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No Key Issues:

Only as good as your last Ofsted?

This enquiry investigates how six primary schools, all deemed to have “no key issues” at the time of their last Ofsted inspections, initially reacted to the report and subsequently addressed the issues associated with maintaining and further developing momentum, progress and standards.

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Introduction

Reasons for choosing the area of study

As headteacher of a popular primary school, recently inspected by Ofsted and deemed to have no key issues to address, I wanted to ascertain how primary schools with similar Ofsted outcomes had reacted to such acclaim and subsequently addressed the issues associated with maintaining and further developing momentum and standards. Were they in a position to determine their own agenda for change, development and improvement and if so, what might these schools learn from each other?

What the study aimed to investigate

The study set out to identify and visit a sample of schools that were deemed to have no key issues at the time of their Ofsted inspection during the 2001 calendar year. As a result of interviewing headteachers and, where possible, senior members of staff, it was hoped to ascertain the initial reaction to the inspection outcomes and any bequeathed status and subsequently examine how any issues associated with maintaining and further developing momentum, progress and standards had been addressed.

Methodology

The study was undertaken as part of the NCSL Research Associates Programme over the spring and summer terms of 2003. Visits were made to seven primary schools, which included one pilot school. Interviews were held with headteachers and other senior members of staff. These took the form of semi-structured interviews, to allow respondents to express themselves at length but with enough shape to prevent aimless rambling. Four of the interviews took place on a one-to-one basis, the remainder involved two people.

The sample schools

I decided that primary schools inspected during the 2001 calendar year Ofsted cycle would provide suitable case studies, as sufficient time had elapsed for them to reflect on the acclaim of a “no key issues” Ofsted inspection and move on accordingly.

Identifying pertinent schools proved to be rather a difficult task. Eventually, a most helpful Ofsted officer provided a list of schools, separated by type of inspection, that were identified by inspectors as having no key issues. The list consisted of 16 schools which had undergone short inspections and 12 which had had full inspections.

This, on the face of it, is an extremely low number, but Ofsted did point out that the list was not guaranteed to be definitive. Due to the time constraints of the research, from the list of 28 schools, I selected just six schools to visit (plus a pilot school).

The schools ranged in size from 54 to 408 pupils on roll, with the proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals varying from zero to 21 per cent. Only five pupils from the six schools had English as an additional language and the proportion of pupils from minority ethnic backgrounds was below 2.5 per cent. The number of pupils on the register of special educational needs ranged from 13 per cent to 21 per cent, with two of the schools each having 11 pupils with a statement of special educational needs, many associated with physical disabilities.

The respective section 10 inspection reports showed them to be achieving well above average in the areas of English, mathematics and science compared to similar schools and in line with the Ofsted report *The Curriculum in Successful Primary Schools* published in October 2002: “The quality of the curriculum, leadership, management and pupils’ spiritual, moral, social and cultural development had all been judged to be good or better in their inspections.”

With the exception of one headteacher, all had been in post at the time of their school’s previous Ofsted inspection. All schools had made good or very good progress since the time of the previous inspection and significantly, one school had “maintained a very good rate of improvement since the last inspection (when no major weaknesses were identified) because of the rigorous application of self-evaluation procedures”.

Main findings, implications and recommendations

- Although many schools had only one key issue following their inspection, many of these being fairly insignificant, Ofsted only identified 28 primary/infant/junior schools as having no key issues. From that cohort, seven schools were selected and became the basis of the study.
- The sample schools closely resembled the schools whose many excellent features were highlighted in the 2002 Ofsted report, *The Curriculum in Successful Primary Schools*. One issue with that report was the (possibly unrepresentative) small sample size, a question which could be asked of my own study.
- The euphoria experienced by the school communities in attaining such a high Ofsted commendation was very short-lived and only lifted spirits and motivated in the short-term. Praise from LEAs and fellow colleagues was limited and somewhat superficial. This is hardly surprising, for the educational climate of the past decade has been one of competition rather than collaboration. Perhaps competition, with performance judged on SATs results and league tables, has resulted in many schools becoming insular, reluctant to share ideas or praise others' successes.
- None of the sample schools had been afforded any status as a result of their outstanding inspections. They were not listed in the annual Ofsted report produced by HMCI of schools and none of the schools has been awarded Beacon status. The general feeling coming through from the schools was that there was an inconsistency of policy, which leads to confusion, and a modicum of bitterness. There have been many initiatives which have attempted to recognise and reward good practice but to some they appear divisive and counter-productive.
- A vital factor, leading to the successful inspection outcomes of the survey schools in the first instance, was their ability to undertake thorough self-evaluation and identify pertinent areas for development. They have continued to excel at self-evaluation by various means, with governor-led questionnaires often providing the priorities for development, rather than nationally driven issues. Such questionnaires would form an excellent example of modelling good practice, an area which, David Bell says, Ofsted certainly intends to develop over the next cycle of inspections.

- The headteachers forming the basis of this research have many qualities. They match those previously reported upon by NCSL research associates, particularly Ronnie Woods' *Enchanted Headteachers* report (2002). The headteachers I met were instrumental in leading their school's success. Increasingly, however, many of the headteachers have looked to share leadership responsibility. The headteachers' successful period in post affords a feeling of trust, respect and wisdom: vital ingredients required to move an organisation forward. The status quo will not satisfy this group of headteachers and although they are able to clearly articulate the destinations of their schools, they do have some reservations:

We are all working harder but can we continue to improve?

How much further can we improve?

These are the two main concerns voiced. They all recognise that more of the same will not work and that both sustainability and transformation are as important as the continual strive for further improvement.

The loyal, committed and dedicated headteachers of the "no key issues" schools are inspirational characters, all of whom are still in post some two years on from the Ofsted inspections in question. All are still keen to further their own personal development. Some have acted as associate heads within their LEA, and one is involved with the Consultant Leader Programme at NCSL. A number are now involved with networked learning communities, which hopefully heralds a new and positive era of collaboration. The prospect of cross-LEA networking and collaboration is indeed an exciting one.

My judgment is that the findings imply the following:

- Headteachers need help to become more courageous at sharing and spreading good practice. For instance heads and senior staff from the schools might be invited to national conferences and local conventions in order to disseminate their good practice to fellow educationalists.
- All headteachers, regardless of length of service, must be encouraged to continually seek opportunities for further professional development. If the leader remains positive and receptive to change, the chances of successfully implementing related initiatives are far more realistic.

- The headteachers of these successful primary schools say that continual improvement without transformation is unsustainable. In order to transform their schools they need a reduction in the burden of the accountability and testing regime.
- Ofsted should include in its annual report schools identified as having no key issues. Examples of good practice from those schools might be placed on the Ofsted website. This could include video clips of outstanding classroom teaching and links to respective schools' websites.

There are of course thousands of successful primary schools, but this was a unique cohort. Having no key issues brought its own related problems:

“We are not liked because we are successful.”

“We are an island on our own!”

“‘No key issues’ is quite a dangerous statement as far as other colleagues were concerned.”

“Like a football team we’ve won the treble but next season will be much harder.”

Perhaps no key issues is yesterday’s news. Perhaps you’re only as good as your last Ofsted.

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The research summarised here is part of the NCSL Research Associate Programme, which offers an opportunity for school leaders to contribute towards the College's research and development agenda. NCSL provides support for school leaders to undertake study, to engage in enquiry and to impact on practice. The programme includes:

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