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Schools and academies

Research Associate Summary report

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Resource

Clustering together to advance
school improvement: working
together in peer support with an
external colleague

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Introduction

School improvement partners (SIPs) have worked alongside school leaders with the aim of improving individual pupils' progress and attainment by enhancing the leadership of learning and teaching (DCSF 2009). This research studied the use of a single SIP across a rural primary phase cluster and investigated how working together through cluster peer support facilitated by the collaborative use of a trained external colleague could affect and enhance the leadership of schools by offering effective professional development and mutual pastoral support.

Although the research specifically explored the role of a single SIP held in common, its findings are equally transferable to any group of school leaders working together with an external partner such as a national or local leader of education (NLE or LLE), as reaffirmed by the recent white paper (DfE 2010).

The research considered the following questions:

1. How can working collaboratively offer **support and training to headteachers**, and what **impact** does that have on their schools?
2. How can a supportive group, working together, improve the **pastoral wellbeing** of headteachers?
3. How can supported collaborative partnership enable headteachers to think strategically **beyond external agendas**?
4. How can collaborative partnership **support governors** in their understanding of school data, through the identification of key points and the sharing of expertise?

Methodology

The research was based on semi-structured interviews with headteachers of eight rural primary schools within the same local area of a shire county, together with their SIP. Supplementary views were also sought from governors on an informal basis and from interviews with the headteachers of two schools within a similar but more long-standing cluster. The schools had between 35 and 300 pupils on roll and were often the only school in their local community.

Findings

The impact of collaborative support

All the heads agreed that working together as a collaborative group had a **strong symbiotic impact** on the leadership of all the participating schools, with headteachers recognising that as they gave of their individual time and commitment to the cluster, they also received positive collective support in return. This ability to give and receive support from each other promoted levels of well-being that both enhanced and encouraged high levels of effective leadership, with the headteachers feeling they had developed both personally and professionally. This, in turn, had made a direct impression on relationships within the wider school community and with other external agencies.

The identified impact of working together as a collaborative group varied slightly between each of the participating schools, but each head could quantify it in various ways for their own school as including:

- defining and then refining the strands of leadership that worked best for their particular school
- making them more effective as leaders of learning through providing challenge and confirming good practice
- distributing leadership across the staff, enabling staff to feel more valued and effective in their roles
- encouraging and supporting pastoral well-being
- sharing the monitoring and evaluation of pupils' work

This impact was felt to be not only due to the collective involvement of the headteachers themselves but also the role played by the SIP as the external professional facilitator. This external perspective was viewed as a vital part of the success of the collaboration.

The enhancement of headteacher wellbeing

Primary school headteachers in rural areas often feel a degree of isolation which can impact negatively on their personal and professional wellbeing. **Collective pastoral support** and non-judgemental challenge provided by the group was valued as an asset by group members, irrespective of whether they were givers or receivers of such support. Such collective support had enabled headteachers who felt their wellbeing was under threat by leadership pressures to move forward positively. In turn, the **growth in levels of trust** built within the group was seen as a key factor in promoting a degree of further pastoral support able to be given to all staff by their headteachers.

The value of an external perspective

The collaborative group valued the role of a single person taking the facilitation lead and encouraging collective strategic thinking. While this role could be taken by one of the headteachers themselves, it was felt that there were many advantages in having an external professional perspective provided by the SIP held in common as the group facilitator. These advantages were identified as follows:

- A broader national view was being offered by a professional whose knowledge and experience was not limited to a small geographical area.
- A perspective was being offered which was external to local authority structures.
- A joint strategic planning timetable provided a process and channel to inform the local authority as to the needs of the cluster schools, to the advantage of both schools and the local authority.
- External networking contacts and expertise were available that ensured that there was bespoke high quality training and access to schools with differing educational practices for all the schools within the participating group.
- There was reciprocal support from other cluster schools that enabled headteachers to reflect on good practice and to develop training pertinent to their own situational needs. By planning together, heads were able to confirm or challenge their own school's practice through exploratory visits to other schools.

- There was facilitation of greater collaborative trust and respect that led to confidential information being shared and acted on without fear of 'contamination' and competition.
- There was a cascading of collective professional knowledge and support to mitigate leadership overload.
- There was a growth in enthusiasm for improving education for all the learners within all the participating schools and a decline in parochialism within individual establishments.

The support of governors

A particular benefit to the confidence and skill set of governors was felt to come from joint locally based training organised and supported by the SIP held in common, which had developed governor skills in using greater rigour when interpreting and analysing data, resulting in more defined challenge to secure school improvement. The governors responded well to facilitation by the external professional because they respected the wider professional experience and perspectives that were offered.

Conclusion

In the schools studied in this research, the collaborative facilitation role was taken by the SIP, but in the future, such external support could equally be provided by an NLE or LLE. The important features reside not in the title of the role but in the capacity to provide a respected external perspective based on successful experience and the ability to build levels of trust and to facilitate mutual collaboration and support.

This research study has shown that the time, effort and trust invested in a collaborative group that is led well by a common respected external professional can reap many benefits for the leadership of the rural primary schools who invest in it.

References

DCSF (Department for Children, Schools and Families), 2009, [Supporting and Challenging Improvement in Learning and Teaching](#), National Strategy Guidance for School Improvement Partners, London, The Stationery Office

DfE (Department for Education), 2010, [The Importance of Teaching](#), White Paper, London, The Stationery Office

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