see where I needed to improve, where I needed to step up the pace.”

“The ‘zappers’ were great. I could get an immediate reaction from the pupils to the lesson.”

“The coach (member of the zone team) identified from his observations when the learning was effective.”

Barriers in the developing role

The perceived barriers to their new role as leading links were also identified. For some, although not all, there was a sense of isolation within their schools. Not all teachers felt supported by their colleagues and manager.

“There is a lack of understanding of what my role is and the importance of training and change.”

This sense of isolation was in some cases caused by what they (the leading links) saw as colleagues’ restricted view on how to effect school improvement.

“They think EAZs are about buying resources to improve schools. They need to understand this is a short-term feel good factor.”

Whilst the enquiry approach was greatly valued, a number of teachers were unsure of its status as research.

One teacher said:

Its not real research... it’s done in a university

This comment seemed to reflect a lack of confidence amongst a number of the group about their own research skills. The constraints of time were an issue for a number of leading links.

“The extra demands of the summer term... school reports... spilled over into the writing up of my practitioner enquiry.”

The one leading link from the secondary school in the zone had particular barriers to face. There were real difficulties for him in relation to the enquiry period and the exam schedule which prevented an enquiry and report materialising. Additionally, while enjoying working with primary colleagues there was an increased sense of isolation in relation to professional support and advice.

General impact of the role

Other impressions and themes which emerged from the focus group discussions included an enhanced conceptual understanding of distributed leadership.

“I have the confidence to lead this change within my school and I realise I have had an opportunity created for me.”

“It is really important that the headteacher continues to learn about leadership beyond formal roles.”

All of the leading links commented on the positive influence on their class teaching emerging from enquiry, inter-visitations to schools and professional dialogue. Wider discussion embraced issues such as the retention of teachers and how the sense of achievement had contributed to a renewed commitment of the profession. A number of teachers expressed ideas about retention incentives, eg enquiry practitioner teams (without class responsibilities) working alongside teachers, teacher exchanges within networks, teacher exchanges with international networks. Others, particularly the younger leading links, felt that opportunities to encourage an enquiry driven profession should be part of initial teacher training if there was to be fusion between informed prescription and informed professionalism. Generally, it was suggested that in order to generate new ways of doing things there needed to be a broadening of professional experiences and opportunities.

Conclusion

This report set out to give an account of a project whose major aim was to develop an enquiry team across schools to effect school improvement. Drawing upon the totality of the experience the concluding section will identify:

- the lessons learned
- what might have been done differently
- how the experience relates to the wider educational context

Lessons learned

The lessons learned were that:

- 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 ideas to be developed, leadership opportunities created and a platform for innovation

What might have been done differently

If a similar project to the one described in this report was to be planned it would be important to:

- establish dedicated time for feedback from the leading link to the headteacher and staff
- establish the importance of the role within the context of annual performance reviews
- prepare the groundwork with headteachers by clarifying the role of the external team in relation to the training and development of leading links
- consider the possibility for there to be two leading links within each school to develop capacity
- form a cross-department leading links secondary team
- ensure input into and regular feedback from governor and parent groups, and headteachers

The major learning from the project has been to demonstrate that it is possible in a relatively short period of time to establish an enquiry team over 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, to become powerful learners and to feel empowered in turning ideas into working practices contributing to whole-school improvement.

How the experience relates to the wider educational context

This report demonstrates how a team of teachers across 12 schools in partnership with a zone team utilised teacher enquiry to improve an aspect of their school and convey the potential for a new way of working. As in *The Smart Story* (Franey, 2002), this sequel has reinforced the notion of doing things differently structurally, interpersonally and developmentally, if we are to meet the challenges presented by the current climate of change in education. In a small way, the report has shown how schools working smarter together rather than harder alone have responded to the challenge of moving from ‘the improvement wave’ (mainly focused on a standards agenda) to a ‘transformational wave’ (Barber, 2000) characterised by a number of key features which include innovation, evidence informed practice and informed professionalism.

Jackson (2002) in his paper, *The Creation of Knowledge Networks – Collaborative Enquiry for School and System Improvement* succinctly describes the current educational context within which schools working together as networked learning communities are a springboard for “creative patterns of working within and between schools... a means of facilitating innovation and change as well as contributing to large-scale reform” (Hopkins, 2001; Demos, 2001; OECD, 2000).

This report attempts to describe the process of interaction between organisational values and professional values grounded in a belief that an inclusive approach to leadership and a focus on collective learning will equip individual teachers to believe in themselves

as both leaders and learners. The work of Jackson (2002) resonates with the salient foci of this report. The four overriding themes captured in this work are:

- change for learning – learning for change
- leadership for learning – learning for leadership
- enquiry for learning – learner for enquiry
- collaboration for learning – learning to collaborate

These converge with the practice conveyed in this report. It is understood that while the schools are in the embryonic stages of working collaboratively, progress has been real. Importantly, the course has been set to develop a mindset that change is for learning and about learning; leadership is learning centred; and enquiry is a process that concentrates professional efforts on improvement within the classroom, school, and across schools. Collaboration is expressed as support and challenge which bonds enquiry for learning within and across the schools.

Clearly, the transitional features of moving schools from an era of prescription to the new era of innovation will have many stepping stones – some of them very slippery!

Working smarter together has forged a pattern of working through which schools begin to see themselves as more than places of teaching but places of multi-level learning. Their collective endeavour acknowledges “that for every journey of a thousand miles there has to be the first step” (Lao-tze, 6BC). The first step has been taken!

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and the headteachers

...for their resilience, initiative, optimism, adaptability and commitment to working smarter together to create a community of intelligence which actively engages children and adults in the joy of learning, and the experience of it.

Appendix 1

Opportunity Zone **Every adult a learner – every child an achiever**

Appointment of “Leading Links” – School Co-ordinator Salary: Equivalent of one management point

Benefits : 0.1FTE Team Training/Programme Development

This post is initially for two terms commencing the 1st January 2002 and finishing the 31st August 2002. The main responsibility is to ensure that there is a close partnership between the Opportunity Zone Central Team and schools, ensuring the implementation of programmes specified in the action plan. There will be twelve Leading Links, one teacher from each school. He/She will hold a management point and be entitled to 0.1 development time. Additionally they will ensure:

- The aims, purposes and values of the Zone are communicated and understood by staff and parents.
- The learning programmes and projects in the school and community are supported and administered efficiently. This includes ensuring that data collection/evaluation procedures are followed.
- Communication from staff, pupils and parents within the school to the Zone is well managed.
- Research and development is seen as the main way of achieving new solutions. We will be engaging in practitioner research.
- Participation in team building activities to ensure effective team-work.

If you are interested in this exciting opportunity to work in a team on innovative programmes to enhance the achievements of our pupils you need to apply by writing 500 words responding to the following points.

- ✓ Your understanding of teams
- ✓ A successful team working experience
- ✓ An unsuccessful team working experience
- ✓ Your interest in this position

For further information, please ask your Headteacher for a copy of the Zone's Action Plan. You are also welcome to contact the Zone Director, Trish Franey on 0117 903 0121.

This is an important post within our network learning community and will provide a valuable and unique experience for the person concerned. Closing date for applications is 10th December 2001.

Appendix 2: Titles of practitioner enquiry research 2002 : Six week project

1. Its Boring Sir!' Research into the most effective teaching strategy to optimise children's learning – Antony Fugill
2. Raising standards in physical education through the use of ICT' – Julia Flynn
3. Does the use of the interactive whiteboard increase pupil engagement and active participation in lessons? – Chaz Friend
4. Supporting improvements in handwriting through the use of an interactive whiteboard – Jane Bishop
5. The use of the interactive whiteboard to develop logical and lateral thinking skills – Sue Thompson
6. The use of the interactive whiteboard in the development of children's word level skills – Michelle Wills
7. Using the interactive whiteboard in the teaching and assessment of science – Julie Green
8. The involvement of the interactive whiteboard in Early Years teaching – Claire Clohosey and Smiljana Pearce
9. An investigation of individual children's responses to the learning process from whole class teaching through group work to individual independent learning – Miranda McCabe
10. How can an interactive whiteboard increase the opportunities to improve speech by stimulating a greater variety of meaningful spoken tasks – Gary Pilsworth and Jane Fairman
11. Using the interactive whiteboard for mental maths did it improve learning? – Helen Sanday

Other Research Associate reports

Alison Banks et al	<i>Two heads better than one? Building a cross-phase school of the future</i>
Patricia Brown	<i>The first 100 days: An enquiry into the first 100 days of headship in a failing school</i>
Moyra Evans	<i>Open windows: Becoming an e-learning school</i>
Alison Kelly	<i>Team talk: Sharing leadership in primary schools</i>
Steve Kenning	<i>The intelligent gaze: Leadership, lead learners and the concept of individual growth – a reflective enquiry</i>
Richard Parker	<i>Passion and intuition: The impact of life history on leadership</i>
Peter Smith	<i>Leading from the classroom: The impact of the assistant headteacher in primary schools</i>

These reports are available on the NCSL web site www.ncsl.org.uk/researchassociates