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‘BY US AND FOR US’

**Building Capacity for School Improvement through
Collaborative Leadership and Professional Development:
a study of four linked initiatives in Buckinghamshire, UK.**

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‘BY US AND FOR US’

Building Capacity for School Improvement through Collaborative Leadership and Professional Development: a study of four linked initiatives in Buckinghamshire.

Innovative developments in Buckinghamshire schools have prompted considerable academic, political and professional interest (NCSL, 2002; TTA, 2004; GTC, 2005; DfES, 2005a). Prompted by this interest, Buckinghamshire County Council commissioned Canterbury Christ Church University to conduct a case study of four 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 processes and effects of this activity and the outcomes for pupils, teachers, schools and networks and for the Authority as a whole. Issues and concerns of stakeholders were identified and recommendations were made to enable the Authority to build further on the current initiatives and apply the successful practice and lessons learnt to the development of the new Children’s Services.

Background to the initiatives

The case study focussed on four key school improvement initiatives:

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 and headteacher sabbaticals, encourages members to offer training, facilitation, peer 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 (TTA, 2004). 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 development 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 (Buckinghamshire County Council, 2006). They are also 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. This was linked to National College for School Leadership (NCSL) funding for primary networked learning communities but the LA also actively encouraged secondary schools to engage with the initiative. 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 of all sectors, 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 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 Canterbury Christ Church University's Centre for Education Leadership and School Improvement (CELSI). The researchers had backgrounds in school-based and Local Education Authority research, teaching, training and consultancy in all sectors. They were able to use their knowledge and experience of school improvement, professional development, school leadership and evaluation to

inform the study. There was opportunity to explore themes in depth in order to draw out an understanding of current practice, outcomes and issues at school, network and county levels. The conceptual framework developed by Frost and Durrant (2002) provided a broad structure for the evidence gathering and analysis of the focus, context, process and impact of the school improvement activity.

Qualitative data was gathered in two stages. First, documentary evidence was gathered through a letter from the Head of School Improvement to all headteachers in the county, also a memorandum to LA advisers, inviting contributions of evidence of schools' involvement in the initiatives. A large amount and range of evidence was gathered in this way and used to draw up a set of 6 questions for interviews and visits which fitted within the overall analytical framework, as follows:

1. What is the nature of the activity related to each of the four initiatives and the extent of involvement across the county?
2. Are the values and agendas underpinning the activity explicit and consistent?
3. What are the benefits of participation in these initiatives, for schools, for pupils and their teachers and headteachers, for groups of schools and for the county?
4. What are the processes for gathering evidence of pupil, professional, organisational and network learning?
5. What processes and structures maximise impact?
6. What are the current issues and concerns? What suggestions are there for future development?

'Key informants' for interview were identified from the information gathered, in consultation with the Local Authority. These were mainly headteachers and professional development co-ordinators, LA advisers and those with strategic responsibility within the Authority.

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 the set of key questions to guide semi-structured interviews and additional conversations. This included around 20 school visits, many of which enabled evidence gathering on several of the initiatives from different stakeholders, and interviews with LA staff at County Hall. 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 discussions with groups of teachers. The researchers employed a high degree of 'theoretical sensitivity' (Strauss and Corbin, 1990), selecting and interpreting data based on their experience and understanding, in order to develop a conceptual as well as practical analysis from the emerging evidence. The process of making detailed notes and maintaining a running dialogue between the

researchers enabled analysis to begin during, rather than after the fieldwork, building on the initial interpretations from the documentary evidence. Thus the researchers recognised Ball's experience that as well as fieldwork there was a patient process of "...analysis, interpretation, theorising and writing" throughout, to enable progressive refinement of ideas (Ball, 1993: 166).

It is important to note that since respondents were to a large extent self-selected or selected by the Local Authority, they might have tended to include more who would tell 'success stories'. The study was small in scope compared with the range and complexity of the initiatives, leading to questions about whether the size and selection of the sample of respondents was sufficiently reliable to represent a view of the response across the county. However both the Authority and schools expressed concern for the integrity and rigour of the study and the researchers felt that those interviewed generally gave a balanced view. They found that they were entering a climate of considerable mutual trust in which there was a shared understanding of the need for an honest response. Respondents highlighted successes but also discussed problematic aspects of the initiatives, raising issues, questioning processes and suggesting improvements. Nevertheless, it was important to test interpretations by triangulating evidence from different perspectives. The field evidence was cross-checked against the documentary evidence and observations in the schools and stories were compared between schools, for example to gain several schools' experiences of working within the same learning community and many different experiences of participation in the Leadership Academy. A process of 'constant comparison' (Ball, 1991) enabled the researchers to validate interpretations and reach a relatively high degree of confidence in the conclusions drawn, given the size of the study. This was felt to have been achieved despite the subjectivities involved in determining an accurate picture of the "...messy realities of life in organisations..." and their multiple social interactions (Ball, 1991:167), in this case extending to clusters of schools, networks and county. The researchers found themselves exploring "...sets of practices embedded in particular milieux..." (Silverman, 2001:298), where apparently uniform phenomena, resulting from policy interventions, are locally constructed in multiple ways. In other words, activity and meaning were found to be highly sensitive to context. It was therefore important to ensure that interpretations and explanations were grounded in an understanding of the way that relationships and interactions were actually happening in practice. It is the interrelationships between variables that hold the key to understanding, therefore it was necessary to examine how elements were assembled or "mutually laminated" (Silverman, 2001:290), and how they were embedded in social organisational patterns (as opposed to coding and validating the elements themselves). Silverman argues that this kind of analysis is necessary as a sound basis for policy development, an important aim of this study for the Local Authority.

Illustrative vignettes about people, schools and networks were collected in order to support the 'social authenticity' (ibid) of the analysis, remembering that a further aim of the study was to identify good practice and process to disseminate and build upon. The intention was not to produce a standardised, generalisable set of 'results' but to develop "a coherent and illuminating description of and perspective on a situation that is based on

and consistent with detailed study of that situation” (Schofield, 1993:93). In lay terms, it amounted to ‘finding out what’s going on out there’.

By checking interpretations between researchers and with the Local Authority staff and headteachers, both throughout the study and in the final report, it was possible to achieve a high degree of ‘internal validity’ (ibid). The draft report was circulated to headteachers and advisers and the analysis was presented at a headteachers’ conference in July 2006 at which advisers and politicians were present, including the county’s Director of Children’s Services who is accountable for the school improvement work that is the subject of the study. In all cases it received a favourable response, confirming its value as an affirming, authentic and critical study. The researchers concluded that this was an accurate and authentic picture of the multi-layered activity, noting that the crucial factor for increasing objectivity in any study, whatever its nature, is “...the critical spirit in which it has been carried out” (Phillips, 1993:71) including the extent to which it has withstood serious scrutiny. All stakeholders expressed genuine interest in what the study would reveal that might help schools and the county move forward and improve provision.

Building trust and sharing leadership

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 (see Cordingley *et al.*, 2003). 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.

Research of continuing professional development (CPD) in the U.K. (Bottery and Wright, 2002, cited in Bottery, 2004) found that most training was “...short-term, technical-rational and implementational in nature...” while teachers were suffering initiative overload accompanied by “public and punitive” consequences for non-compliance (Bottery, 2004:187). This overburdening and disenfranchisement from the process and purpose of educational change has been widely discussed elsewhere (e.g. Bascia and Hargreaves, 2000). Experiences of prescriptive, top-down approaches are in tension with policy that encourages teachers in collaborative, school-based learning, making use of their collective experience and expertise (DfES, 2005a). English policy documents describe the features of CPD in support of a ‘new teacher professionalism’, which include teachers taking more responsibility for their own CPD, access to coaching and mentoring,

sharing expertise through networking and collaboration, and innovating through engagement in classroom-based research (DfES, 2005a: Handout 1).

While this encouraging emphasis in the English policy documents expresses the intention to give more responsibility to teachers for their professional development, effectiveness depends both on teachers' understanding and ability to respond positively and also on the availability and equity of opportunities for CPD. With limited funding available for professional development and pressure to maintain standards in climates of competition, schools must not only ensure that teachers are trained to implement policy but are also required to provide opportunities for generating and sharing ideas to support development of practice. Teachers are required at the same time to be both unquestioning implementers and creative innovators, in an "ongoing contestation between state control and professional autonomy" (Helsby, 2000:93). This study examines the effects of a strategic approach at Local Authority level to mediate national policy, to provide supportive structures for collaborative development and also to develop a culture of shared leadership and professionalism that enables schools to work together for improvement. This includes supporting school leaders who are wrestling with these contradictions, so that they become better at "sorting the worthwhile from the non-worthwhile" and can provide mutual support and healing in the face of poorly conceived or incoherent reform (Fullan, 2003: 272).

Bottery (2004) points out that teachers, students, education and society are damaged as external demands keep a tight grip on the development of pedagogy and professional knowledge. This prevents the flexible, individual and critical responses that are needed to support learning in local contexts. It therefore places a ceiling of competence on teaching rather than encouraging excellence, fighting against policies that apparently support innovation, creativity and the development and sharing of internal expertise. Bottery argues that there is a pervading lack of trust in the English education system, both trust in the teaching profession and a concomitant lack of trust of government on the part of teachers, eroding schools' capacity to prioritise and lead their own development. In many schools, across partnerships working for school improvement and in the realm of policymaking, there is considerable work to be done in developing trustful relationships that transcend the utilitarian and mechanistic. 'Two-way trust' is necessary if an extended view of professionalism incorporating teachers' engagement in enquiry, leadership and learning is to be taken seriously.

Buckinghamshire County Council, in adopting approaches to encourage widespread participation in initiatives across the county, across all phases (primary, secondary and special schools) and for schools in all circumstances, has taken a considerable risk. The authority has emphasised networking, peer support and in-house professional development for *all* schools, strongly supported by collaborative leadership practices. The activity and learning are deliberately lateral, rejecting hierarchical 'beacon' models that inevitably put some schools in the spotlight and some in the shadows (Bascia and Hargreaves, 2000). This avoids 'apartheid' between different types of schools and different areas (Hargreaves, 2003), where performance training approaches tend to be

used with schools in more challenging circumstances while more ‘successful’ schools are deemed to be ready to develop into ‘professional learning communities’.

This study has shown that through this set of initiatives, the Authority has allowed schools to engage in different ways to meet their own needs, choosing their own areas of focus for development and acknowledging different starting points. Furthermore, schools have recognised one another’s needs and have offered mutual support and encouragement, with the Leadership Academy acting as a vital catalyst for making connections, fostering discourse and articulating priorities, linking individual and organisational aims to the common purpose. This principle has been carried into localised working so that approaches and resources have been standardised to a point but are left flexible to allow for interpretation in the institutional context. Schools have gained confidence in evaluating progress using flexible criteria, so as not to require everyone to reach the same place at the same time. Relationships have been built that enable wider participation, which is evident in the practical details, for example larger schools have shared staff to enable headteachers of smaller schools to leave their classes to attend meetings, while headteachers lacking confidence to participate have been personally approached and encouraged by their peers. Mutual trust is a recurrent theme in the interview data. Thus there is evidence of the growth of an ethos of encouragement, shared responsibility between schools and collaborative improvement that celebrates diversity without emphasising disparity or introducing judgement or blame.

Sharing 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 underpinning the whole range of activity in this study were remarkably explicit and consistent. Principles, ideals and stances guiding decision-making and against which beliefs or actions can be evaluated (Halstead, 1996) were apparent across the networks and initiatives. This is particularly notable given the scope and complexity of this study, where the initiatives involve a range of stakeholders whose expectations might inevitably conflict and where groups with different value priorities might naturally “...vie for influence and domination” (Halstead, 1996:3). The study found that individuals were proud to affirm publicly their beliefs, attitudes and feelings and considerable emotional commitment was demonstrated on the part of advisers, headteachers and teachers. There was evidence of repeated decision making that clearly reinforced the characteristics promoted by the Local Authority. This included moving toward the sharing of leadership at all levels; peer support within and between schools; the idea of collaborative working as embodied in the NCSL slogans ‘working smarter together’ and ‘working with, for and on behalf of each other’; the notion of ownership

and the importance of using evidence. Above all there was an increasing emphasis on learning, with pupils' learning at its heart. The study found evidence of great integrity, particularly on the part of many headteachers working to find synergy in these initiatives, which mirrored a coherence of policy in this respect at county level.

While there is a place for expert input and facilitation 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 their evidence and experience from the school context. This is building a culture of increased participation, capacity for leadership and a higher level of knowledge, understanding and dialogue 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 in the relatively short term. 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 for some groups of schools. 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 encouraging peer support for leadership learning. 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: improving learning

Evidence of impact was considered against the framework developed by Frost and Durrant (2002), examining effects on pupil learning, professional learning (of teachers, headteachers and other staff), organisational learning and system / network / community learning.

Pupils have 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. There is a strong movement to place pupil learning at the centre of all initiatives and this priority is carefully guarded by headteachers, teachers and advisers.

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. There is some evidence of greater shared leadership of developments.

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. They have been empowered to lead developments focussing on collaborative leadership and professional development for the benefit of pupils' learning.

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, explore themes in depth, self-evaluate and revisit and reshape priorities over time. They have found common ground and have achieved greater shared responsibility for development, again focussed on pupils' learning.

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.

Dissemination has been gathering momentum beyond the county. Papers published by NCSL (2002), TTA (2004) and GTC (2005) reflect national interest. One Professional Development School has published its case study in a national journal (Barrie and Pennington, 2005) and other papers report on research and evaluation underpinning the developments (e.g. Castagnoli and Cook, 2004). More reporting of this kind would be valuable in bringing the innovations to the attention of a wider audience and informing the educational discourse concerning the relationships between collaborative leadership and professional development and school improvement. At the same time reporting and recognition has an important effect in building further confidence amongst schools and the LA.

In summary, characteristics of the activity for headteachers, teaching staff and pupils generally bear out the intentions of the authority as explained at the start of this paper. They include:

- collaborative leadership and learning
- whole staff involvement
- focus on pupil learning outcomes
- invitational approach and voluntary involvement
- devolved funding for schools
- practical frameworks for planning, evidence gathering and evaluation
- encouragement of risk taking
- allowing choice and diversity
- peer support and greater 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. The authority demonstrates a move towards more sustainable approaches to improvement suggested by Durrant and Holden (2005) in which responsibility and leadership are shared and there is greater internal accountability, built on trustful collaboration and dialogue and an enquiry-based, evaluative approach. This developing climate supports and mediates risk taking, connecting diversity of approach and enabling choice and innovation within coherent frameworks based on shared values and purposes. This offers an alternative to a bureaucratic, micro-managed, training orientated approach that stifles creativity and innovation, orientates improvement towards meeting external accountability requirements and fails to acknowledge the local contextual differences that both offer opportunities and impose constraints on school development.

Sustainability, support and sophisticated leadership

Issues and concerns emerging from the study are mainly to do with sustainability, including widening and deepening impact, maintaining consistent and continuing 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 and there are variations in confidence, achievement and participation. Accommodation of this is viewed as essential to avoid the development of greater disparity and inequity of opportunity.

Further questions were raised through the study about the support needed for collaborative learning, leadership and professional development (Durrant and Holden, 1995; Frost *et al.*, 2000). 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 Leadership Academy Board and sharing of mentoring roles help to spread the workload but also, importantly, build new capacity for strategic leadership and peer support amongst headteachers.

Two other areas for potential development were identified. The first is pupil collaboration, pupil voice, pupil leadership and pupil research which are known to contribute significantly to school improvement (Rudduck and Flutter, 2004; Fielding and Bragg, 2003; MacBeath *et al.*, 2003). For example, one learning community was discussing how to pool resources to link pupils across schools for collaborative learning but this was not widespread. Pupil involvement in improvement is a natural and essential dimension of collaborative working and leadership development.

The second area that could be given more emphasis is the identification and further development of school-based enquiry, with structured and funded support for teacher research, linked to leadership of change, focussing on pupils' learning. Teachers who contributed to the study were enthusiastic about their experiences of school-based research but would clearly welcome more guidance, support and opportunity in this respect. The notion of academic 'research projects' should be resisted in favour of strategic approaches in which research and leadership of change are 'two sides of the same coin' (Frost, 2006) with teachers engaged in developing their schools rather than working to produce 'findings' that are clearly unlikely to be generalisable. The intention might be to broaden the collaborative work of the Academy and of individual learning communities towards a wider dialogue within which everyone can learn through teacher-led enquiry, develop their leadership and contribute both to improvement and to knowledge creation, nurturing both social and intellectual capital towards improvement. Fullan (2001) contends that this requires deeper cultural change than we might realise, contrasting sharply with ineffective use of standards, competency-based learning and models involving courses and training packages. Fullan suggests that the job of teaching needs to be redesigned for teachers' learning, since "...there is too much to know and to keep knowing for external standards to carry the day" (p.266). A county strategy that

offers a range of options to support teachers' career-long learning linked to leadership of school development in this way could prove 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, nevertheless robust processes and sophisticated leadership are needed, not only to meet the requirements of external evaluation, but also to support and structure continued learning and reflection on the processes and outcomes of change.

A discourse of leadership and learning

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. The evidence in this study suggests that schools as institutions, within communities and connected up across the county are forming concentric patterns of interconnected learning communities in which people (teachers, support staff, headteachers, pupils) are gathering influence and increasing ownership of improvement processes through the sharing of leadership. They are learning together how to move forward. It could be said that leadership 'density' (Sergiovanni, 2002) has increased first through the strategies of the Leadership Academy and the mentoring and support of new headteachers, but increasingly by 'stretching' leadership across and between schools (Spillane, 2003) as the activity continues to gather momentum. Although this is not always yet made explicit beyond headship, the structures are developing to allow this to happen as the Leadership Academy widens its brief to attend to other 'levels' of leadership.

It has been suggested that changes in classroom practice and school organisation are dependent on prior changes to educational systems, beyond the powers of individuals in schools at regional level, and beyond the power of teachers at organisational level. Elliott (1998) asserts that these ideas are responsible for the quest for generalisations about characteristics of schools as social organisations and the "effective production of educational outcomes" (p.180). He argues, alternatively, for the development of a 'discursive consciousness' – a capacity for discourse about one's practice and its effects that engages individuals in improvement. This study has shown that through the combined effects of the four linked initiatives in Buckinghamshire, this capacity is increasing in relation to both pedagogical practice and leadership practice. This was demonstrated at a primary headteachers' conference organised by the Authority in July 2006, in which schools were invited to showcase their improvement work, whether linked

to a county initiative or generated within. The intention was to act immediately on the recommendations of this research, which suggested that more opportunities were needed for sharing and dissemination between schools and beyond localised networks. It also provided an opportunity to validate the study through a presentation by the two researchers from Canterbury. The conference 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 (as modelled by NCSL) to discuss specific projects. There was a celebratory 'carnival' feel, with a primary school jazz band playing at lunchtime and a range of colourful 'stalls' displaying schools' achievements and work in progress. However, this was complemented by earnest critical discussion and sharing of ideas, both philosophical and practical, during the learning conversations led by groups of teachers. All presenters and those who had constructed displays had committed much time and effort to communicating what they had achieved, but were also willing to share dilemmas, ongoing issues and the problems they had experienced, thereby exhibiting the kind of discursive consciousness and reflexive self-evaluation that Elliott (1998) describes. Throughout this conference, the peer support, sense of celebration, pride, interest and commitment to mutual learning were clearly visible. This suggests that there has been building of confidence, recognition of achievement and now understanding and assimilation of evidence in various forms (LA internal publications, websites, displays, school publicity materials, presentations to conferences) that provide a foundation for greater consistency and further development. The indications are that this is mirrored in all sectors.

It is important that strong links, robust structures and detailed but flexible practical arrangements are forged and maintained to scaffold this work, for example through use of technology (such as 'SKYPE') 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. The Authority is showing that improvement needs to happen simultaneously at tactical, strategic and capacity building levels (Gray *et al.*, 1999), enabling reaction to changing policy frameworks and requirements and proactive innovations for improvement while attending to the development of models for sustainable long-term improvement and mutual support. 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 in a significant critical mass of schools. Organisational learning and improvement have already followed, or are believed to be 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 and leadership at strategic level.

Accountability from within

Fullan (2001) sketches a scene of two ships, the 'Accountability' and the 'Professional Learning Community', passing in the night, uncomfortable in one another's presence, occasionally battling in the darkness. Clearly standards-based reform does not engender internal commitment and ingenuity, while learning communities will never evolve on their own. What they must do, he suggests, is to learn to respect each other and draw on each other's essential resources. He suggests that, as with this study, we need to begin by looking for examples of success and suggestions for potential in the most promising examples. Then we need to recognise that 25% of change is about looking for direction and 75% is about learning how to progress in individualised local contexts. We must "change existing conditions so that it is normal and possible for a majority of people to move forward" (p.269). It is notable that the LA's initiatives fit within current policies and national strategies but these have been interpreted regionally and locally, often with considerable adaptation and enhancement to make them more powerful. This has involved focussing accountability and professional development carefully while building capacity for improvements in local contexts. Fullan identifies the process that can be recognised in Buckinghamshire, where control has become looser and commitment has shown evidence of a shift from external to internal terms of reference, with the system emphasising direction and guidance rather than control. Interviews with Buckinghamshire's strategic managers and school leaders show that they experience and endorse this cultural shift, both in intention and in practice.

Fullan (2001) goes on to explain that 'problems don't stay solved'; people in organisations, networks and systems have to figure out what to do over and over again in response to changing contexts. They need to carry on learning, using evidence, making knowledge explicit and generating the creative energy to act upon it. A fundamental requirement is an 'outward identity' and a collective desire to improve the system. Evidence from Buckinghamshire's Leadership Academy, its Professional Development Schools, its Learning Communities and its web of support to connect new headteachers into the system, suggests that it has set in motion sustainable school improvement, offering valuable and robust models to inform the Authority's current expansion to multi-agency working.

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