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National College
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Research Associate
Full report

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Resource

Face-to-face leadership support for primary headteachers: lessons from the Greater Manchester Challenge

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Disclaimer

Abstract

This project was a small-scale investigative study undertaken during 2009-10. It reflects the views of 8 headteachers, in receipt of external support, working in primary schools across the 10 Greater Manchester Challenge (GMC) local authorities.

These schools were identified by GMC as keys to success schools (schools facing the most challenging circumstances, typically schools vulnerable to the Key Stage 2 or 4 floor targets, and/or in an Ofsted category) or schools that were either in an Ofsted category (notice to improve or special measures) or had recently successfully moved out of an Ofsted category ie during the academic years between 2005 and 2008.

This project's focus was on the types or methods of leadership support that these headteachers found most helpful in:

— assisting the school in developing an agenda for change and identifying and resolving its own problems

— supporting the school in developing internal leadership capacity to lead and manage change in order to enhance the achievement of all pupils

The research demonstrates that headteachers in this project preferred to be supported by national or local leaders of education (NLEs and LLEs respectively). In this research, these are termed professional reflection partners. The main reasons for this terminology are that the NLEs and LLEs in question were fellow headteachers, who understood the experiences, daily challenges and opportunities of headship. Their client-centred ways of working enabled the headteachers receiving support to identify specific agendas for their schools, and to be supported in developing change for improvement.

Background to City Challenge

City Challenge was a three-year project set up in 2008 and designed to raise the attainment of young people in London, Greater Manchester and the Black Country. It built on the existing London Challenge programme. Through school support and bespoke development for school leaders, its aim was to improve pupil outcomes across each challenge region focusing on three key areas:

1. Develop a strong culture of learning in all schools in the region that will lead to a sharp drop in the number of underperforming schools.

2. Close the attainment gap between children from advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds.

3. Increase the number of outstanding schools in the region.

The support offered responded to local and contextual needs in each city challenge area. It included the development of a range of school-to-school programmes to support system leadership, and a bespoke programme of support for identified schools in challenging circumstances that had the capacity to improve. Programmes included, but were not limited to, support across all levels of leadership including opportunities for headteachers, senior leaders, middle leaders and senior leadership teams.

The change in government in 2010 meant a change in the name of the programme in Greater Manchester from the Greater Manchester Challenge (GMC) to the Greater Manchester Challenge Leadership Strategy. The National College was responsible for the programme and worked closely with partners to supply a range of bespoke school support and leadership development opportunities. The partners included government departments, schools, local authorities and a range of other key stakeholders.

The GMC programme offered a range of tailored support activities, including:

— identification, training and deployment of local leaders of education (LLEs)

— creation and maintenance of outstanding practitioner networks

— support for keys to success schools, in partnership with local authorities

— development of an integrated regional response to the succession planning challenge

— further extension of the national leader of education (NLE) and national support school (NSS) programme in Greater Manchester

— use of the families of schools and other developing datasets for the early identification and targeting of resources

— funding of area-specific, tailored leadership programmes

Introduction

The white paper, The Importance of Teaching (Department for Education (DfE), 2010), makes clear that school-to-school support is to be a central strategy in raising standards and improving outcomes for all children. It states:

> 'It is also important that we design the system in a way which allows the most effective practice to spread more quickly and the best schools and leaders to take greater responsibility and extend their reach.'

<div align="right">DfE, 2010:73</div>

The expansion in the number of NLEs and LLEs, the creation of teaching schools with roles that include school-to-school support, and the deployment of leading teachers, including specialist leaders of education, are key development strands within this vision. The ways in which personnel involved in such support engage with schools will, arguably, be critical for the success of such measures. This report aligns with this vision as it focuses on a sample of primary school headteachers and their perceptions of the leadership support they received.

This research project was a small-scale investigative study undertaken during 2009-10. It reflects the views of 8 headteachers working in primary schools across the 10 local authorities involved in the GMC. Each school was supported by either an NLE or LLE following invitation by the GMC leadership team challenge advisers or the GMC leadership director. Greater Manchester's local authorities commissioned the GMC to support schools.

The GMC's aim was to ensure that the schools involved continued to maintain or further improve their results in subsequent years. The ability of schools to continue to improve or sustain effectiveness over longer periods through the development of internal capacity to lead change would be an indicator that improvement had become embedded in the schools' work and culture. It would also reflect how the headteachers' application of associated strategies within their schools had influenced educational outcomes.

All the schools in the study were recognised by the GMC as having some barriers to success in terms of:

— improvement in pupil attainment measures

— developing internal leadership capacity to lead change and drive up standards and achievement for every child

— developing the school's agenda for change involving the identification and resolution of its own issues

The schools had been identified by GMC as keys to success schools or schools that were either in an Ofsted category (notice to improve or special measures) or had recently successfully moved out of an Ofsted category (ie during the academic years between 2005 and 2008).

Several schools had significantly raised pupil attainment levels over a three-year period (2005-08) but were identified for leadership support because:

— they were at or below national floor targets for English and mathematics at the end of Key Stage 2; or

— leadership capacity, due to staffing changes, was judged to be vulnerable

Project aims and focus

The project focus was on headteachers' views of the types or methods of leadership support they found most helpful in:

— assisting the school in developing its own agenda for change and identifying and resolving its own problems

— supporting the school in developing internal capacity to lead and manage change to enhance the achievement of all pupils

The aims of the research were to:

— investigate the views of headteachers regarding the support they received from what could be termed critical friends such as NLEs, LLEs, local authority school improvement advisers and/or school improvement partners

— establish the type of face-to-face support that the headteachers found most helpful both personally and professionally

Literature review

Organisational change

The approaches schools employ to address organisational change and/or meet improvement challenges are many and varied. Each approach aims to improve the performance of individuals and teams as well as the organisation as a whole. This small-scale research considers what support school leaders themselves found most helpful in addressing change management and leadership capacity-building.

For this reason, the literature review initially focuses, in brief, on some different perspectives on change management approaches as these are integral to the school improvement agenda and therefore to the work of those supporting schools. It subsequently highlights some models for working with clients that contribute to change management.

Appreciative inquiry

Whitney and Trosten-Bloom (2003) point out that Drucker (1993) once remarked that leading change is about aligning people's strengths so that their weaknesses become irrelevant. Drucker did not say precisely how this could be done, and nor did he offer a theory of a positive, rather than a deficit-based approach to human system change. However, Whitney and Trosten-Bloom contend that:

'Appreciative Inquiry transforms organisations into places that are free and alive, where people are eager and filled with positive power, and where the creativity of the whole never ceases to amaze, surprise and ascend... it enhances organisations' capacity for positive change.'

Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003:vii

Cooperrider and Whitney (2005) revealed appreciative inquiry (AI) as a new model of change management, uniquely suited to the values, beliefs and business challenges facing managers and leaders today. They propose that AI can offer an alternative approach that school leaders can use to dramatically improve performance by encouraging all those within the organisation to study, discuss, learn from and build on what is working, rather than simply trying to fix what is not. It proposes, simply, that organisations are not, at their core, problems to be solved. In fact, they are just the opposite: every organisation was created as a solution designed in its own time to address challenges or meet the needs of society.

Table 1 indicates the differences between traditional problem-solving and AI.

Table 1: AI versus traditional problem-solving

Problem-solving	Appreciative inquiry (AI)
Felt need to identify problem	Appreciating and valuing the best of what is
Analysis of causes	Envisioning what might be
Analysis of possible solutions	Dialoguing what should be
Action planning (treatment)	Taking action
Basic assumption: An organisation is a problem to be solved	Basic assumption: An organisation is a mystery to be embraced

Cooperrider and Whitney (2005) further observe that AI is:

> 'a narrative-based process of positive change. It moves people through a series of activities focused on envisioning bold possibilities and lifting up the most life-centric dreams for the future.'

Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005:15

The AI model follows a staged process to achieve its change management aims. A five-step version of this is included as an appendix.

Five practices of exemplary leadership

Another change management process, developed by Kouzes and Posner (2003) contends that when getting extraordinary things done in organisations, leaders engage in five practices of exemplary leadership:

1. model the way

2. inspire a shared vision

3. challenge the process

4. enable others to act

5. encourage the heart

Embedded in these are behaviours that can serve as the basis for learning to lead. Kouzes and Posner (2003:22) call these the 10 commitments of leadership, based on their discovery that leadership is concerned with relationships where people have expectations of the leader (Table 2). This source is included here as their work emphasises actions and relationships which those with a role to play in supporting schools will be engaged in facilitating and developing. The 10 commitments also relate to the behaviours and ways of working that leaders demonstrate and engage in as they lead change following the receipt of their support.

Table 2: 10 commitments of leadership

Practice	Commitment
Model the way	1. Find your voice by clarifying your personal values.
	2. Set the example by aligning actions with shared values.
Inspire a shared vision	3. Envision the future by imagining exciting and ennobling possibilities.
	4. Enlist others in a common vision by appealing to shared aspirations.
Challenge the process	5. Search for opportunities by seeking innovative ways to change, grow and improve.
	6. Experiment and take risks by constantly generating small wins and learning from mistakes.
Enable others to act	7. Foster collaboration by promoting co-operative goals and building trust.
	8. Strengthen others by sharing power and discretion.
Encourage the heart	9. Recognise contributions by showing appreciation for individual excellence.
	10. Celebrate the values and victories by creating a spirit of community.

Source: Kouzes & Posner, 2003: 22

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These 5 practices and 10 commitments echo to some extent the appreciative stance adopted in the AI model. For example 'Inspire a shared vision' is reminiscent of AI's 'dream' stage, and both emphasise a positive, corporate commitment.

Although models such as those above exist for leaders to use, they do not focus necessarily on the individual characteristics of those leading. Maxwell (1999:xi) stresses the importance of the leader's character in leading change: 'Everything rises and falls on leadership' - but knowing how to lead is only half the battle.

Understanding leadership and actually leading are, for Maxwell, two different activities. The key, Maxwell contends, to transforming from someone who understands leadership to becoming a successful leader in the real world is character. A leader's character and qualities activate and empower leadership – or stand in the way of the leader's success. Maxwell states that, 'if you can become the leader you ought to be on the inside; you will become the leader you want to be on the outside'.

For Cockman, Evans and Reynolds (1999), the most effective leaders recognise the need to manage people in a way that increases their enthusiasm, commitment and motivation. This means:

— seeing themselves as agents of change

— no longer relying on a formal position of power

— being concerned with releasing energy and developing people

— taking a facilitating role, and supporting self-managed teams

— becoming an effective coach

— working non-prescriptively, helping people to solve problems and make decisions for themselves

— encouraging a culture of feedback and open communication

— working hard to reduce dependency among their people

Each of the theories above recognises the place of the leader as an individual who is central to the change management process. However, within the context of this study, in addition to adopting change management processes, one might ask:

— How can leaders be effectively supported in leading the changes required of them?

— What models might be used?

Egan's skilled helper model

The skilled helper model is a three-stage model or framework offered by Egan (2002) as useful in helping people solve problems and develop opportunities. The goals of using the model (Egan, 2002:7-8; Figure 1) are to:

— help people 'manage their problems in living more effectively and develop[ing] unused opportunities more fully' (ibid)

— 'help people become better at helping themselves in their everyday lives' (ibid)

The Egan model aims to help the speaker (ie the person seeking help or client) address three main questions:

— What is going on?

— What do I want instead?

— How might I get to what I want?

Not everyone needs to address all three questions, and at times people may move back into previously answered ones. For simplicity, we will look at the model sequentially. However, the skilled helper will work with the speaker in all or any of the stages, and move back and forward, as appropriate.

Figure 1: The skilled helper model

Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3
Current scenario	**Preferred scenario**	**Action strategies**
1a: The story (What's going on?)	2a: Possibilities (Ideally, what do I want instead?)	3a: Possible actions (How many ways are there?)
1b: Blind spots (What's really going on?)	2b: Change agenda (SMART goals)	3b: Best-fit strategies (What will work for me?)
1c: Leverage (Focusing/prioritising)	2c: Commitment (Check goals are right)	3c: Plan (What next and when?)

Action leading to valued outcomes

Source: Egan, 2002: 7-8

In Figure 1, the three rows relate to the current scenario, the preferred scenario and the action strategies that will produce movement from the current to the preferred scenario. The focus of each row is:

— row 1: 1a, 2a, 3a (expansive, exploratory and creative)

— row 2: 1b, 2b, 3b (challenging, reality-testing and selecting)

— row 3: 1c, 2c, 3c (focusing, committing and moving forward)

Process client-centred consultancy

Whilst Egan (2002) identifies 3 stages for assisting clients, Schein (1999) described 10 general principles of process client-centred consultancy as a way of helping those requiring support:

1. always try to be helpful

2. always stay in touch with the current reality

3. access your ignorance

4. everything you do is an intervention

5. it is the client who owns the problem and the solution

6. go with the flow

7. timing is crucial

8. be constructively opportunistic with confrontive interventions

9. everything is data and errors are inevitable – learn from them

10. when in doubt, share the problem

This review has not sought, within the confines of a small-scale study, to explore the extensive range of literature relating to coaching but has highlighted two approaches to client-centred work. Both of these have a coaching emphasis; however they include reference to the client's own sense of personal agency in securing change, and the helper's role in enabling the client to uncover and act upon this. This sense of agency underpins the theoretical models outlined above.

Helping

Schein (2009) points out that helping is a fundamental human activity and that many different words are used in connection with it including: assisting, aiding, advising, care-giving, coaching, consulting, counselling, guiding, mentoring, supporting and teaching. He also identifies that, as an activity, it can also be a frustrating one. All too often, he states, to our bewilderment, sincere offers of help are resented, resisted or refused, and moreover we often react in the same way when people try to help us. He poses these questions in response:

— Why is it so difficult to provide or accept help?

— How can we make the whole process easier?

In the context of the GMC, one could ask:

— What is the help needed for?

— Who needs the help?

— What sort of help is most likely to impact positively on individuals, teams and organisations?

The help is needed to address the desire to improve learning and performance across the 10 Greater Manchester local authorities for all learners. What type of support have primary headteachers involved in the GMC found most helpful?

Methodology

This research used semi-structured interviews with eight primary school headteachers from different local authorities across the GMC area during 2009-10. The interview questions were open in nature to liberate the fullest possible answers.

The headteacher interviewees' experience in headship ranged from less than 1 year to more than 20 years, and the sample included both males and females. Their schools comprised a range of socio-economic factors, sizes and reasons for being a keys to success or vulnerable school.

The researcher, a primary school headteacher, brought a theoretical insight based on the literature review, and the interviews provided valuable qualitative data regarding the views and feelings of the headteachers taking part. The interviews offered an opportunity to uncover their previously unexplored views regarding the type of support that they, as headteachers, had found most helpful in developing and managing change for school improvement.

All the headteachers were being supported by either an NLE or LLE at the time of their interview. Each was also supported by a school improvement partner (SIP) commissioned by the local authority. Most were also in receipt of additional local authority support through school improvement services. Each of the NLEs or LLEs involved in supporting the schools was interviewed face to face, and some telephone interviews were used subsequently to establish the type of support offered. SIPs and/or other local authority officers involved with the schools were not interviewed and this is acknowledged as a limitation in the methodology.

The analysis used transcriptions of the interviews to ensure accurate representation of the participants' views. Quotes from the interviews were used to provide insights into the background and heart of the responses.

The next section details the findings from the research and is followed by conclusions drawn from these, linked to, where appropriate, the earlier literature review.

Findings

This section provides an explanation of the findings from this study based on analysis of the semi-structured interviews with the headteacher participants. As the study focused on headteachers' perceptions, their quotes are used throughout to represent these.

Questions were used to explore headteachers' views of their experience of being supported by SIPs and, where relevant, local authority school improvement advisers and/or local authority improvement officers or consultants. This is compared with support provided by an NLE or LLE.

It must be recognised that the remits for some roles, whilst all were centred on helping the school improve, were different in their scope and nature. For example, SIPs had a limited number of allocated days in which to fulfil their role, which itself had certain prescribed functions. In contrast, the NLEs and LLEs were able to commit in some cases two days a week to assist the school in identifying its improvement agenda and supporting the SLT in building leadership capacity to lead and manage the changes required to secure improvements.

NLE or LLE support provided by a headteacher from another local authority

Initial thoughts and expectations

Questions that focused on a participant's initial thoughts concerning, and expectations of, support from a fellow headteacher as either an NLE or LLE elicited a range of responses. These reflected uncertainty about what to expect as well as hopes about what the role might offer. Responses included:

"[It was] unclear at first, what it was about, how it would work."

"[This is] our vision – this is what we need, how can you help us?"

"[There was] relief that someone would support us."

"[It was an] opportunity to talk to someone who understands the issues."

"[We] wanted someone in post to share ideas."

"[I] felt it would benefit the children, myself and the leadership team professionally."

All the headteachers, especially when they were clear about the role of the NLE or LLE, reported that they welcomed the opportunity to work with a fellow headteacher. The idea of sharing and collaborating with someone also in headship was valued by all the participants. The participants were all aware that they were being supported by an NLE or LLE who was accredited by the National College.

Advantages and disadvantages

The next series of questions explored the perceived advantages and disadvantages of being supported by an NLE or LLE headteacher from a different local authority. A selection of representative quotes is given in Table 3.

Table 3: Advantages and disadvantages of being supported by an NLE or LLE

Advantages	Disadvantages
[There was] more freedom to discuss [things] and [it was] good for confidentiality.	[There were] geographical difficulties, [eg] time for staff travelling.
Different ways of working are explored [and we were] able to use ideas that have worked.	[I was] only anxious of the time it would take me and senior leaders out of school.
[It] would not work without [it being] someone from a different authority. [I] need to feel what is discussed is confidential.	
[The] LLE does not come with any preconceived ideas about the school – he's got his perspective and had a different take on things.	
[I had] no concerns, [it was] nice to have reassurance.	
[I was] relieved it was someone out of the authority.	
[The NLE was] just so willing to support anything at all... [I] know he's experienced, know he'll help me find the answers, within the authority people [had] not had enough experience or are too long out of headship.	
Other authorities may be further along than yours... [you] can take similarities and take advantage of that situation.	
[It was] good to have someone from outside the authority – useful dialogue... [there's a] different perspective – the way things are organised and managed in different authorities.	
[I had] no reservations, [I] could see it would benefit the school long term... [we were] keen to receive support from GM Challenge.	
[It was] quite invaluable, in [my own] authority [ie the headteacher's] lots of people know each other.	
[It's] good to see how people approach a problem in a different way.	

Clearly the participants viewed the advantages of support from a fellow headteacher as an NLE or LLE from another local authority as outweighing any disadvantages. In summary, key advantages were:

— confidentiality, associated in part with being from outside the headteacher's own local authority

— drawing on a colleague's experience and expertise

— drawing potentially on practice within another authority

Client-centred support

The next research questions investigated how, from the beginning and over time, the approach used by either the NLE or LLE supported the headteacher and the school's leadership team.

NLEs and LLEs interviewed highlighted, and headteachers confirmed, that they used a client-centred approach to supporting schools. This was based on, although not exclusively, Egan's skilled helper model and process client-centred ways of working. This enabled the headteacher to consider, as Egan (2002:25) puts it:

— What is going on?

— What do I want instead?

— How might I get to what I want?

Using similar, coaching-style questions, the NLE or LLE explored:

— what the current reality is for the client

— what is happening

— where the barriers are

— how many possible unexplored opportunities there are

— what actions the headteacher can and will take

This aligns with the ARROW questioning technique which aims to promote high-quality thinking with the client. These questions consider the: aim, reality, reflection, options and ways forward. This client-centred support enabled the headteachers to explore issues and potential solutions. The agenda, problems and/ or issues, as well as their resolution, belonged to and were the responsibility of the headteacher being supported. This reflects the issues of personal agency identified in the literature review.

The following comments show a range of views, and it is important to consider the fact that this was the first time each headteacher had experienced client-centred support for school improvement. However, having experienced it, what did the headteachers think about this way of working?

— **Realness:** feedback from the headteacher participants indicated that the interpersonal relationship between the headteacher and the NLE or LLE was very important. Perhaps the most basic of these essential attitudes was realness or authenticity. As the NLE or LLE was an existing headteacher entering into what was seen to be an open, honest relationship with the client headteacher, the consistent view was that she or he was much more likely to be effective as a consequence, as the following quotes indicate:

"[There was a] positive response – good to have someone aware of the daily stress... [the] LLE could relate their current pressure and experience to the situation."

"[It was] good that he didn't come with a set of tasks – it's about asking questions."

"[It] helped to turn vision into something that is real and concrete and makes a difference to children. It helped to have time to focus on it."

— **Valuing, acceptance, trust:** headteachers reported that there was another attitude that stood out in NLEs or LLEs who were particularly successful in facilitating leadership learning. This was related by the headteachers as a valuing of themselves as a leader and learner, including their feelings and opinions. It was viewed as a caring approach to them as a leader, but one characterised by no perceived desire to control or dominate. It was perceived as an acceptance of the headteachers as individuals and having worth in their own right and a belief that they were fundamentally trustworthy:

"[Trust] depends very much on the initial contracting discussion and the personality of the LLE."

— **Empathic understanding:** a further element that established a climate for professional growth was viewed to be empathic understanding. The headteachers identified that because the NLE or LLE had the ability to understand the headteacher's reactions from an insider's perspective (ie as a colleague headteacher), and had a sensitive awareness of the way the process of education and learning seemed to the headteacher, then again the likelihood of significant learning was reported to have increased. The headteachers as learners felt deeply appreciative when they were understood from their own point of view, ie not evaluated or judged:

"[It was] useful to talk to a head who has been through what we are going through."

"[They] can talk on a similar level, [and it] has been a great opportunity not just for me but also the leadership team... it's a great model to follow."

"The LLE provides a challenge that is tough yet more caring; being a head in post seems to result in a different approach."

This client-centred way of working, based on this small sample of headteachers, appears to have been valued. Being supported by someone who did not, from the headteachers' viewpoints, have an external agenda that was not necessarily focused on the same issues that the school saw as high priority, would seem to be important:

"[I was] concerned at first; [I] didn't want to be told what to do... [the] LLE quickly took on board the school situation and realised how to support us."

Exploring approaches to school improvement with an NLE or LLE who was still in post as a headteacher was important to all the headteachers in this research. As part of this, being helped to explore the school's own agenda was an area that the headteachers in this project increasingly appreciated:

"[We had] discussions about new initiatives and [he] posed challenging questions re time and taking on too much."

"The LLE listens, challenges and gives me a focus."

"He provided an ability and opportunity to reflect [as] an additional sounding board... we were in headless-chicken syndrome... he helped us have a more reflective practitioner approach."

One aspect of this approach was the emphasis on NLEs or LLEs using impact evaluation questions to explore the school's agenda rather than applying traditional problem-solving approaches. Such questions focused upon enabling headteachers to identify the required impact that interventions and changes in practice would have. They would, for example, prompt headteachers to describe what teachers would be doing differently as a consequence of improvement work so that this could be tangibly evaluated, alongside more hard-data measures of impact such as attainment levels:

"[The] discussions and questions about impact [were] very helpful."

Confidentiality

Personalisation of the support offered and the confidence and trust shown by the NLE or LLE were important to all the participant headteachers. The role of the SIP by contrast was both perceived and experienced differently. This was because the headteachers viewed the SIP as arriving with a local authority school improvement agenda. All the headteachers in the sample indicated they would not speak to their SIP or local authority officer in the same way or about the same things as they would the client-centred NLE or LLE because they would feel too vulnerable. They were happy to talk about concerns and uncertainties with the NLE or LLE as they trusted their confidentiality:

"I feel more confident talking to another serving headteacher than anyone else."

Headteachers stated:

"[There is a] huge need for heads to have support [from] a professional partner and be able to discuss in confidence – [we] can't do this with the SIP."

"The LLE is someone I can trust… [he] comes without an agenda and has credibility."

"On a personal level, it's wonderful as it's confidential and has anonymity."

Pupil performance data in English and mathematics and pupil progress in these areas from a local authority perspective appeared to the headteachers to be the main focus for SIPs:

"SIPs have the local authority's data and target agenda, not the school's."

The headteachers also appreciated someone who could respond to their particular context and its associated school improvement demands:

"There is more than one way to be a headteacher and doing a good job at it."

Wellbeing and impact

The client-centred relationship with headteachers was action- and impact-focused. The next set of research questions asked participants to comment on the support received for:

— headteachers' wellbeing

— impact on the school's leadership team

— impact on the school

Headteachers' wellbeing

Sessions with the SIPs were viewed by the majority of the headteachers as inspectorial in nature whereas the NLE or LLE sessions were described as a dialogue with a fellow professional. This latter approach was perceived as contributing therefore to the headteachers' own sense of wellbeing:

"[It was] helpful to have support when things go badly or where there's failure."

"[It] helps to have someone to talk to [from] outside the school, as it helps to protect staff from feeling the pressure you are under [ie, being able to discuss issues with an NLE or LLE but not with a staff member helped manage a reduction in pressure upon these staff members]."

"It's good to see and discuss how other heads [ie NLEs or LLEs] are coping."

"[It's] helpful to get things into perspective… [I'm] grateful for this support… it's a good model."

The NLE or LLE was also seen as skilled in helping when the headteacher was uncertain of the action or direction to take:

"When you doubt yourself, he's good at reminding me of the positives."

Impact on the school's leadership team

The NLE or LLE also worked with members of the school's senior leadership team (SLT), individually, in pairs and/or as a group, if requested by the headteacher. This adopted a similar approach in which questioning was used to uncover perceptions and identify strengths and areas for development in terms of priorities and headteachers' leadership. This included seeking their views on the SLT's role in securing improvement in priority areas. Their collective, as opposed to individual, opinions were fed back to the headteachers so that they could use these in considering and developing effective strategies for achieving improvements alongside their SLT, for example by adopting a more distributed approach. Headteachers' statements concerning the impact of this work identified how beneficial it had been, for example, in reculturing SLT effectiveness. Comments included:

"Staff now get the point of distributed leadership."

"Leadership roles [are] now taken on board by staff, [and] the conversations [between the NLE or LLE and staff members] really helped."

"Leadership team confidence has improved."

"The action of involving other members of the leadership team has been wonderful."

"The facilitating had a really big impact."

The purpose of the work overall was to assist the school in developing an agenda for change and identifying and resolving its own problems. In addition it was to support the school in developing its internal leadership capacity to lead and manage change that enhanced the achievement of all pupils. The impact on not only the SLT but also middle leaders with whom NLEs or LLEs also worked on some occasions, was also noted:

"It's helped middle leadership – middle leadership is a key area for staff development – if those people really make an effective contribution to the school, it makes a huge impact on the school."

Impact on the school

As Hargreaves and Shirley (2009) have noted, inconsistency is not the same as diversity. Inconsistency is about a difference in the standard of what is better and what is worse. Diversity is about variable expressions of a standard (or even of what counts as standard). Part of the questioning of NLEs and LLEs related to uncovering inconsistency and/or diversity so that the headteacher and SLT could gain greater awareness of this and make changes in practice to address these:

"Changes are internalised and the work of the LLE will continue through [the] school."

The NLE or LLE approach helped the school to explore consistency and diversity. By contrast, the SIP approach, as experienced by the headteachers in this research, focused on performance inconsistency in the areas of English and mathematics. This, it was felt, did not take full account of diversity in pupils, schools and improvement strategies.

In commenting on the impact on the school, some participants reflected:

"Having a sounding board to explore with has been important to the progress we have made in a short time."

"In 2009 we achieved floor targets in English and maths for the first time."

In each interview, headteachers were asked if they had any single words or phrases they would use to describe the support from the NLE or LLE. The following were some of the comments received:

"Questioning, confidentiality, support and constructive challenge, agenda-free, would recommend it."

"Very good, very relaxed and that's important to me, unpressured challenge."

"Helps you see things with completely fresh eyes."

"Not telling me what to do, helping me to explore different options."

"If I didn't rate it, I wouldn't be doing it."

The support from the NLEs or LLEs was, in summary, clearly appreciated by the headteachers being supported.

Comparison of NLE or LLE support with SIP or school improvement adviser support

The next set of questions focused on the differences and similarities between the support from local authority school improvement advisers and/or SIPs and that from NLEs or LLEs. Both approaches were centred on helping the school to raise standards and manage and lead school improvement, and in this respect there were similarities. However, the approaches to achieving this were seen as significantly different. In making this point it is again important to set this finding within the context of the schools' needs at the time and the difference in the remit of and time available for SIPs in particular to provide hands-on support, as opposed to the commitment and time availability of NLEs or LLEs. Headteachers commented:

"Any work with the SIP is so narrow: there is a restricted agenda. [Support from the] SIP is a more formal aspect... the NLE is a much better idea. [It is] good to see where something goes from an open discussion."

"[The] role of SIP has changed drastically this year. Last year [the] SIP was supportive, [and] acknowledged problems in the school. This has now changed, the role is purely looking at statistics, standards, attainment. I value the LLE support more now."

Headteachers wanted to consider the school in the round but expressed frustration about the SIP support role as they perceived it:

"[The] SIP agenda [is] not focused on the whole school, just data."

"[The] local authority [has its] own targets which become a focus for the school. The LLE does not come with a list of agendas, that's the difference, no external agenda that is imposed on him."

"Two different scripts – [the] SIP and local authority adviser come with [the] focus on attainment and accelerated progress. Their script is written for them. [Greater Manchester] LLE doesn't have the same script, [and] can talk on a wider basis, which is helpful and useful."

This small sample of headteachers all noticed and experienced the clear differences between support from local authority school improvement advisers and/or SIPs and that from NLEs or LLEs. However, as has been stated above, this reflects the variation in their respective remits, agendas (whilst acknowledging that both have a role in securing and supporting school improvement), and time allocations for providing hands-on support, particularly in the case of SIPs.

Support identification

Each headteacher was asked to identify what the NLE or LLE did that they found most helpful.

The first theme was related to **facilitated reflection**. Headteachers valued having time set aside to consider their school's improvement agenda through a challenging but supportive professional dialogue with an experienced serving headteacher:

> "The LLE listens, challenges and helps me find my focus."

> "Advice that he's able to offer, not telling me what to do, helping me to explore different options, has helped my confidence."

> "I need to talk to an LLE regularly - it challenges me in a different way."

> "Reflecting with a fellow headteacher is the key element for me. Someone still doing it understands better, not someone who was a head several years ago."

> "[There is] time to talk, reflect and discuss leadership, not targets."

> "[There is a] huge need for heads to have support, to have that facilitated, [a] need to have a professional partner and be able to discuss [matters] in confidence."

The second combines with the first and relates to the **approach** taken by the NLE or LLE as this also appeared to be important to those being supported. The client-focused approach felt personalised to the school's context and each headteacher's needs, and was deemed non-judgemental in its character:

> "This is the best sort of support I've had to support me as a headteacher."

> "I feel [LLE support] is more about me and my school and my agenda [and] priorities rather than data-crunching and percentages."

> "The LLE fits and marries to the school, he fits and internalises ideas. He helped us to turn it into something tangible."

> "The LLE is not someone judging you – that's affirming."

Each member of the research sample was asked if they could suggest, with the benefits of hindsight, any 'even better if' points regarding NLE or LLE support. The areas highlighted related to greater clarity on roles and purpose and how access to such support throughout headship would be beneficial:

> "[I would have liked] greater clarity at the start about the role of the LLE."

> "[There needs to be] focus on the purpose of the support – deciding priorities and building leadership capacity."

> "[The] initial stages felt a bit shallow, [so] pre-information is important."

> "[There should be] regular access to an LLE throughout your headship."

> "I wish I'd had this type of support from the beginning of my headship."

Having considered the findings from this small-scale research investigation, the conclusions, implications and recommendations for action are presented in the next section.

Conclusion

Change for improvement is not a linear process; it is more fluid and complex, and happens through the identification of direct and indirect relationships between:

— the work of effective leaders

— changes in school and classroom processes and conditions

— improvements in pupil outcomes

As such, the headteachers in this small-scale research were unanimous in their identification of the need for an independent professional reflection partner as it could be termed (such as an NLE or LLE) who would work with them in a support capacity. The respondents also considered that for optimum effectiveness this should preferably be an existing headteacher as they bring with them a current understanding and experience of the daily challenges of headship.

Impact was felt in terms of improvements in, for example:

— headteachers' personal knowledge, skills and capacity to lead improvement

— development of other leaders' skills and knowledge and their capacity to lead improvement and have an enhanced appreciation of accountability for this (eg middle leaders)

— improved standards

Key messages about their experience of the face-to-face support participants had received from the NLE or LLE that they had found beneficial and effective in contributing to school improvement included:

— **Professional knowledge:** the NLE or LLE was viewed as an experienced colleague who would bring this experience and their knowledge to bear on issues related to improvement. This included potentially learning from different approaches taken within the local authority in which the NLE or LLE was based.

— **Client-centredness:** the headteachers were able to focus the support offered on the problems specific to their school's context. The coaching style of approach enabled the headteachers to explore issues, consider alternative perspectives and subsequently own the issues and have a sense of agency for their improvement.

— **Focused and impact-oriented:** the support was proactive, with clear timelines and directed towards the school's needs. Questioning was impact-oriented and required headteachers to project what the changes would lead to in terms of, for example, staff behaviour, as well as hard-data outcomes such as levels of attainment.

— **Time for reflection:** headteachers valued the time made available for dialogue which encouraged professional reflection and enhanced leadership learning.

— **Confidentiality:** this enabled headteachers to explore issues with freedom and openness.

— **Authenticity:** the support received was considered to be open, honest and non-judgemental and this helped foster a positive working relationship.

— **Empathy and valuing:** headteachers felt that whilst they were challenged in their thinking, their views were listened to and taken into account. They felt valued personally and professionally and this contributed to their sense of wellbeing as well as their willingness to engage.

The impact of the support was felt in relation to personnel development such as improved middle leadership capacity, contribution to aspects of school improvement and improved achievement and attainment.

The experience of support from NLEs and LLEs in comparison with that from SIPs or other local authority officers was specific to this group of headteachers. They appreciated that the SIP role was required for accountability purposes but preferred the approach of the NLE or LLE in helping to move the school forward. The headteachers in this research saw the SIP role as very different from the client-centred support role, which was considered more supportive.

This should in no way be seen as a personal reflection on the SIPs and/or local authority officers and advisers as individuals, but rather on their role, which was perceived to be more inspectorial as a result of being attainment focused.

Comparatively, therefore, the headteachers in this research indicated they would prefer support from an NLE or LLE rather than a SIP and/or other local authority officer as they found this more helpful in driving school improvement.

Implications

Whilst recognising that this is a small-scale study, its findings and conclusions demonstrate that client-centred support can help headteachers to be successful in improving pupil outcomes and school leadership capacity through:

— working with who they are - their values, virtues, dispositions, attributes and competences

— developing the strategies they use

— supporting the specific combination and timely implementation and management of these strategies in response to the unique contexts in which they work

It should be recognised that this study was based on a set of schools involved in a particular programme owing to their circumstances and therefore facing particular challenges. Accordingly, the study does not claim that its findings are generalisable to a wider sample. For example, other headteachers in different contexts might well perceive the support provided by their SIP or local authority officers or advisers differently.

However, it was evident that this group of headteachers found the NLE or LLE support more impactful on themselves as leaders, and on their staff and the school as a whole.

The headteachers in this small-scale research were unanimous in stating their need for what I have termed an independent professional reflection partner, who is an existing headteacher. Indeed, each participant was asked what message they would like to give to the secretary of state for education regarding the future use of NLEs or LLEs. Their comments included:

"Keep this type of support going. Many heads in challenging circumstances need to discuss the bigger picture with a fellow head."

"This sort of support may actually encourage people to take up headship."

"It's an invaluable resource, particularly for schools in difficult situations."

"Trust the professionals; there is value in peer support. As school leaders we are also learners, [and] this support has helped me to learn about myself, my school and my colleagues."

"There needs to be a better way of supporting dedicated headship time and this may be it... there needs to be a better way of addressing headteacher wellbeing because of the loneliness and isolation of the head's role. It's a tough role."

Recommendations

Based on this research, the National College and the DfE might wish to explore further ways of delivering this type of client-centred support for a wider range of schools rather than purely for schools in difficulty, below floor targets or in an Ofsted category. The purposes of this include:

— improving educational outcomes for children

— improving the leadership knowledge, skills and capacity of headteachers and other leaders within schools

— sustaining those currently in headship in being able to address its demands

— providing a supportive incentive for those considering headship to grasp the nettle

The expansion of the NLE and LLE programmes, the development of teaching schools with a remit that includes school-to-school support and the deployment of specialist leaders in education, and the expansion of academies with a remit to support other schools all might contribute to such provision.

Based on this study, one could proffer the importance in the latter examples of ensuring that the successful ways of working identified in this report be translated into these new contexts. For example, this might be through the provision of LLE training and the support of an experienced NLE or LLE serving National College headteacher support associate for those leading school-to-school support.

Central to this are the most effective aspects of the NLE or LLE model based on this report's findings:

— The employment of client-centred processes and methodologies will:

  · explore the school's context, priorities and perceived issues

  · ask probing questions, including those focused on the anticipated impact of improvement measures

  · emphasise critical reflection on existing practices, issues, barriers to improvement and levers for change

  This assists the school in developing its own agenda for change and in identifying and resolving its own problems, thus creating a sense of individual and collective agency.

— Support is needed for schools to assist in developing internal capacity to lead and manage change and thus improve the achievement of all pupils. In some cases this involved working individually or collectively with SLT members and/or middle leaders to inform reflection on their effectiveness as leaders, and increase their skills and knowledge of leadership roles and accountabilities at different levels.

— Approaches that achieve an effective balance between offering challenge and support are fostered.

This research has also identified that its headteachers, in preferring a client-centred, coaching process, valued the NLE or LLE focus on identifying strengths as well as areas for improvement. This closely aligns, one could argue, with appreciative inquiry as it encourages those in the school to study, discuss, learn from, celebrate and build on what is working, rather than simply trying to fix what is not. As Sir John Harvey-Jones puts it:

'In a world of a continuous barrage of information, the ability to create the bridge of mutual understanding is increasingly more important and more difficult. Real communication involves trust, integrity and empathy.'
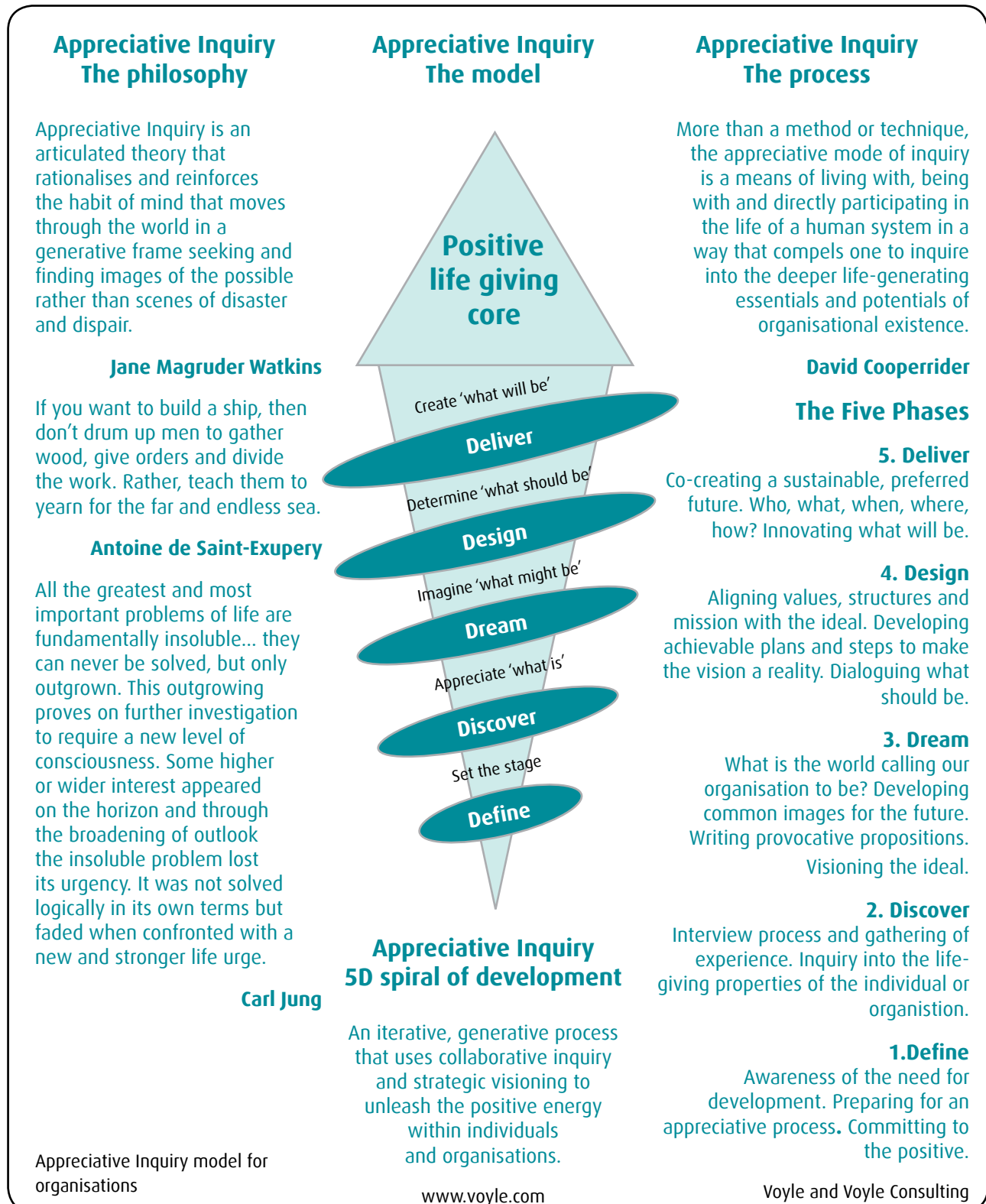
cited in Borg, 2007:vii

or expressed as Schein's (1999) guiding principle: 'Always try to be helpful.'

Appendix: Five phases of appreciative inquiry

Figure A1 shows the five phases of appreciative inquiry (Voyle and Voyle Consulting (2005-10). See www.voyle.com/appreciativeinquiry.html.

Figure A1: Five phases of appreciative inquiry

Appreciative Inquiry
The philosophy

Appreciative Inquiry is an articulated theory that rationalises and reinforces the habit of mind that moves through the world in a generative frame seeking and finding images of the possible rather than scenes of disaster and dispair.

Jane Magruder Watkins

If you want to build a ship, then don't drum up men to gather wood, give orders and divide the work. Rather, teach them to yearn for the far and endless sea.

Antoine de Saint-Exupery

All the greatest and most important problems of life are fundamentally insoluble... they can never be solved, but only outgrown. This outgrowing proves on further investigation to require a new level of consciousness. Some higher or wider interest appeared on the horizon and through the broadening of outlook the insoluble problem lost its urgency. It was not solved logically in its own terms but faded when confronted with a new and stronger life urge.

Carl Jung

Appreciative Inquiry model for organisations

Appreciative Inquiry
The model

Positive life giving core

Create 'what will be'

Deliver

Determine 'what should be'

Design

Imagine 'what might be'

Dream

Appreciate 'what is'

Discover

Set the stage

Define

Appreciative Inquiry
5D spiral of development

An iterative, generative process that uses collaborative inquiry and strategic visioning to unleash the positive energy within individuals and organisations.

www.voyle.com

Appreciative Inquiry
The process

More than a method or technique, the appreciative mode of inquiry is a means of living with, being with and directly participating in the life of a human system in a way that compels one to inquire into the deeper life-generating essentials and potentials of organisational existence.

David Cooperrider

The Five Phases

5. Deliver
Co-creating a sustainable, preferred future. Who, what, when, where, how? Innovating what will be.

4. Design
Aligning values, structures and mission with the ideal. Developing achievable plans and steps to make the vision a reality. Dialoguing what should be.

3. Dream
What is the world calling our organisation to be? Developing common images for the future. Writing provocative propositions. Visioning the ideal.

2. Discover
Interview process and gathering of experience. Inquiry into the life-giving properties of the individual or organistion.

1.Define
Awareness of the need for development. Preparing for an appreciative process. Committing to the positive.

Voyle and Voyle Consulting

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