

School Improvement From Within

Shirley Palmer - General Primary Adviser

Schools are experiencing a time of constant change; too many government initiatives to count; anxiety over Ofsted; comparisons with other 'like' schools; SATs and league tables; work-overload and feelings of isolation. How can the LEA give back some sense of ownership to Headteachers and enable them to bring about improvement in a way that meets their needs?

The concern which prompted this question was based on the realisation that we were in an educational climate of wave after wave of new educational initiatives over which Headteachers had little choice and for which they were expected to take on board, often at very short notice. These initiatives often clash with, and detract from, a school's own priorities. This takes its toll. Statistics show that 15% of Headships are unfilled and there are Heads who are in charge of two schools. I asked myself what use are new initiatives when the people who are asked to implement them are not supported?

As a general Primary Adviser, an important step for me is that the school maintains some sense of ownership in any new initiative - 'improvement from within rather than imposed'.

I believe that it is not only desirable but also essential that, in most instances, school improvement focuses in on areas of concern for the school.

In this article I would like to describe two initiatives that I have been part of. The first is a support network for newly appointed headteachers. the second a conference for newly appointed headteachers.

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1. Support network for newly appointed headteachers

As a step in this direction, I helped to start a group bringing Headteachers together. When Headteachers work well together they are able to

- ◆ Support and appreciate each other
- ◆ Share information
- ◆ Share resources
- ◆ Share hopes and visions
- ◆ Help each other prioritise
- ◆ Express their feelings, particularly their anxieties and worries
- ◆ Bring difficult situations for discussion
- ◆ Develop a common purpose

I cannot claim this to be a new idea - I don't think I've had an original idea in my life, but then again most teachers are magpies when it comes to pinching and adopting ideas! The idea for this support network was based on my own experience when first appointed as a Headteacher. I was fortunate to have the then Senior Primary Adviser in Wiltshire as my local adviser. She never forgot what it felt like to be a newly appointed Head - particularly of small schools but not exclusively so.

She formed what she called the 'New Heads' Support Group'. We met half-termly in each others' schools. The intention was that each Head would have the chance to 'walk' their school, talking about their vision for the school, the situation that they had inherited, as well as any problems or constraints. It was established that anything that was said

was confidential and that was crucial. It was also established that it was not an occasion for 'knocking' your predecessor, although you could discuss in a professional way any problems that you had inherited.

The opportunity to 'walk' each other's school was extremely useful - many ideas were exchanged. It is very interesting what different pairs of eyes can pick up!

The other purpose for the group meeting was to discuss current issues and to encourage educational debate. The adviser also made it clear that it was an opportunity to ask any questions, even if they seemed trivial. Perhaps questions that we would not necessarily feel able to ask at our larger cluster meetings without feeling a fool. The Heads within this group were from schools of varying sizes and both rural and town placements. It enabled us to appreciate the problems faced by us all, regardless of size of school e.g. we all had headaches, they were just caused through different reasons. It helped the Heads from bigger schools to empathise with those in smaller schools and vice-versa.

These half-termly gatherings were a vital lifeline for me. I looked forward to the discussions and the opportunity to clarify anything that I wasn't sure about. It was great to share ideas and concerns. You can't help but pick up ideas that are useful in your own school situation. It certainly helped me to develop my management skills and to move my school forward. The meetings were so popular. Informal support networks developed and I remain in regular contact with some members to this day. New members joined the group and a few people left. It took three years for some of us to decide that we could no longer justify calling ourselves 'new' Heads just to remain in the group!

Remembering how belonging to this group really helped me and other colleagues set me thinking about starting a similar group - but I didn't have access to a budget to cover supply. My Senior Primary Adviser did not have to work with the joys of 'earning targets' and could offer her services free! None-the-less, I decided to run a course called 'Getting a Grip - Keeping a Grip!' based on the same principles.

The first session was based on examining their role as Headteachers. Some simple questions were posed for them to reflect upon, as well as looking at what the job entailed and other people's expectations. The questions raised were as follows:

Examining your role as a Headteacher

- ⇒ *Why are you involved in Education?*
- ⇒ *Why are you a Headteacher?*
- ⇒ *As a Headteacher, what's your own personal vision?*
- ⇒ *Are you clear about your role?*
- ⇒ *Are others clear?*
- ⇒ *What would you change?*
- ⇒ *Does it contribute to your goal?*
- ⇒ *How do you keep on top of paperwork?*
- ⇒ *Could someone help you?*
- ⇒ *Do you take risks/ask questions? If not, why not? How could this change?*
- ⇒ *Do you look after your physical and emotional health? If not, what could change?*
- ⇒ *Do you know when you have done well? How do you reward yourself?*

Prior to this session, the course participants were also sent an article to read on leadership to form the basis of a discussion.

Eight Headteachers took part in the course and all decided that they wanted to have the follow-up sessions meeting in each

others' schools, based on the same principles as the support network that I had belonged to. They agreed to each buy an afternoon of my adviser time for when it was their turn to have the meeting in their school. This would entitle them to attend the other meetings and they considered it good value for the eight sessions.

We now run between three and four of these groups each year, with other Primary Adviser colleagues overseeing a group each. We also pull all the groups together for input at a central venue when an area of concern or need for information is highlighted. So far we have had input on personnel issues, budgeting, payroll, governor support, strategic planning etc. The heads within the groups decide what the focus will be - ownership is always important.

The feedback highlights how these networks are valued and often seen as a life-line.

2. New Headteachers' Conference

I was fortunate to attend a conference, organised for new headteachers by the LEA, when I became a headteacher in Wiltshire over fourteen years ago. This took place in a lovely seaside venue, over two days. There were outside speakers, after dinner speakers, a variety of workshops etc. It was very interesting and enabled me to meet other new headteachers in the county. I remember it also being somewhat daunting with a lot of information to assimilate.

In recent years these conferences had ceased to exist for whatever reason. Part of my remit, as a General Primary Adviser was the pastoral care of headteachers. I spent some time contacting new heads sounding out whether they would be

interested in attending a similar event to the one I attended. The response was very positive.

When planning the conference I was initially advised to hold it in county in order to save costs. I held fast in my belief that it would be far better to hold it at a venue out of county - mobile phones have little effect if the distance is too great to nip back to school. It would be highly unlikely that conference members would drop into school on their way to or from the conference if it were out of the county etc.

I then reflected on what it was that I gained from the conference that I attended and more importantly what I was frustrated by. I came up with the following 'frustrations':

- Every minute of the day was highly planned and little time was built in for reflection

- There were few opportunities to discuss informally with colleagues or to share common areas of concern

- Unless I had got up at the crack of dawn or stayed up until the early hours of the morning I was unable to make use of the wonderful facilities provided in the hotel - I could only walk past the swimming pool and Jacuzzi and look longingly at both, never mind walking by the sea!

Before organising the conference I tried to analyse the benefits gained from attending the conference for myself as a new headteacher, things that went well and areas that could be improved. I consulted with other headteachers and tried to jog their memories back to conferences that they had attended as new headteachers. The benefits were:

- Out of county, therefore far enough away so that school matters could not disturb you, phone calls etc.

- In a pleasant location - good hotel facilities
- Interesting speakers and presentations

- Contact made with other new headteachers from similar schools.

- Opportunities to discuss issues such as School Development Planning, Effective Leadership.

Areas that could be improved included:

- Time to discuss more with other colleagues
- Opportunities to relax and enjoy the facilities

- Time to discuss issues relevant to their own school situations

- Opportunities to read and digest information about school improvement/ leadership.

- Access to up to date information, articles.

The one benefit, however, was the contact that I made with other new headteachers and I remain in touch with some of those colleagues to this day. We have all supported each other over the years and that support has been invaluable - at times a lifeline.

So what could I learn from this and what were my aims for the conference?

The aims of the conference were:

By the end of the conference you will have-

- ◆ Considered the headteacher as a learner in the learning process - action research within your own school
- ◆ Considered effective time management and people management
- ◆ Looked at strategies for carrying out effective self-evaluation and monitoring
- ◆ Received information about working with governors and how to develop a positive partnership with them
- ◆ Heard how to manage change for school improvement
- ◆ Had time to reflect on your role within the school
- ◆ Had an opportunity for professional dialogue with colleagues

◆ Time to think about your well being and survival!

It's all very well drawing up the aims for a conference or course that you wish to run but it is important to check whether your aims match the expectations of the people attending. I was determined to build in time for reflection, reading, informal discussion. This meant taking a risk, especially since this was to be the first major inset activity that I had organised by myself. This calculated risk took the form of deliberately leaving some 'gaps' in the programme. The first session did not start until 10am which allowed course participants to arrive and settle into the hotel, formal introductions could be made and then they could get to know each other over coffee.

The first session was also the first risk - nothing was actually planned as a formal presentation. I called the session 'Is the honeymoon period over yet? - opportunities and constraints'. We looked at the overall aims of the conference and colleagues had an opportunity to brainstorm ideas and reasons for attending. Fortunately their aims matched the aims of the course really well but there were some additions. Some colleagues had come along with the hope of getting answers to specific problems and to leave with an idea of 'how to keep a balanced view' and to 'do the job right!' Some of the new headteachers did not actually feel that they had even had a honeymoon period, having become aware of various problems that were not evident during their interviews or early weeks in post.

I invited each of them to reflect on and record the 'one burning issue' that was causing them to lose sleep and for which they would like to leave the conference with some guidance on how to go about dealing with and possibly even solving. These were then written on post-it slips anonymously and

displayed on a flip chart. A sample of the issues were as follows:

- How do I deal with an Admin. Officer who thinks she runs the school?
- I've inherited a deficit budget which I wasn't aware of, until after my appointment - I need help in dealing with this. There are some difficult choices to be made.
- The previous head left under a slight cloud - the school has been through a difficult time but now the governors want to be involved in every decision - almost to the point of running the whole school.
- The school has a very stable staff -which is a plus. But some colleagues have never taught in another school (thirty years or more!). How do I go about introducing changes, especially in raising expectations?
- Being a head of a small school with a high teaching commitment, I often feel that I'm struggling to carry out either role effectively.
- As a head of a large school how can I feel confident that I am keeping tabs on everything?
- I want to be able to raise the profile of the school in the community and develop positive relationships with parents - getting them involved more in all aspects of the school.
- I'm the head of a small school in a rural part of the county - I feel quite isolated at times and there doesn't appear to be an effective clustering system with other schools in the area.
- How do I deal with a colleague who is an excellent teacher but very negative in their attitude - constantly putting a 'dampener' on any suggestions made for change etc.? I can feel myself being irritated by them. I need to move the school forward but want to avoid conflict if at all possible.
- I was an internal appointment, having previously been the Deputy Headteacher of the school - I have a clear vision for the school and want to make a difference. How

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can I ensure that colleagues will view me as being effective in this new role?

It was clear that some of these questions/ issues could be dealt with under the sessions already planned e.g. Managing People/ Managing Time, Working in Partnership with Governors, Effective Leadership/ Effective Schools, Strategies for Monitoring and Evaluating. Work-life balance. Others would be covered during informal discussions.

The second risk was my version of the 3R's - READ, REFLECT and RELAX! I deliberately left the time from after tea on the first day (4pm) until dinner at 8pm free. I was available to discuss any concerns in confidence. They

could choose to have informal discussions; have time to read the articles and books that I had brought along; or to simply relax and enjoy the facilities that they hotel offered - including walking along the lovely stretch of beach. I was slightly concerned here - would some colleagues feel that they were not getting value for money if every session wasn't highly planned?

But all went well and my gamble paid off as the evaluations and request for a follow-up session proved. It now forms part of the local module for the Headteacher Induction Programme.

My intention in writing this is to share my experiences of helping to support headteachers. I consider this to be a vital part of education. Not only have I found this aspect of my job very rewarding for me personally, but I know how much the schools have benefitted from having their headteachers supported. I would like this need to be given more recognition and structures put into place that would enable this to happen more easily. I can see initially there might be some resistance. The idea of taking time for oneself is not fully accepted and the need to produce and fill every moment with activity is very strong. But we cannot ignore the statistics any longer. Are teachers ready to join the other helping professions that build in time for reflection?