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Research Associate Full report

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Resource

Distributed leadership: case studies
of the effective creation and
deployment of pastoral teams

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Introduction

This research focuses on the effective creation and deployment of pastoral teams in schools. It arose from the work carried out in improving behaviour across a cluster of four primary schools and a high school serving an area of high social deprivation, near Birmingham. These schools were in receipt of a behaviour improvement grant and focused on achieving the following outcomes for their community:

- reduction in exclusions
- reduction of absenteeism
- reduction in challenging behaviour incidents in school

The schools' leaders were aware that many of the existing behaviour management systems reacted to crisis situations, rather than dealing with the root cause of the situations many children and families found themselves in. In response to this, specific pastoral teams were formed in each school to develop new systems and approaches to secure the outcomes identified above.

The importance of headteachers being able to establish:

a culture of respect and safety, with zero tolerance of bullying, clear boundaries, good pastoral care and early intervention to address problems

HM Government, 2010:32

has been identified in the recent government white paper, *The Importance of Teaching*.

However, as much research has shown in recent years, headteachers cannot achieve this in isolation but require more distributed approaches to support them, including the use of teams (Bennett et al, 2003; MacBeath et al, 2004; Harris & Spillane, 2008).

This research sought to identify how teams within schools supported headteachers in achieving such a culture through addressing the following research questions:

- What are the key leadership elements that promote effective teams?
- How can teams make rapid change?

The research is presented as a series of case studies, three of which are drawn from the schools and the fourth focusing on the team of headteachers and deputy headteachers and/or behaviour leaders that formed a steering group.

It aims to offer the reader an insight into what contributed to the effectiveness of the work of cluster teams. Although studied within the context of improving behaviour, its findings and conclusions might be relevant to teams working in other school-based contexts.

Methodology

The cluster schools were located in a significantly disadvantaged wider community and each faced similar issues relating to families with poor prior experience of the education system, poor housing, single-parent families and low incomes. There was some variation in terms of families' ethnic background with some schools serving largely white background families and others serving communities with a high proportion of minority ethnic families.

The research was carried out on completion of three years of the cluster's work. One-to-one interviews were carried out with between four and five key staff including headteachers, lead behaviour professionals (all of whom were deputy headteachers), learning mentors, special educational needs co-ordinators (SENCOs), learning link workers (personnel employed to focus on family learning and/or family support) and attendance officers in all four of the primary schools. These were representative of the staff involved in both the cross-cluster work and pastoral teams within each school.

Case study 1: Caslon Community Primary School

A distributed leadership approach at Caslon Community Primary School transformed the work carried out by the pastoral team. The work carried out by individuals prior to their forming a team was judged 'good' by Ofsted, whereas the subsequent team's work was seen as part of the school's 'outstanding' care, guidance and support in a later inspection.

Key learning

- The pastoral team leader modelled distributed leadership qualities. These were also demonstrated by the headteacher at senior leadership team (SLT) meetings, and were evident in the leadership of other teams throughout the school.
- The vision for school improvement in behaviour, attendance and exclusions was shared, with every staff member contributing to the school improvement plan.
- The leadership model was powerfully bottom-up, with the formulation of a shared vision and aims for the team driving the preliminary meetings.
- Solution-focused approaches and a no-blame culture permeated all aspects of the team's work.
- The strategies and activities that grew from this distributed approach impacted positively on staff, parents and pupils in the school.
- Continuous professional development (CPD) was integral to the team's work as team members gained skills, knowledge and understanding of effective approaches by sharing strategies in an open, solution-focused format.

Background

Caslon Community Primary School is a small school serving a pocket of deprivation south of Birmingham. The school faces many challenges with an increasingly mobile population, a majority of White British families with poor personal experience of the education system, poor housing, low incomes and a significant proportion of single-parent families. Approximately 25 per cent of pupils originate from Yemen and have come into a socially deprived area. The leadership team recognised that attainment and progress were heavily reliant on how the community could be supported to get something out of the education system, as for many parents this had not been their experience when they were children.

Key challenges

Creating a new team

The roles that staff in the team held had existed for a number of years prior to the team's formation. This meant that work patterns and accountability to a line manager were well established. Three of the roles were held by support staff and, in forming a team, there was an initial expectation relating to senior staff behaviours that was difficult to change on both sides. For example, natural seniority was assumed on occasions by teacher members in relation to support staff members and expected and/or accepted by the latter.

Impact and value for money

Investment in the team's ways of working meant that team meetings were held within school hours and team members were non-class-based. Some teachers and support staff colleagues felt that team members

who were support staff should be in the classroom supporting children with their learning, not involved in meetings and/or carrying out their roles outside their perceived classroom responsibilities. To ensure whole-staff commitment to the pastoral team's work, impact on behaviour, attendance and exclusions had to be demonstrated.

Budgetary constraints

The salaries of a number of staff within the team were funded for short fixed terms and the school faced redundancies due to its small pupil intake.

Solutions

Ensuring a distributed team approach

The pastoral team comprised those staff members who already held key roles related to behaviour, attendance and exclusions. It was led by the deputy headteacher who, as a member of the SLT, provided a clear link between this and the pastoral team so that the latter's work was discussed weekly at strategy meetings.

Distributed leadership was developed over time through weekly meetings using a solution-focused approach to problem-solving. Team members brought individual family or child cases to discuss with team colleagues and their shared thinking informed the next steps for the week ahead. This shared forum established the team's identity as well as individual and collective responsibility. Team members drew on each others' expertise on an equal level and challenging questions were encouraged and facilitated by the team leader. As team members' confidence in the solution-focused approach developed and the equity of their roles and responsibility was facilitated, so more equitable practices were adopted within team meetings. For example, support staff felt empowered to ask probing questions of colleagues to help develop solutions.

The deputy headteacher agreed with her performance management leader to focus on the formulation of this team and agreed that her leadership skills be a core focus for performance management. Observations of her work were carried out, and her leadership styles discussed. This model of performance management was also carried out with all members of the pastoral team, whereby different aspects of their roles were set as performance targets.

Budget for sustainability

The salaries of a number of staff within the team were funded for short fixed terms. The leadership team and school governors agreed that the team's work and its impact on improving behaviour, reducing exclusions, increasing attendance and raising achievement was significant and therefore too great to lose. Consequently savings were made in other areas to support its sustainability.

Next steps

The distributed model has meant that over the past three years, each team member has developed skills so that the team is now sustainable without a team leader.

Further information

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- For general school information, contact info@caslon.dudley.sch.uk

Case study 2: Hob Green School

Distributed leadership at Hob Green School was tested when the deputy headteacher became the school's acting head. This required the change team that was formed to be able to lead self-sustaining improvement.

Key learning

- The distributed approaches enabled changes made by the team to have a high impact on pastoral care.
- The vision for the change team was one that was shared by the whole school community.
- The leadership model was reliant on consistent administration systems which structured the work for the whole team.
- Solution-focused approaches and a no-blame culture permeated all aspects of the team's work.
- The team leader's move to a role as the school's acting headteacher aided and consolidated change team members' confidence in the overarching vision.
- Individual members were empowered by the deputy headteacher to develop and lead change in all aspects of their work.

Background

Hob Green is a one-form-entry school in the suburbs south of Birmingham. The school serves a mainly White British community and faces many challenges with families that have poor personal experience of the education system, poor housing, low incomes and a significant number of single-parent families. It has a small minority of pupils from minority ethnic backgrounds. The leadership team believes that a whole-school pastoral approach must be in place to reduce the impact of a variety of barriers to learning.

Key challenges

Recognising the need for change

Many of the barriers to pupils' learning and wellbeing were historically seen by some staff as problems the children brought to school which impacted on their learning. Perceptions were that behavioural problems were learnt from inappropriate parenting or were endemically related to the socio-economic background of the pupils. The need for change was therefore not fully appreciated as acceptance of the existing situation was embedded.

Historical roles and accountability

Support staff who were crucial to the success of the changes had already been employed for a number of years to complete specific roles, which were however not completely aligned with the outcomes the school required. There was a lack of understanding, primarily by some teachers, of the far-reaching implications of the work that these staff members undertook, such as the value of a family support worker in securing increased attendance and the likely impact of this on pupil achievement. Communication with senior leaders had the effect of increasing their knowledge of the work and its impact and this in turn secured their support for it and had a positive influence on pupil behaviour.

Staff turnover

Long-term staff illness, promotion and insecurity due to budget constraints caused a great number of changes in staffing over a few years.

Solutions

Sharing the vision

The vision for a more holistic, pastoral approach centred on children's wellbeing and the influence of this on achievement was shared with governors and was one they clearly understood. The community needs were seen as substantial and ones that could not be ignored. This vision influenced governors' recruitment of senior staff that held and shared such ideals.

Administrative systems

The team was structured around each of the five Every Child Matters (ECM) outcomes with a firm commitment to weekly meetings which were driven from a regular agenda set by the deputy head. Meetings were facilitated by team members; for example individuals rotated the facilitator role and records of outcomes were stringently kept to inform the next steps and record impact. For example, team members were prepared to report on family support outcomes so that these could inform discussions and decisions about the next steps.

An empowered change team

The team's initial facilitation by the deputy headteacher helped raise the status of its work and the work of its individual members as this became a core development focus for the school. His expectations of team members and their work helped elevate their assumption of new responsibilities. This increased the value of those involved and their work to meet the needs of the community.

[The team members] are the foil to knee-jerk reactions! The team act as critical friends, bringing different yet equally valid perceptions to our concerns.

Deputy headteacher

When this deputy headteacher became acting head, the team was sufficiently well established in its ways of working for these to be sustainable. Team members took on additional responsibility to cover his absence.

Impact

Their impact on the core areas of behaviour, attendance, exclusion and achievement gave the team the strength to promote the system with great authority. This was recognised by the school's Ofsted inspection in which provision for care, guidance and support was graded 'good'. Staff saw the effects of the team on pupils' behaviour in the school.

The acting headteacher was promoted to a post in a new school and has embedded the same practice there within months.

Next steps

The team has developed each member to the degree that any member of the team could replicate the practice elsewhere or be sustainable without a team leader.

Further information

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Case study 3: Rufford Primary School

At Rufford Primary School, a different model was developed in which the learning mentor, not the deputy headteacher, lead the pastoral team as a key development area for the school. The headteacher's distributed style of leadership empowered the learning mentor in her work and the empowerment of other team members. This contributed to the team's success in improving the core areas of attendance, behaviour, exclusions and achievement.

Key learning

- Distributed leadership at Rufford allowed staff to learn, grow and have a desire to succeed.
- The pastoral team leader or learning mentor replicates the practice of distributed leadership in all areas of her work.
- The authority that the learning mentor holds induces respect from the staff, pupils and parents with whom she works.
- A holistic, solution-focused and no-blame culture permeated all aspects of work.
- Commitment to distributed leadership by the headteacher and the allocation of resources in terms of finance and time gave status to the credence of the learning mentor and her team's work, and accelerated its impact with the target families.
- As at Caslon Primary, CPD was integral to the team's work as team members gained skills, knowledge and understanding of effective approaches through sharing strategies in an open, solution-focused format.

Background

Rufford Primary School is an average-sized school serving a population of Pakistani heritage families and a minority of White British families. It is located a few miles south of Birmingham. The school has a high rate of pupils eligible for free school meals, and many families are from socially deprived backgrounds.

Key challenges

Sustainability

The school employed a deputy headteacher who had the insight to form a pastoral team and small behaviour and education support team (BEST). This emulated on a school-based scale the role of a local authority BEST. Its main aims were to reduce exclusions and serious behaviour incidents, and raise attendance levels. The deputy headteacher was promoted to headteacher at another school, having been the main driver of this initiative within a cluster of schools which adopted similar approaches.

Training and accountability

While the learning mentor was trained in her area of expertise and had worked within the school's BEST to learn facilitative and distributed leadership styles from the deputy headteacher, she did not feel that she had the overarching authority to make some important decisions.

Budgetary constraints

The team was dependent on release time from class-based duties to meet and discuss the cases. A reduction in pupil numbers in the school had an effect on finances, hence constraining the time staff could be released.

Solutions

Empowerment of support staff

The deputy headteacher's promotion to another school was managed through distributing team leadership responsibility to the learning mentor. The headteacher supports the learning mentor by providing a sounding board and this has aided her confidence in carrying out her role. She and the learning mentor recognise that it is team empowerment that makes the difference:

It's the relationship they've got with talking to each other often.

Headteacher

The headteacher recognises that sustainability can only be achieved if team members understand and promote each others' work:

I've got three cracking members of staff not one... when one brilliant one goes, you're stuck then.

Headteacher

The learning mentor:

- runs pastoral meetings and uses a solution-focused approach to the discussion of cases
- deals with issues that arise from attendance data
- tracks the progress of pupils targeted for case work
- supports professional development as a higher level teaching assistant (HLTA) by providing training for other TAs and cluster-based training for learning mentors in other schools

Credibility

The learning mentor has a strong commitment to the work that she does and the headteacher recognises that, through actually doing the work with the community rather than just promoting it, the learning mentor has far more credibility with staff in school as the approaches she shares are tried and tested:

I want them to believe in what they are doing because it is coming from somebody who has tried it.

Headteacher

Next steps

The headteacher is driven by the impact of empowered staff and looks at all deployment in this light, ensuring prospective succession gaps are ready to be filled by staff that have deeply rooted beliefs in the vision of the school.

Further information

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Case study 4: The steering group

A group of headteachers facing similar circumstances distributed the leadership of strategies to improve exclusions, behaviour and attendance to their deputies.

Key learning

- The sharing of good practice through steering group meetings has had a substantial impact on the behaviour, exclusions and attendance work in the schools. All the schools have seen their Ofsted grades for care, guidance and support improve since carrying out developments.
- Ensuring pastoral teams received consistent, protected time enabled them to meet and be creative, proactive and reflective in their work.
- Headteacher commitment was crucial to success. This was demonstrated through their ensuring they held a full understanding of the agenda and communicated a belief in the value of the vision.
- A distributed leadership style in each school enabled empowerment and high-impact solutions on the core areas of attendance, behaviour and exclusions to be brought into action very quickly.
- CPD and review were central to each team's work.

Background

A cluster of primary school headteachers and a high school headteacher in an area of high social deprivation south of Birmingham formed a cluster to successfully bid for a behaviour improvement grant. The grant was used to fund a behaviour and education support team (BEST) for a year. Following this, funding was used for administration and facilitation time for the deputy headteachers so that team-based approaches could be developed in each school.

Key challenges

Maintaining a vision

The initial three years of the project saw rapid successes with a regular steer from the headteachers and underpinning clarity on the purpose of the project. However, as the funding ended, although the successes were clear in terms of impact on pupils, new staff did not have an appreciation of the importance of the team's work as the underlying difficulties had, by that stage, been resolved.

Impact and value for money

In the first year a very substantial proportion of the grant was spent on employing external services as the schools were looking for external support to offer solutions to difficult pastoral issues. However, these services could not necessarily offer the operational support required, being more advisory in nature and this led the steering group to re-evaluate provision and develop school-based teams that would be more sustainable and fulfil the operational requirements.

Forming a new team

The headteachers knew what outcomes they wanted and were forward thinking enough to be looking for new perspectives and solutions to the overall issues behind underachievement and behaviour. The staff chosen to carry developments forward did not initially share the need for change, nor have knowledge of the methods used or a positive experience of cluster work. While there was no resistance as such, doubt existed as to how new ways of working would improve provision and practice.

Solutions

Ensuring a true distributed team approach

The steering group undertook a lot of research initially to learn about the philosophy behind strategies targeted at improving behaviour, attendance and exclusions and approaches that had been effective elsewhere. This investment of time was important as it deepened the overall understanding for the whole group. The final position was to distribute leadership of developments to the deputy headteachers. This meant:

- sharing a clear vision and outcomes agreed between the schools, with clear indicators of what the measurable impact of developments would be
- empowering the group to organise and facilitate its own meetings
- empowering individuals within the group with decision-making autonomy from headteachers
- deputies facilitating pastoral team work in their own schools

Budget for sustainability

The nature of the pupil intakes for all the schools meant that the headteachers saw that it was more cost-effective to sustain the work. Demonstrating the success of strategies made it feasible to protect the budget for the work.

Next steps

New headteachers to the group needed to review the current position and carry out some group visioning to offer a genuine steer. In the future, it will be important for them to acknowledge that the powerful impacts were only achievable due to empowering staff to drive the work:

Ownership is key and I'm not sure how another head coming in would cope... in order for me to manage my workload I have to do a lot of delegating... that's developed people

Headteacher, Rufford Primary School

A number of original personnel from the cluster have moved to schools with similar challenges and replicated aspects of the work successfully:

I have set up a Pastoral Team in my [new] school and within six months they are operating on their own.

Headteacher, Brockmoor Primary School

Further information

- For further information, contact snasa31@googlemail.com

Conclusion

The distributed approaches adopted by steering group members enabled each school to develop effective school-based teams that led to improvements in the core areas of behaviour, attendance and exclusions and through these, achievement.

In summary, distributed leadership as it related to the pastoral teams, was found to:

- spread the ownership for the work across a greater number of staff
- accelerate impact so that what might have been long-term changes became embedded more quickly
- facilitate learning across teams rather than directing individuals' actions
- create invaluable opportunities for teams to reflect and discuss, thus enabling more robust solutions to be found
- foster a culture of openness and no blame, which was essential to accelerating change

Successful teams were those where:

- leaders had been able to take risks
- decision-making was distributed to those who worked practically with the children and families where the change and support were needed
- the roles of team members were kept distinct
- time was protected to enable the work to be carried out consistently
- there was a clear vision for the team's work and aims were generated by team members
- clear ways of working were established with supporting administration systems
- dialogue between team members was facilitated and contribution from all encouraged

School leaders might wish to consider the report's findings and conclusions to inform their creation of teams and evaluations of team effectiveness. As school discipline is now a central feature of the government's strategy for schools, heads might also like to consider how such pastoral teams can impact positively on attendance, behaviour, exclusions and achievement.

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