

Trinidad visit – February 2007

Schools facing challenging circumstances: developing leadership

“One of the most important roles for effective leaders, therefore, is developing leadership in others; encouraging them to take on responsibility for improving learning and achieving goals.”

Leading in a culture of change - Fullan



Context; purpose; team; itinerary

The visit took place against a background of developing issues within South Gloucestershire. A recent DfES funded initiative on collaborative working had recently been introduced within the Local Authority. The conscious decision had been made to make collaborative links across “schools causing concern”, within Bands 3 and 4 of our own categorisation system. The basic concept was to make links across a range of schools to develop approaches to common issues. Each collaborative contained at least one school in either Band 3 or 4, but the area of focus was shared by all the schools coming together. The areas covered included: improving maths outcomes; developing assessment for learning; early reading skills; developing the use of data; generic teaching and learning; and leadership. In many of the collaboratives the key partners were not Headteachers but subject leaders and/or class teachers. This collaborative working had been launched at a day that also saw the launch of the Creative Leadership programme within South Gloucestershire. As well as supporting schools through this launch schools within collaboratives were also invited to participate in a highly successful day on coaching leadership led by Jan Robertson.

In light of this development of leadership at this level within the school system a bid was made to take part in a LECT (League of Exchange for Commonwealth Teachers) visit to further investigate how we could improve leadership skills in our less experienced teachers. We were successful in securing a visit to Trinidad in order to carry out this work. All schools working within a collaborative were invited to send applications from teachers. We received nine applications from teachers and two from Headteachers: as the focus was to look at teacher leadership we accepted the applications from the nine teachers. They came from four different schools, with one school sending three teachers and the others two. The age profile, experience and

leadership experience varied. The group included: a deputy head; a number of subject leaders, some of whom were members of the Leadership Team in their schools; and class teachers. Three of the teachers worked in a Band 3 school; two worked in a school that had been placed in an Ofsted category in the past; and two had directly supported a school in Special Measures. Some of the teachers had direct links within collaboratives and others were simply “fortunate” enough to work in those schools.

The work being developed in the collaboratives is encompassed by the following quote:

“In the contextual realities of high expectations, rapid change and a youthful professional in the first decades of the twenty-first century, teachers cannot be the mere targets of other people’s leadership, but must see themselves as being, and be encouraged to be, leaders of classrooms and of colleagues from the moment they commence their careers.”

Andy Hargreaves – Sustainable Leadership¹

Prior to the visit a link had already been established with a member of the Curriculum Development section in the Trinidad Ministry of Education. Tom Whittingham (South Gloucestershire Leadership, Management & Governance Strategy Manager) had delivered a key note address at a meeting with key officers from the Curriculum Division. It was through this link that the itinerary was developed in order to build sustainable partnerships. It has to be mentioned at this point that the timing of the visit was both fortuitous and unfortunate: the trip coincided with Carnival. This turned out to be key in helping us understand the culture and traditions of the Caribbean island we visited. However, it did present a number of challenges in respect of the educational aspect of our visit. Despite this our itinerary included: a visit to Runranath Learning Resource Centre, the central base for curriculum development and the media centre for the Ministry of Education; half a day in five different schools; and a day conference with members of the central team and primary school Principals. The schools visited covered the whole range from two separate girls and boys schools in socially challenging areas to a Muslim mixed primary to a privately funded school attached to the University of the West Indies. We had government schools as well as denominational schools.



Key similarities/differences within the systems;

The system in Trinidad has many similarities to the Public school system in the UK. For example: separate schools for boys and girls; and the use of the Common Entrance Exam to determine entry into secondary school. There is also a testing regime that takes place at the end of Standard 1 (Y3) and Standard 3 (Y5). Although

school results are not published as in England individual outcomes of the Common Entrance are made available for the 100 students and schools are proud to tell how many of their pupils were placed in the top 100 last year. All children are taught in classes of similar age, we saw no evidence of mixed age classes. Children are grouped in roughly the same way as in England with regard to Infant and Juniors. However, there is an expectation that when children start school they are prepared: they begin formal work almost immediately. There was very little evidence of play in Reception. In general there appears to be a formality to all aspects of work: there was little regard made to differentiation; classrooms were set out in rows; children were expected to stand and greet visitors (they would be up and down like yoyos during an inspection); many schools had weekly tests; and house points were often offered for cleanliness of nails or punctuality. One school told us that the weekly Friday test had improved attendance, contrary to what one might expect it might do. The reason for this was that pupils had to achieve a certain mark in tests to move on to the next class, or they were “kept down”; the more tests you did the more likely to achieve the appropriate mark. We saw examples of pupils who had been “kept down”; a particular example was a boy who stood head and shoulders above his classmates and was quite clearly at least a year, if not more, older than them.



Challenges faced by schools;

Clearly the challenges faced by some South Gloucestershire schools paled into insignificance at the side of some of what we heard. Drugs and knives, although not common place, do occur in some of the Trinidadian schools, particularly the all boys schools. Levels of literacy are low, some of the Principals were amused that we had a national issue with African-Caribbean boys. Many pupils in Trinidad struggle to reach levels of basic literacy, particularly reading.

There are some clear challenges in relation to cultural aspects of education. The value of education is a challenge in both systems. The links with Carnival and the music culture cannot be under-estimated. Most schools have a steel band and take part in some form of Carnival activity. This celebration of the island’s culture is a significant part of school life.

A key difference in the two systems appears at the level of resources. The school buildings reflect the climates of both countries, although in both there are considerable variations in the quality of buildings. The teaching resources in Trinidad appear to fall well below those in English schools. This is particularly noticeable in the area of ICT where Trinidadian schools have a much lower computer to pupil ratio than in England. Staff use of ICT is also less obvious, very few teachers had access to laptops.

Similar in both systems is the need to develop leadership in order to help improve the quality of teaching. However, there are significant differences in the way in which leadership is identified, although not necessarily in the way in which it is encouraged. Within the Trinidadian structure leaders are identified primarily through experience, whereas in England there are more formal ways of identifying leadership earlier and supporting the development of potential Headteachers. We have also developed techniques of encouraging teachers to remain in the classroom and not seeing leadership as a route to a larger salary.



Identifying the different leadership styles within the schools;

“The first assumption I make about leadership, then, is that it makes a difference.”

Geoff Southworth – Learning-centred leadership¹

The visits to five schools in Trinidad demonstrated a wide range of leadership styles, as one would find in British schools. Our conversations during the visit indicated that Trinidadian principals would like to move to a model that reflects our local management. Financing of schools is a key element in this process. At the moment they have little control over finance, handling only a small part. The remaining financial control lies with the Ministry of Education. This is contrary to the English system where Headteachers manage all aspects of the school budget.

It is apparent that this aspect of school management has a significant impact on the capacity of leadership from the Headteacher/principal. In Trinidad principals spend no time managing the budget process, whereas English Headteachers have to carry out a significant part of their time planning and monitoring budgets. All of the principals we visited demonstrated true capacity to lead their schools. They were not restrained by significantly restrictive requirements to manage their schools. There appears to be a more informal approach to the role of self evaluation in Trinidad. The principals did not describe systems that were time consuming. Other leaders in the schools did not often become actively involved. This was mainly due to the lack of financial management available to principals in order to free up other staff. So the key element of finance provides Trinidadian principals with the time to develop their own leadership skills but at the same time reduces their ability to provide other leaders with the opportunity to expand their skills. The English system of developing leadership is through a range of formal and informal routes. It is typified in the following quote:

“Secondly, distributed leadership suggests *openness of the boundaries of leadership*. This means that it is predisposed to widen the conventional net of leaders, thus in

turn raising the question of which individuals and groups are to be brought into leadership or seen as contributors to it.”

Distributed Leadership – A report from the National College for School Leadership

Quite obviously this is built on the foundation that schools have the budgetary freedom to make decisions on which CPD activities to engage in. One of the key problems within this system is that this requires a degree of social responsibility. Headteachers may be using their school budgets to develop leaders who will have greatest impact in another school. The notion of using leaders across a collaborative approach will hopefully keep these teachers in their own schools whilst at the same time expanding their experience.

Personality and personal ethos, as in England, are crucial elements to defining the leadership style within the principals. Where they identify that distributed leadership is key to school improvement principals have created ways to enable teachers to take responsibility. Often the schools have a “committee” structure to school development. Teachers are encouraged to lead these committees. There is less of an emphasis on the subject leadership that has been apparent within many English schools in the last few years. The committees in Trinidadian schools focus on more general developmental areas, such as Finance (despite having little to handle) and the Religious nature of the school.

Key to the collaborative approach currently being adopted in South Gloucestershire and as seen in some of our host schools is the notion that there is leadership potential in all our teachers:

“Leadership is not an ‘it’ from which we can abstract behaviours and tasks, but is a relationship...highly political and is a struggle within practice, theory and research. Furthermore leadership is not located in job descriptions but in the professional working for teaching and learning.”

Leaders and leadership in education - Gunter



Systematic leadership development;

One of the schools we visited had begun working in collaboration. This work was focused at principal level. The nine schools had come together because they faced similar challenges and were looking for similar outcomes. The schools had met

together for a training event but as yet staff have not had the opportunity to work in each other's schools.

The organisation of "support and challenge" to schools in Trinidad is similar in many ways to our own South Gloucestershire schools. However, the main differences lie in the fact that whilst Trinidadian schools are under the direct control of the Ministry of Education English schools are subject to layers of bureaucracy, including the Department for Education and Skills, the Office for Standards in Education and the Local Authority. The Trinidadian system includes support offered by the Curriculum Division and challenge from the Supervision Division.

Despite the obvious differences in relation to the way in which leadership is encouraged they appear to result in similar outcomes. The principals we met during our visit were eager for their schools to succeed and in many instances encouraged their own staff to develop their leadership skills. Key to the whole process were improvements in teaching and learning. Pupil outcomes in terms of test results are a fundamental outcome measure. This is summed up by Robert J. Sharratt in piece on Ethical Leadership¹: "Those who simply gear the work of teaching and learning to the achievement of high scores on tests with little or no regard for the lasting meaning and significance of the curriculum, are teaching at best a superficial knowledge and at worst a meretricious mistreatment of knowledge which empties the pursuit of knowledge of all but a crassly functional and self serving purpose."

The social responsibility mentioned previously is fundamental to the concept of collaborative working. It will only work if all of the schools hold social and moral responsibility for all pupils within the Local Authority. This is based upon the premise that we can only achieve the best for our pupils if all of our schools are of equal quality. To succeed we have to share the outstanding practice. The quote below has, therefore, implications for team builders across as well as within schools.

"In order for the principal to be a team builder, there must be a commitment to change and reform the traditional role of the principal."

Urban School Leadership: Issues and Strategies. - Sanders, E.T.W.

Both systems need to explore ways of recognising outcomes that span the range of the curriculum. The narrowing of the curriculum is a challenge in both countries.



Implications for developing leadership

“Therefore, the underlying assumptions I hold about school leadership are that it is:

- a shared function, not restricted to those who occupy senior role positions in the organisations;
- contingent upon the context in which it is exercised;
- involves setting a direction for the school which includes developing the people or organisation;
- a process of social influence;
- makes an individual and collective difference to the quality of learning and teaching in schools.”

Geoff Southworth – Learning-centred leadership¹

We need to seriously consider the development of leadership if we are to hold on to the fundamental notion that the provision of the highest quality of education for our children. Good schools are reliant upon good leaders at all levels. It is essential that potential Headteachers and senior leaders are exposed to leadership experience as much as possible. For younger teachers it is also important that this is carried out within a supportive mentoring approach.

The context of a situation is a key element. Many of us can provide anecdotes of Headteachers who move from one successful school into another, only to discover that their breadth of experience is not as wide as they thought. As a result they encounter difficulties. Collaborative work enables leaders to experience a range whilst being supported.

The development of people is the key purpose of this collaborative approach. It is the *raison d’etre* for this work.

As previously mentioned we cannot underestimate the social implications of this work. In the past schools have played an important role in the social development of their pupils. This new way of working extends our moral and social responsibilities to a much wider sphere.

If we are to make any difference then it has to be a collective improvement in the quality of teaching and learning, not only within the leader’s own school but also across others in the Local Authority.

“One of the most important roles for effective leaders, therefore, is developing leadership in others; encouraging them to take on responsibility for improving learning and achieving goals.”

Leading in a culture of change - Fullan

It is intended that the work from the visit will be showcased at the Leadership Symposium being held in South Gloucestershire in July 2007. It is hoped that this will provide the opportunity for colleagues from Trinidad to join us at the event and for members of the group to give an insight into how this work will be developed in the future. Links between the Trinidad group and a group working on a National College for School Leadership project “Leadership Pathways” are currently being discussed. The future direction of this work will also be influenced by the evaluation of the collaboratives in the first year of the programme.



¹ The essentials of School Leadership – edited by Brent Davies

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