

Collaborative Leadership and Professional Development for School Improvement in Buckinghamshire

*Judy Durrant (Canterbury Christ Church University)
with John Bartholomew (Canterbury Christ Church University Associate)
and Gordon Vincent (Buckinghamshire Local Authority)*

Innovative developments in Buckinghamshire schools have prompted considerable academic, political and professional interest (NCSL, 2002; TTA, 2004; GTC, 2005; DfES, 2005). Prompted by this interest, Buckinghamshire County Council commissioned Canterbury Christ Church University to conduct a case study of the Local Authority's linked initiatives in 2006. The aim of the study was to identify the good practice and process and the lessons to be learnt from four initiatives in the county that are based on collaborative approaches to leadership, learning and professional development. As well as informing further school improvement work, the Authority wanted to identify effective models that could be applied more widely across the newly integrated Children's Services.

The Local Authority (LA) identified from the outset some of the processes that the initiatives were designed to promote: collaborative and distributed leadership, facilitation, networking, transference, ownership, monitoring, training and self-evaluation. The study examined the effects of this activity in terms of outcomes for pupils, teachers, schools and networks and for the Authority as a whole, and identified issues and concerns of stakeholders. Recommendations were made to enable the Authority to build further on the current initiatives, transferring the successful practice and the lessons learnt to the development of the new Children's Services.

Background to the four initiatives

Local Authorities have obligations to deliver on statutory duties, but their powers have been diminished, so Buckinghamshire embarked on a process of devolving responsibility for school improvement. Four years ago, Buckinghamshire School Improvement Service began engaging teachers and school leaders in professional development that was more collaborative, focussed on pupil and adult learning. This was in the context of growing school autonomy, deeper understanding about how adults learn and acknowledgement that professional development needs to be focussed on pupil outcomes to add value. Recognising the rich resource of the knowledge, skills and understanding already residing in the county's schools, the intention was to encourage greater dependence on peer learning. There is considerable trust in the fact that there are excellent practitioners in schools, with whom responsibility can confidently be shared through collaborative activity, networking between schools, distributed leadership and effective self-evaluation. Buckinghamshire was granted funding for this set of initiatives in the belief that higher performance and sustainable improvement could be achieved.

Buckinghamshire Academy for School Leadership (BASL) was established at a headteachers' residential conference in 2003. Headteachers were invited to design the

structure and set the agenda for the academy, which is formalised in a constitution. The Academy is led by an elected Board of members with representatives from all sectors. Although participation is voluntary, most headteachers in the county subscribe and participate. BASL is organised in partnership with the Local Authority, where headteachers own the agenda and LA staff facilitate the activity and subsidise it, for example by providing administration free of charge. BASL runs seminars, conferences with inspirational speakers and internally-led workshops. It funds opportunities such as international study visits, headteacher sabbaticals and individual research projects, encourages members to offer training, facilitation, mentoring and coaching, and supports research and development projects. BASL aims to represent the views of Buckinghamshire school leaders locally and nationally.

Buckinghamshire Professional Development Schools (BPDS) are schools that are able to demonstrate a high quality of practice, according to rigorous criteria, in specified aspects of professional development: induction, mentoring, coaching, tutoring and peer training. In this initiative, which is exclusive to Buckinghamshire, schools have received funding for professional development for three years from the Teacher Training Agency (now the Training and Development Agency) matched by Local Authority funding. They work closely with higher education and other schools in providing placements and a rich environment for initial teacher training. They may feature planned learning opportunities, action research, professional reviews and portfolios. More than 50 schools have achieved BPDS recognition and contribute written case studies of their practice to a published directory disseminated nationally by the TDA as well as within the county. They are encouraged to make their own links to share with local schools.

Buckinghamshire Learning Communities (BLC) were initiated by an invitation to all schools, arranged through a BASL conference in November 2004. Clusters of a minimum of 6 schools formed networks with a common focus, which had to include pupil learning as well as adult learning. Planning and bidding took place intensively through to the summer of 2005, for a September 2005 launch involving around 150 schools clustered into communities. Although some of the schools had been working together previously, the newly formed networks are at a relatively early stage of development; this study was conducted halfway through their second term.

Collaborative Leadership Learning (CLL) groups and headteacher mentoring were been established following a pilot with the National College for School Leadership in 2002 (NCSL, 2002), in response to concerns that more support was needed in the early years of headship. Headteachers new in post (including those who are experienced in the role but new to Buckinghamshire) are assigned to a support group facilitated by a more experienced headteacher and a Local Authority adviser. The groups meet regularly for sharing, problem-solving and peer support, with inputs from speakers on relevant topics. Headteachers are also assigned an individual mentor – a more experienced headteacher with whom they can have critical conversations to support their leadership and professional development. Mentors and facilitators are recruited and accredited through the Leadership Academy.

The research process

The research was conducted by Judy Durrant and John Bartholomew from Canterbury Christ Church University. The data gathering was organised in two stages. First, documentary evidence was gathered through a letter from the Head of School Improvement to all headteachers in the county, and a memo to advisers, inviting contributions of evidence of schools' involvement in the initiatives. 'Key informants' for interview were identified in consultation with the Local Authority. These were mainly headteachers and CPD co-ordinators, LA advisers and those with strategic responsibility within the Authority. People were encouraged to organise the visit time in the way that they thought would be most informative, which might include one-to-one and paired interviews, tours of schools, visits to classrooms and/or discussions with groups of teachers. The researchers responded flexibly to changing circumstances in order to gain as full a picture as possible in an intensive programme of visits over seven days, working with a set of key questions.

Although respondents were to a large extent self-selected or selected by the Local Authority and therefore likely to tell 'success stories', the researchers were convinced of the Authority's and schools' concern for the integrity and rigour of the study. Most of those interviewed gave a balanced view, highlighting successes but also discussing problematic aspects of the initiatives, raising issues, questioning processes and suggesting improvements. Interpretations were cross-checked to reach a high degree of confidence in the conclusions drawn. Successful models were collected to share and build upon and there was genuine and widespread interest in what the study would reveal that might help schools and the county move forward and improve provision.

Values, purposes and activities

Through all the four initiatives that are the focus for this study, schools have been given, and have accepted, greater responsibility for learning and improvement. They have often had to overcome a range of logistical problems and addressed political issues in order to move forwards collaboratively, particularly where new relationships have been formed. There is a feeling that individuals and schools are now working 'on behalf of' each other and they have clearly learnt new skills and approaches.

The values and agendas underpinning the activity are explicit and consistent. While there is a place for expert input to give developments initial momentum, respondents describe a movement towards building capacity for self-motivating and self-sustaining learning communities. Schools are increasingly providing training, mentoring and coaching for themselves and other schools. New knowledge is being developed and shared, enabling teachers to bridge between existing theory and evidence and experience from the school context. This is building a culture of increased participation, capacity for leadership and a higher level of dialogue, knowledge and understanding about learning.

The need for a strong and unremitting focus on pupils' learning was returned to repeatedly in interviews with headteachers and teachers. They are not prepared to invest long-term in initiatives that do not contribute to fulfilment of this common purpose.

Headteachers are the principal guardians of this, working strategically to deploy resources, time and energy and mindful of the need to demonstrate tangible outcomes. However, they are showing that it is possible to take a broad and creative view, developing relationships and long-term strategies for sustainable improvement through mutual challenge to re-shape their thinking.

Many of Buckinghamshire's Learning Communities are showing exciting developments that connect professional and organisational learning with pupil learning. Communities are making use of expert input and wider research, applying this through experimentation and enquiry. The dynamic and complex relationships and positive outcomes identified in other studies of network activity (NCSL, 2006) have already begun to develop at this early stage. Parallel with this, the Professional Development Schools initiative gives recognition to schools developing their professional cultures and working creatively to involve, motivate and support all members of staff in professional learning to contribute to school development.

This activity is driven by confident leaders setting their own agendas. A high level of participation and ownership reflects the extent of genuine involvement across the county, with the Leadership Academy and peer support for leadership learning at its heart. Activity is characterised by a significant increase in the amount of collaborative working within and between schools, sharply focused for each initiative – on improving pupils' learning, professional learning, organisational and network development and on building leadership capacity. The overall effect is a strong shared responsibility for learning at all levels.

The impact of the initiatives

Headteachers are supported in developing professional confidence as leaders within and beyond their schools. They have scope for choice in individual professional development and offer one another a great deal of encouragement and peer support, which is formalised by LA structures but has also become part of their culture. Those who participate fully feel they have a voice within the county and beyond. *Schools* have more opportunities for investigating, challenging, developing and sharing practice and learning from each other. The very real barriers that existed, particularly between secondary schools under the selective system, have “dissipated” as a direct result of these initiatives. Schools have been prompted to prioritise clearly and explore themes in depth. They have found common ground and have achieved greater shared responsibility for development. *Teachers, teaching assistants and other staff* have been provided with opportunities for professional development, enquiry, reflection and evaluation. Much enthusiasm and commitment around common purposes is evident. Teachers are offering one another practical support and taking greater collective responsibility for professional development. *Pupils* have also had many improved learning opportunities which were evident in observations and figured prominently in teachers' and headteachers' accounts. Improvements are demonstrated particularly in assessment for learning, reflective learning and thinking skills, in other words addressing metacognitive aspects which can

be applied across the curriculum, while not neglecting improvements in specific subject knowledge.

This study revealed a collective commitment within schools and the LA to research, review and evaluate activity in relation to intended purposes, demonstrating strong internal accountability. Shared formats and processes for evidence gathering and reporting have been designed, usually arranged around formal meetings. There is also a wealth of specific documentation, which could be systematised (e.g. professional development portfolios, lesson observation notes) and some which is individualised and evolving (e.g. students' work, photographs and displays). It is important even when resources are shared, to allow scope for them to be customised to fit their intended purposes.

In summary, characteristics of the activity for headteachers, teaching staff and pupils include

- collaborative leadership and learning
- whole staff involvement
- focus on pupil learning outcomes
- invitational approach and voluntary involvement
- funding allocated to schools
- practical frameworks for planning, evidence gathering and evaluation
- encouragement of risk taking
- allowing choice and diversity
- peer support and shared responsibility for learning

The initiatives together have helped to bring out the richness in individual institutions and link this within localities and clusters, while maintaining the sense of belonging, contributing and learning across the county.

Issues, concerns and areas for development

Issues and concerns emerging from the study are mainly to do with sustainability: widening and deepening impact, sustaining improvement, ensuring accountability and continuing to develop effective support. It is important to stress that one solution will not fit all scenarios and that the freedom to apply ideas in context and encouragement of localised interpretation of initiatives is a real strength in the LA's approach. Inevitably the study highlighted inconsistencies. Some schools have moved further than others; all have had different starting points; some disseminate and create links effectively while others are more reticent or find themselves in circumstances less conducive for sharing. For example, some small schools have needed support from their neighbours in order to release heads who have a teaching timetable.

The Authority has already taken action in response to the question of how excellent practice can be more effectively identified, celebrated and shared. At a conference in July 2006, 'Working Smarter Together', schools were invited to showcase their improvement

work, whether linked to a county initiative or generated within. This was extremely well attended, offering dozens of schools, represented by headteachers, teachers and pupils, the opportunity to increase confidence that their stories were worth telling, with many more creating the audience. Time was allocated for touring around the many 'exhibits' and for more detailed learning conversations to discuss specific projects. At this conference the peer support, sense of celebration, pride, interest and commitment to mutual learning were clearly visible.

Further questions were raised through the study about the support needed for collaborative learning, leadership and professional development. Negotiation and clarification of the roles of advisers and facilitators is vital and they themselves need not only initial training but also continued support. The enormous pressure on headteachers can be mediated through the strong professional networks and mentoring relationships, but even so it is important that expectations of busy headteachers allow for ebbs and flows in activity. Rotation of membership of the Academy Board and sharing of mentoring roles help to spread the workload but also, importantly, builds new capacity for strategic leadership and peer support amongst headteachers.

Two other areas for further development were identified. The first is the theme of pupil collaboration, pupil voice, pupil leadership and pupil research. For example, one learning community was discussing how to pool resources to link pupils across schools for collaborative learning, but this was not widespread. The second area that could be given more emphasis is the identification and further development of school-based research expertise, with structured and funded support for teacher research, linked to leadership of change, focussing on pupils' learning. Most schools are involved in research of some kind, but a county strategy with a range of options for teachers and schools could make this enormously powerful.

Finally the Authority may need to explore more fully how the development of local, institutional and individual responsibility can be balanced by systematic accountability, supported by the gathering of evidence across, as well as within, initiatives and schools. This can be linked to self-evaluation according to regional and national frameworks. It is difficult to achieve when structures are under constant review, but robust processes are needed not only to meet the requirements of external evaluation, but also to support and structure continued learning and reflection on processes of change.

Moving forward

Although much of the funding is finite, the Local Authority takes the view that further improvement can be sustained upon the foundation of the new, highly productive relationship between the Local Authority and its headteachers. The LA has demonstrated its commitment to schools, trusting that the schools will reciprocate commitment now that funding is to a large extent devolved. This will be dependent on enough being achieved while funding lasts, to convince schools of the value and necessity of the collaborative work. It is important that strong links and robust structures are forged and maintained to scaffold this work, for example through use of technology when there is no

longer funding to cover teachers' classroom absence. Significantly the Leadership Academy, which is central to these developments, is not dependent on core funding but self-financing and, if the current momentum is sustained, will provide a strong catalyst for driving and shaping continued development.

This is an exciting time for the Authority, moving into multi-disciplinary working through the Children's Services. Approaches to professional development, collaborative working and learning, use of evidence and enquiry and the sharing of leadership can be applied in the wider services, for Children's Centres, social services, family learning and so on. There is much that can be learnt about balancing structure and accountability with shared responsibility and local, institutional and individual ownership. The principles and values underpinning these four initiatives guide a complex set of improvement strategies that enable leaders to take responsibility for taking action in unique local contexts. This is not a short-term task, nor is it finite. There is gathering evidence to show that collaborative approaches to leadership and development are leading to real and sustainable improvement in pupils' learning and professional learning. Organisational learning and improvement have already followed, or are likely to follow. There is a strong infrastructure and increasing sense of community across the county that offers potential for sharing this learning more widely, which requires continual commitment if it is to be sustained. Buckinghamshire Local Authority has recognised that listening and evaluating are crucial as a basis for moving forward. By commissioning this study, putting its innovative school improvement work under scrutiny, the Authority has demonstrated its own commitment to evaluation of evidence to inform learning at strategic level.

References

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For a copy of the full report and further information about these initiatives, please contact Gordon Vincent: gvincent@buckscc.gov.uk