

A U T U M N 2 0 0 2

Two Heads Better than One?

Building a cross-phase school
of the future

This report records and analyses a unique situation – the appointment of two headteachers to a innovative ‘future school’ operating from one building which incorporates a public library, and adult education and community facilities, as well as a nursery, a primary and a secondary school.

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Introduction

As 21st century schools develop as learning organisations and community centres of life-long learning, the traditional autocratic headteacher model of leadership seems increasingly inappropriate and impractical. Many schools have experimented with and developed alternative management models, most commonly based around a leadership team and often widening leadership opportunities across the whole staff. These approaches are consistent with the notion of the learning school. They offer the complexity and flexibility needed to meet the many challenges facing leaders in today's schools.

In order to investigate team leadership, we chose an in-depth study of our own organisation, rather than a broader survey. Ours was a case study in a unique context, but facing issues common in all management situations.

A unique context

Chafford Hundred Campus is innovative in many respects, serving the new town of Chafford Hundred in Thurrock LEA. The building incorporates a public library, adult education and community facilities, as well as a nursery, a primary and a secondary school. It is truly a 'neighbourhood learning centre'. The building incorporates a central block of shared facilities, including the public library, administration, staff room, halls, cyber cafe and specialist accommodation, with separate classroom wings for the primary and secondary schools. Our leadership team faced the huge task of setting up this new institution, to open in September 2001. The full research report documents the period of planning and opening the campus.

It was unique to have a cross-phase, all-female team of five, consisting of two headteachers, two assistant headteachers and a business manager. Working together, we aimed to create one institution, with shared staffing and resources. Major ambitions were:

- to develop primary-secondary fusion, rather than liaison or co-location
- to maximise the learning opportunities arising from portable technologies
- for the campus to work in partnership with local businesses, the public library and adult education services, health and community agencies, other schools and the local community, to develop its role as a community enterprise centre

Appropriate research methodology

We believe that school-based, practitioner-led, action research is effective educational research. It puts the principles of life-long learning into practice and enables teachers to realise that they can understand and take control of change. Ultimately, the status and morale of the profession stands to benefit greatly from practitioner research. Also, we believe, action research can be more focused, simpler, more accessible and more immediately relevant to fellow professionals than conventional academic research.

The medium is the message

Through carrying out school-based practitioner research, we demonstrated how the learning school should function. In our view, its focus should be teaching and learning, with a drive for constant improvement. As the leadership team, therefore, we constantly discussed and analysed our own efforts. As befits a 21st century school, we used audio, digital and video recording of our meetings and major events. The team agreed to keep individual learning logs. The outcomes were tested through formal and informal feedback from parents and pupils. Our final report is in web format (www.ncsl.org.uk/researchassociates).

In addition to using all this data to draw our conclusions, we promoted the notion of researching best practice through leading by example. As intended, other teaching and support staff became involved and they have initiated several other research studies with universities, businesses, international organisations and the DfES. The ethos of the learning school has already become embedded, with pupils too carrying out surveys, preparing reports and presenting at conferences. The approaches adopted by the leadership team have been carried through to pupils in Year 7, who have one to one weekly reviews of their learning and who keep their own learning logs.

In order to become learning communities, schools need to talk about learning, and young people need to become fluent in the language of learning. In such a community, tutoring for learning is integrated into the school, not an add-on. Tutoring for learning cannot fix a culture which does not encourage learning or learning conversations. In a learning community, all members are involved in such conversations (Gray, 1999).

The benefits of cross-phase team leadership

There were many occasions when it was extremely beneficial to have five people with very different backgrounds and experience working together. Some of the advantages of our cross-phase team were:

- There is a wider range of strengths to draw on and play to. For instance, display work is a traditional strength of primary teachers which secondary staff can learn from; secondary specialist knowledge in areas such as music and PE may benefit primary colleagues.
- Everyone can develop their own specialism and expertise – a larger staff obviously provides more opportunities for individuals to pursue their own professional interests across phases.
- Team members can call on a variety of people for support. We held a book week, where the range of events was more impressive than could be achieved by a single school. Reception children visited a zoo accompanied by the Year 7 art club, who assisted them in producing art work on their return.
- Different approaches, drawn from different traditions and practices can be tried – such as different formats for parents' evenings or exchanging teaching materials between schools. We discovered lots of divergent thinking arising from the synergy of cross-phase interaction and creativity in decision-making, and it was easier to adopt new approaches. For instance our working together inspired the development of an integrated Year 7 curriculum, based on good practice in Key Stage 2.
- There are many opportunities for personal and professional development – each of us has taken on new roles and learned far more than we believe we would have done in a conventional situation.
- There is an adaptability to futures thinking – we have learned to challenge all conventions and this has meant trialling many new ideas.
- Experimentation and change are accepted as a natural part of learning and development, not viewed as personal failure. The more risks one takes, the more likely it is that mistakes will be made, but we have accepted that a learning organisation needs to take risks in order to learn.

Constantly questioning and challenging each other was essential in setting up an innovative institution – nothing was taken for granted. This was particularly relevant to the team's growing understanding of the cultural and organisational differences between primary and secondary schools, which is often recognised but rarely confronted.

Facing up to the challenges of cross-phase teams

The task we attempted was stressful and difficult. It would be unhelpful to others to gloss over the difficulties we faced, and our research, if it is to be useful to others, must be honest and objective. We recognised that in any team situation there will be personality conflicts, tensions and disagreements. These are some of the challenges our team faced:

- There were difficulties in creating shared understanding. We found, for example, different behaviour policy expectations in different age groups and in different contexts. This meant giving time to discussion and debate, to create mutual understanding and consensus, which might not otherwise have been necessary.
- We had different priorities, pressures and practical requirements – for example, communication with parents is usually more face-to-face in primary and paper-based in secondary.
- There were difficulties drawing the whole team together – because of the different demands within and beyond the school day at primary and secondary levels, it was rare that everyone could meet together.
- Experienced members of the team can feel overburdened – we discovered that a huge amount of explanation was required to work with colleagues who were placed in an unfamiliar phase.
- Less experienced members can feel unsupported, inadequately trained or prepared – walking into a Year 1 class from a Year 7 class, and vice versa, can be extremely challenging.
- Equality in principle is hard to achieve in practice, given inequalities of pay between sectors and the traditional expectations of heads, deputies and assistants.

- There is a serious question mark over whether any team can function effectively with two leaders – the rarity of such situations probably says much about the drawbacks. Staff can be unsure about who to go to for decisions, and sometimes get different responses from members of the team.
- Conventional differences of pay, staffing structure, preparation time, daily routine, ethos and expectation between primary and secondary staff are impossible for a single institution to resolve on its own – in many ways these are different worlds. For instance, even generosity of staffing and funding cannot solve the problem of non-contact time for a reception class teacher whose children are very unsettled in her absence.

Our cross-phase team faced the additional difficulty that two schools cannot legally function as one, so shared staffing, budgeting and planning proved extremely problematic. Although the law will now allow the campus to become one institution, that does not permit the joint functioning of two heads.

In addition, like any community school, we face the challenge of staffing a 24/365 school with the majority of staff on teachers' pay and conditions based on the formal notion of 1265 hours per annum. Our experience is that this equation places an unreasonable and disproportionate burden on leadership team members.

Key findings

If our experience is typical, a successful cross-phase team needs:

- strategies to promote effective communication
- an understanding of the difference between core and boundary activities
- strong people management skills
- values-driven strategic planning
- external support

Partnership

Partnership is an over-used phrase in relation to school management, behind which may lie good intentions but little substance. Our commitment was to working in partnership with other teams, such as the public library and adult education services, to deliver wide-ranging community services. After a few months of existence it is too early to evaluate our success in achieving that. Nonetheless we can state that, in our experience, school leadership teams cannot succeed in isolation and must develop new and better ways of working with other agencies.

Recommendation

All-age schools, community learning centres, networked learning communities and federations of schools are an increasingly important feature of education in this country. Further work is needed to help schools develop appropriate models for team leadership in these new contexts. Our experience suggests too, that these new contexts will require further legislation and changes in teachers' pay and conditions if schools are to be enabled to experiment and to develop effective new structures.

References

Gray, J et al (1999) **Improving Schools: performance and potential**, Buckingham, OUP

Handy, C (1994), **The Empty Raincoat**, London, Hutchinson

Feedback on this report to any member of the team is welcome, through abanks@chaffordhundredcampus.thurrock.sch.uk

Research Associate Reports Available in Autumn 02

Two Heads Better than One? Building a cross-phase school of the future, Alison Banks, Catherine Finn, Smita Bora, Karen Lee and Carol Watson, Chafford Hundred Campus, Thurrock

Working Smarter Together: The development of an enquiry team across 12 schools, Trish Franey, Networked Learning Communities

Open Windows: Becoming an e-learning school, Moyra Evans, formerly Denbigh School, Milton Keynes

Leading from the Classroom: The impact of the assistant headteacher in primary schools, Peter RJ Smith, Swallowdale Primary School, Melton Mowbray

Passion and Intuition: The impact of life history on leadership, Richard Parker, Lodge Park Technology College, Corby

The First 100 Days: An enquiry into the first 100 days of headship in a failing school, Patricia Brown, School Development Adviser, Hertfordshire

Team Talk: Sharing leadership in primary schools, Alison Kelly, Hooe Primary School, Plymouth

The Intelligent Gaze: Leadership, lead learners and individual growth – a reflective enquiry, Steve Kenning, Callington Community School, Cornwall

Summary and full reports of these and previous research associate studies are available from the NCSL web site at www.ncsl.org.uk/researchassociates

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The research summarised here is part of the NCSL Research Associateship Programme, which offers an opportunity for school leaders to contribute towards the College's research and development agenda. NCSL provides support for school leaders to undertake study, to engage in enquiry and to impact on practice. The programme includes:

- Study visits
- Team enquiries
- Bursaries
- Researchers in residence
- University project attachments

We welcome enquiries about the Research Associates Programme. For details, please contact Martin Coles by emailing martin.coles@ncsl.org.uk

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