

What Can Headteachers Do to Support Teachers' Leadership?

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We have always known that, whatever schemes and strategies are hatched in the centres of power and in headteachers' offices, it is what teachers do that ultimately makes a difference. Successful headteachers therefore are those who cultivate the capacity of teachers to contribute to the development of the effectiveness of their school. This commitment to the sharing of leadership is one of the cornerstones of the Leadership for Learning network.

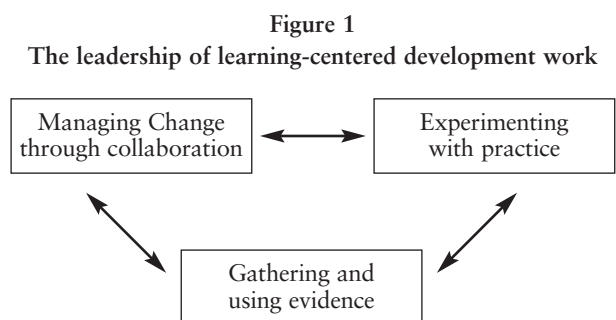
Shared leadership can involve teachers, support staff, parents, students, and others in the community but this paper focuses on teacher leadership and in particular the role of headteachers in supporting teacher-led development work. It draws on the interview data from a research project in 2001 (the Impact Project) in which teachers who had some experience of leading development work in their schools were asked about the conditions that maximised their effectiveness (Frost and Durrant, 2002). Recommendations from teachers include:

- recognising and understanding the potential for leadership in teachers;
- developing a culture that is conducive to teacher-led development work;
- providing time and access for external support;
- ensuring the existence of facilitative organisational structures and providing critical friendship to teachers.

We have argued elsewhere that *teacher leadership* is the key to capacity building within the school (Frost and Durrant, 2003a; Frost and Harris, 2003). However, this should not be taken to imply some kind of developmental free-for-all where individuals pursue whatever improvement goals seem important to them. Rather we argue that teachers need practical support to enable them to deploy whatever energy and ingenuity they have in ways that are strategic and in harmony with overall school priorities.

Leadership for learning

The claim is that, if schools are to develop their organisational capacity to the maximum, all teachers need to be encouraged to exercise leadership. It is not simply a matter of developing 'middle leadership' or 'emergent leadership'; these terms reflect an assumption that the function of leadership should continue to be limited to those who take on management roles such as Subject Leader or are given other designated responsibilities such as chair of a working party or school improvement group. A more productive view of teacher leadership is a more inclusive one which assumes that all teachers have the potential to be "change agents" (Fullan, 1993). All teachers can participate in the leadership of learning-centred development work which has three essentially inter-related dimensions as in Figure 1 below.



Source: (Frost and Durrant, 2003a)

There is a growing body of evidence to suggest that it is through the leadership of such development work that teachers can make a major difference to their own personal and interpersonal capacities, to the personal and interpersonal capacities of their colleagues, to pupils' learning, and to the organisational structures and cultures of their schools (Frost and Durrant, 2002). In addition, they can make a significant contribution to wider professional discourse and professional knowledge creation and

transfer. However, the majority of teachers are unlikely to be able to engage in such leadership without a framework of support and expectations (Frost, 1999; Frost *et al.*, 2000; Frost and Durrant, 2003a; Holden, 2002a; Holden, 2002b).

The Impact Project examined how teachers think about the impact of their development work (Frost and Durrant, 2002). Through a series of interviews the research team explored a conceptual framework and gained knowledge about what headteachers can do to facilitate and support teacher-led development work. The interviewees were all teachers who were known to have initiated and sustained development activity in their schools in the context of externally supported school improvement programmes, some of which led to the award of a masters degree. Schools had entered into partnerships with Universities and LEAs in order to provide:

- frameworks of support and critical friendship for leadership of change;
- guidance in the methodology of school-based enquiry;
- links with wider research and discourse;
- expertise related to pedagogy and the development process where relevant.

The main purpose of the research was to explore ways in which the impact of teachers' development work can be evaluated, but the interviews also led to some very useful insights into the role of headteachers.

What the Impact Project told us about the role of headteachers

The teachers interviewed emphasised the importance of creating the right conditions within schools to enable them to exercise leadership and maximise the impact of their work. They were in no doubt as to the crucial role that headteachers have in this respect, offering a range of both positive and negative experiences to illustrate their views. Teachers suggested that internal support is needed in the following areas:

1. Cultural and structural support
2. Support for planning and research
3. Extending internal and external networks
4. Recognition and celebration of leadership and voice

The points set out under these headings below are extracted from a fuller analysis of the interview data.

1. Cultural and structural support

1.1. Recognise and understand the potential for leadership in teachers. There is a growing body of evidence which clearly demonstrates that there is massive and largely untapped potential: teachers have ideas, enthusiasm and expertise but exercising leadership and taking action may require a change of attitude. One of the teachers interviewed describes her reaction after a support group meeting: "I realised that this was actually to do with us and not to do with us being lectured at; it is something we are actually going to do". Headteachers play a pivotal role in releasing this energy and in nurturing self-esteem and confidence to enable teachers to assume leadership roles.

1.2. Build a culture conducive to teacher-led development work. This is clearly a complex and long term endeavour. Some teachers described "...a climate where staff are willing to learn and participate..." and spoke of the threat associated with external judgement and inspection having been removed. They felt able to work with ideas, contribute to school development and influence school policy. Others felt pressured and stifled, unable to discuss work in progress or present outcomes of their development work in school. Teachers presented a consistent view of the kind of support that is most effective; they praised headteachers who were strong but "gentle" managers, "unleashing potential", giving "freedom to experiment", motivating, setting an example and having high expectations of staff.

1.3. Provide opportunities for teachers to tap into their own enthusiasm. Given the right conditions, teachers can reflect on their circumstances, values and beliefs in the context of their current responsibilities and school development priorities, and in so doing identify personal development priorities. Sometimes this can be complex, as in the case of this teacher who was prompted by literature provided through a school improvement scheme to focus on a professional concern.

I was tracking this bottom set group which I found really challenging-they were very hard work and I just wanted to...try something different to motivate them, so that they would enjoy the lessons and I would enjoy teaching them. The literature said to try out these formative assessment ideas - there's quite a lot to gain for the low attainers - so I thought I'd give it a go.

Working ideas and action plans through with proper support enables teachers to achieve a strong sense of conviction about the development work that follows and ensures maximum energy and commitment.

1.4. Ensure the existence of facilitative organisational structures. For teacher-led development work to have maximum impact, organisational structures need to be in place for the purposes of collective deliberation and decision making, sharing good practice and embedding good practice in the fabric of the school. A review of such structures may well reveal obstacles to the maximisation of impact. This may be at the most basic level: in one school, an issue was that colleagues were unwilling or unable to meet in the staffroom at break and lunchtimes so that even day-to-day opportunities for discussion, sharing, friendship and support were missed.

1.5. Use communications structures to keep everyone informed and elicit support. Members of senior management / leadership teams are well positioned to make powerful links between different strands of development within the school. However, development work can be undermined when they are not aware of the range of development work and the potential for complementarity. One teacher spoke about participating in an “open discourse” whereas others felt that there was no forum at all for their ideas and that their participation in a masters programme was perceived as an individual professional development exercise, despite the focus on support for school improvement.

1.6. Provide access to external frameworks of support. The data demonstrated how valuable external support can be. Such provision may include: the input of particular knowledge and expertise, a researcher to gather data, critical friendship, networking opportunities and a framework for reflection and inquiry. All of the teachers interviewed were members of facilitated groups and they highly valued this support. Some commented that it is vital to have long-term support and continuity within partnership arrangements, rather than taking part in a succession of “projects”.

1.7. Make time available for development work. The single obstacle to teacher-led development work most consistently mentioned is the lack of time for development activities. This applies both to teachers and to those who support development work. Tiredness, busyness and overload were frequently mentioned in our interviews, particularly by those working in schools in the most challenging circumstances who said it was “exhausting” even to remain “calm and friendly” in relationships with pupils. Headteachers are clearly pivotal in allocating resources to a development project; they may also have to convince teachers that it is acceptable and valuable to take time out of the classroom. The Impact Project data includes good examples of teachers being allowed time - either built into the timetable in

advance or provided through supply cover - to carry out development activity. Some headteachers covered lessons themselves, demonstrating a personal commitment which was highly appreciated and valued by the teachers concerned. It also reassured teachers that their classes were being properly looked after. However, where there are problems of recruitment and retention schools may be short-staffed and so it is difficult for teachers to be released from their classes. Such problems are most likely to be felt in ‘schools facing challenging circumstances’ and it is in such schools that the need to engage teachers in development work is most critical. Headteachers need to focus therefore on more creative solutions including more flexible use of staff professional development time and imaginative timetabling.

2. Support for planning and research

2.1. Focus development work in high priority areas with greatest potential benefits. Some starting points for development are more productive than others. Research can be used to identify the strands of development which have most potential impact; a very clear and familiar example is formative assessment. The ‘Inside the Black Box’ research (Black and Wiliam, 1998) clearly demonstrated that the use of assessment for learning techniques can have a marked effect on levels of attainment and the cost of implementing the changes in practice are minimal. Headteachers need to assess the energy input against the potential ‘effect size’ of any proposed development work and ensure that teachers do not wear themselves out for little reward (see Hargreaves, 2001 for a discussion about ‘leverage’).

2.2. Set priorities and co-ordinate initiatives to prevent overload and fragmentation. The teachers interviewed saw multiple initiatives as a major problem and commented that they did not appear to be “joined up” at policy level. Teachers’ energy was divided and their attention diverted and fragmented. They recognised that their development work gained support if linked to national initiatives or school priorities (e.g. addressing weaknesses identified through inspection) but many had sketchy knowledge of school development plans and planning processes. It is up to the headteacher to ensure that those who have better knowledge of internal and external plans and priorities can protect teachers from conflicts over multiple initiatives and help them to reconcile their personal priorities with school priorities. External pressures can be interpreted and channelled steps can be taken to ensure that, once a teacher-led development project has been agreed upon, it is supported and given appropriate priority.

2.3. Ensure that development work is well planned for maximum impact. Planning is a crucial aspect of development work. It is up to headteachers to set high standards and to support teachers in their planning. Teachers said that frameworks and time scales, particularly in accredited programmes, increased the effectiveness of their leadership, helping them to clarify their focus, structure their planning and action, and evaluate systematically. Senior managers should be involved in this planning to ensure that: a) they are consulted over action plans; b) action plans take into account the full range of possible impact factors; c) they include a collaborative element to draw colleagues in; d) they are linked to, and compatible with, previous and concurrent work and e) they are realistic in terms of time and energy. This active involvement enables them to give practical as well as moral support for teachers' strategic action.

2.4. Ensure that monitoring and evaluation is in place. It is important to ensure that the school's arrangements for monitoring and evaluation include development work led by teachers. This may be threatening to the teacher concerned but senior managers have a key role to ensure that: (a) the success criteria used reflect the full range of possible impact, (b) the gathering of evidence is planned, and (c) evidence is generated throughout the development work rather than just at the conclusion. Teachers in our study were enthusiastic in describing evidence of the impact of their development work, particularly where pupils had started to find a language to discuss their own learning, but they were reticent about the significance of their "findings". Headteachers may need to take the lead in reassuring teachers about the value of different kinds of evidence, particularly where there is a pervading emphasis on test results and other quantitative data.

2.5. Document, archive and share the processes and outcomes of development work. In addition to the support strategies already outlined, the school can derive maximum benefit when development work is documented and archived. Benefits include expanded organisational memory; better follow-up on projects; effective dissemination through discussion, professional development activities for other staff and internal publications. One experienced leader of change wanted to see a culture where this became normal: "I think if we can try and create a culture of learning which includes recording, researching... evaluating, identifying good bits of work, then it's got to have an effect". It is important that such use and dissemination of evidence is repeated and reinforced to take account of the fact that people move on and change roles, so that organisational learning as well as individual learning is nourished.

3. Extending internal and external networks

3.1. Provide space to talk about teaching and learning rather than just results. The Impact Project data clearly shows that many teachers are still enthusiastic about learning and care deeply about pupils' experience. One teacher was delighted to observe the impact of changes in teaching strategy: "...it was lovely to see them excited about writing and they couldn't get to the table fast enough". Teachers find discussion about learning satisfying but talked about tensions in their role, for example one teacher said that higher test scores had been achieved "...at the expense of creativity, enjoyment and investigation". Some interviewees described an overt discourse about learning in their schools but others said that this was not the case. Where teachers have a strong desire to engage in discussion, reflection, inquiry and evaluation in order to make learning and teaching more satisfying for all concerned, there is enormous potential for long term capacity building. Headteachers need to embrace and support this rather than to narrowly focus on short term tactics to push at the margins of attainment measures.

3.2. Facilitate collaboration and sharing with colleagues from other schools. The interviewees report that even modest collaboration with colleagues in another school is powerful: "We've had one conference and that's been really good, if for no other reason than just to talk to people and hear what's going on". The sharing and contrasting of practice leads to new ideas. Teachers "have credibility with other teachers", and the reciprocal expectation gives development work momentum. Teachers find it valuable to belong to a community of practice in which there is a feeling of shared values and purpose, for example they may have a focus on improving pupils' learning; a recognition that teachers, too, need to learn; a belief in the value of inquiry as the basis for change. These learning communities need careful co-ordination and monitoring to ensure that they are meeting the needs of teachers and schools. They should be responsive and are likely to evolve over time.

3.3. Provide critical friendship. Teachers who may have relatively little experience of development work need to learn about leadership as they go. This may be best achieved through critical friendship (MacBeath, 1998; MacBeath *et al.*, 2000; Swaffield, 2003). A range of different people can provide critical friendship and each has particular advantages: an external consultant may have the advantage of being independent; a teaching colleague may have the advantage of not being perceived as threatening; the senior manager may have the advantage of having an

overview of the school as an organisation. Some of the teachers interviewed talked about offering critical friendship to colleagues; one said he had learnt that in his leadership role “being a friend” is more important than “missionary zeal”.

3.4. Encourage teachers to disseminate beyond the school. When teachers are encouraged to share their work beyond the school and the school is able to examine the work of other teachers, not only does this affirm practice and authorise professional knowledge but the school also secures fresh professional knowledge. While some teachers were surprised by the interest shown in their work and others were reluctant to share, at the same time they said that they found the experience and evidence of colleagues in other schools very valuable. The knowledge given away through such dissemination is repaid not only by the personal professional development of the teacher concerned but also by the knowledge that travels back along the line of dissemination.

4. Recognition and celebration of leadership and voice

4.1. Enable the student/pupil voice to be heard. Teachers tend to see this starting point for the identification of problems and opportunities for development as more legitimate and acceptable than external inspection. One teacher had talked in depth with pupils over time about their learning and this had given rich insights and demonstrated pupils’ expertise as witnesses. As one teacher reported:

...they will talk over and over again about how they hate worksheets... copying questions... responding to questions in textbooks... they don’t learn anything. And what comes out so strongly is that learning’s all about autonomy, authority, engagement, democracy....their perception is quite scary sometimes. They quite often see things that the teachers don’t see and understand.

This teacher was convinced of the value of listening to pupils, but clearly this has to be done sensitively and with appropriate support. School self-evaluation in which pupils are listened to can provide stimulus and a source of evidence to support teachers’ development work, and some schools have taken this much further to establish pupils themselves as researchers and leaders of development work (Fielding and Bragg, 2003). Students have even taken up the challenge of research and self-evaluation on an international scale (Sutherland and Nishimura, 2003).

4.2. Ensure that the school derives maximum benefit from teachers’ involvement with an external source of support. Some teachers were frustrated that their schools took little notice of their endeavours and therefore stifled the potential impact of their development work: “The senior management team are very pleased, very supportive in terms of, ‘Yes, we think it’s a very good thing, but please don’t tell us anything about it, please don’t agitate...’”. This kind of nominal support is unlikely to be of strategic or practical help as the development work proceeds. Where teachers have undertaken a masters degree programme or participated in a scheme supporting their development work, headteachers need to express their expectations by asking for reports, by asking for active interventions and by drawing the teacher into collaboration during the life of the project rather than waiting for a final product in the form of a report or thesis.

4.3. Celebrate and praise the development work. The data sometimes point to the inadequacy of support from the senior management team in celebrating and supporting development work, as in the example above. The reduction of self-esteem and de-professionalisation described by some teachers, particularly under punitive inspection regimes, was noteworthy:

It’s not very nice to be told that what you’re doing isn’t very good... really I think people on the whole are very talented and I think we’ve lost some of the sparkle in people, in individual flair and skills.

So encouragement, praise and recognition are important as well as active, practical support from senior managers.

4.4. Recognise emerging expertise and professional capacity. Teachers who have put their energy into the leadership of development work will be encouraged when they are provided with opportunities to share their insights, articulate their views and acquire expert status. Most of the teachers interviewed described in great detail their sophisticated approaches to the management of change (characteristically raising awareness, being approachable, taking small steps, providing examples, materials and checklists, demonstrating success and building on existing good practice). They also demonstrated enormous commitment and “...a bit of faith and staying power”. This capacity to manage change can be of great value to a school if recognised by the headteacher. These emerging teacher leaders can be invited to act as critical friends to others who may be undertaking the leadership of development work. They can be consulted on other proposals for change

and they can be used in school-based professional development activities in place of or alongside expensive external “experts.”

Partnerships to support teacher leadership

The suggestions above rely on support for teacher leadership from within the school and from external sources. In order for this support to be coherent, consistent and complementary, schools and external agencies need to work in partnership. Partnerships with external agencies are important because they can bring to bear a range of different expertise and value orientations. External agents are also relatively untrammelled by the particular history and micro-politics of the school and can offer a more impartial critical friendship. University departments or faculties of education are particularly well placed to play a part in such partnerships because of their expertise in research, but just as important is their experience in providing structures to support teachers’ reflection and their presentation of accounts of practice. In the 1970s, Stenhouse (1975) argued that it is teachers who are best placed to understand classrooms and that therefore university staff should offer their skills in support of teachers’ inquiry-based development work.

The list above shows the importance of both internal and external support but the responsibility for balancing this lies mainly with the headteacher. While universities and other supporting agencies need to adopt flexible approaches that are responsive to school needs, headteachers must ensure that schools gain maximum benefit from partnerships and other external arrangements. The impact of teacher-led development work can be radically transformed when senior colleagues work with teachers to ensure that the initial planning of such work addresses a wide range of possible outcomes including the development of teachers’ personal capacity, the enhancement of the school’s organisational capacity and the transformation of pupils’ learning (Frost and Durrant, 2002). Headteachers have a crucial role to play in seeing that such planning is followed through with effective monitoring and evaluation. A key outcome of the Impact Project is a conceptual framework which can be used as a foundation for such planning, monitoring and evaluation; a number of tools derived from this framework are presented in *Teacher-led Development Work* (Frost and Durrant, 2003b).

In that book, we argue that schools should engage with the values of higher education which includes putting a high premium on inquiry, evidence, scholarship and critical debate. This is, however,

likely to be most effective when it takes place, in part at least, on the school site rather than solely within the cloistered world of the university. When teachers attend courses designed by university staff and held on the university campus, there is not the same sense of partnership. The partnership between schools and external agencies has to be a genuine one based on mutual respect for different values, missions, expertise and experience. It is important therefore that, where schools control the funding, they should flex their muscles and negotiate a set of arrangements that fit their own agendas, are adjusted to suit local circumstances and make best use of the expertise and agendas of potential partners.

Policy makers, practitioners and academics have a responsibility to work together to develop a climate in which professional knowledge is created and transformed. Teachers must have a central and active role in this process, which in practice means creating the right climate for teacher participation. In *Teacher-led Development Work*, we put forward a model that goes far beyond the provision of training or staff development activities, towards the creation of professional learning communities - networks of critical discourse based on inquiry, evidence, reflection on experience, comparison and contrast from a range of educational perspectives. This happens most effectively when teachers experience a sense of belonging and shared values and purpose, encouraging them to make contacts, develop relationships and explore and test practice through inquiry and discussion. Headteachers and partners should work to maximise the conditions supporting teacher involvement, leadership and mutual learning within these communities, so that all the partner organisations-not just the schools-are able to develop a better understanding of learning and teaching and the processes of school improvement. This is how we are able so as to build a powerful capacity for change.

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Note: A fuller account including most of this material was published in the USA in Frost, D. and Durrant, J. (2004) ‘Supporting Teachers’ Leadership: What Can Principals Do? A teachers’ perspective from research’ in J. Chrispeels (ed.) *Learning To Lead Together: The Promise and Challenge of Sharing Leadership*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications (pp 307-326)

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