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The First 100 Days:

An enquiry into the first 100 days of headship in a failing school

What is it that happens in the first 100 days – the very early stages – of taking up the headship of a school in special measures that steers a school towards or away from successful improvement?

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Contents

Preface	3
Introduction	4
Methods	5
Story of Brightside JMI and Nursery School	6
Findings	19
Bibliography	22
Acknowledgements	23

Preface

My interest in the subject matter of my study was stimulated by several factors:

- concern about children in schools who are let down by the adults entrusted with their education
- personal experience of working with a talented team in a school deemed to be causing concern
- contact with headteachers appointed to failing schools and noticing how important the early period in post appeared to be, and
- a growing awareness about the emotional stress on headteachers and school staff when their schools are placed into the 'special measures' or 'serious weaknesses' OFSTED categories

My initial enquiries found very little research about failing schools and particularly nothing about what happens when a new headteacher takes up the post. There seemed to be a feeling that failing schools were difficult to research because they did not want to be burdened by researchers.

This topic is important to me because of the respect and high regard I have for people who choose to work in the teaching profession and who choose to lead our most challenging primary schools. The case study described here is only one school's story and, as such, I offer it as an impression only – a picture to reflect upon.

Introduction

I am a teacher who has worked for 33 years in primary schools in London and Hertfordshire. I have been a primary school headteacher for 16 years and at the time of this study I was my second headship.

I wanted to investigate the first 100 days – about two terms – of headship in a failing school because I wanted to find out what happens and gain some insight into what might support, either directly or indirectly, the work of a headteacher, new or experienced, in this role. What is it that happens in the first 100 days – the very early stages – of taking up the headship of a school in challenging circumstances that steers a school towards or away from successful improvement?

Through the enquiry I wanted to consider how a headteacher who is newly appointed to a failing school starts the task of school improvement. I wanted to try to catch some of the feelings that might be experienced in this situation. I wanted to consider what it was that happens to the headteacher that might have an impact on their leadership in those first 100 days. I wanted to ground the research in the experience of headteachers, to consider how the outcome of the enquiry might provide support for school leaders in challenging circumstances and might identify areas for further enquiry.

I was able to use from September 2001 until March 2002 to carry out my enquiry and to prepare the account of my findings. Although fortunate to have this amount of time, I knew that I needed to retain a sense of realism about what could be achieved. I recognised that because I was focusing on the very beginning of a headteacher's work the long-term outcomes were not going to be known, nor was the head's tenure guaranteed to be a success. I undertook to recognise that a school is a unique establishment and that when tracking the path of a headteacher newly in post, it is not possible to predict the outcome. It is possible to hope.

I was determined to take account of the complex, challenging and diverse work that headteachers have to do, and to work with them. Participation in my research was not intended to add any pressure to their work. I undertook to accept the complex relationship between school effectiveness and school context.

I undertook to respect and value the people and the schools with whom I worked and to maintain confidentiality and ethical behaviour at all times. All names are fictitious.

Methods

This report records the case study of one school. It shows how one new headteacher strives to start to move a school from its position after a critical OFSTED inspection towards successful improvement. It shows the way the headteacher and those working with her act and react during the first 100 days to establish the direction and pace for the school to move forward more confidently despite its context and history.

The study examines a headteacher newly in post between September 2001–March 2002. It describes what happens in the school during this time. The school was identified through a link with a local education authority (LEA) adviser. I outlined my research topic to the LEA adviser who thought there might be a suitable school. It was to this school – which I shall call Brightside JMI School and Nursery – which the headteacher – whom I shall call Mrs Angela White – was appointed in March 2001 and took up the post in September 2001.

The LEA adviser presented the proposal to the headteacher and then I telephoned her to arrange a preliminary meeting. The meeting took place at a restaurant and it was agreed that we could work together and that she felt quite comfortable about my research subject and methods.

I had some understanding of the challenge that lay before the headteacher and I did not want to add any extra burden to her workload. On the contrary I hoped that my interest, undivided attention, impartial position and support as an experienced professional would be useful.

As it turned out my position could not be described as impartial because I very much wanted the headteacher and the school to succeed. Therefore, it is more appropriate to describe my role as a researcher who at times participated by providing positive critical friendship and support through active listening. The LEA adviser and the headteacher understood that the research might be presented as a report, which they would see and which would be subject to their agreement.

The research design used a variety of methods. It comprised a literature search for current and previous research and an in-depth case study data collection in the school. I spent time in the school, during working days and school holidays. I shadowed the headteacher, and interviewed her and some of the other people who work in the school.

The majority of data was collected through discussion with the headteacher, and observation notes. The initial discussion with the headteacher lasted for two hours. The intention of using planned, semi-structured interviews was never fully successfully carried out due to the extreme busyness of the headteacher's days. It was neither practical nor possible to exclude the rest of the school community's access to her. The interviews usually turned into unstructured discussions, with frequent breaks while the head carried on with the business of running the school.

Story of Brightside JMI and Nursery School

Context

At the time of this study Brightside had 227 pupils on roll, but that number was falling. In 1998 there had been 363 pupils on roll. The school was perceived to be growing over the years until the April 1999 OFSTED inspection, although there is no strong evidence to support the view. However, there is a decline in pupil numbers in the area and therefore the reasons for the falling role are blurred. There is capacity for about 150 more pupils.

The school has mixed age classes to accommodate the falling rolls. The mixed ages are across key stages. The governors worked hard to convince parents of the benefits of mixed-ability grouping. The school had hoped to attract pupils from another local school, which had been closed by the LEA due to falling rolls, but that has not happened. There are significantly more boys than girls in the school. Attainment test results indicate that the performance of both boys and girls at Key Stage 2 is well below the national average.

The 1991 census data is now more than 10 years old and not all the pupils come from families representative of the ward in which they live. The school draws from a wide catchment area. However, although the census data shows the school to be in the second most favoured ward in the district, it also shows the ward to be significantly less advantaged than most other parts of England. The high percentage (53%) of pupils eligible for free school meals reflects the high level of unemployment and low-income earners in the community. This is well above the national average.

The school has a diverse intake, culturally and linguistically. The percentage of pupils speaking English as an additional language is very high (29.3%). The predominant ethnic group is white with a number of minority ethnic pupils, mainly black Caribbean or black African. There is a sizeable group of Turkish pupils. The school is in the highest national category for ethnic minority pupils. Thirty three per cent (70 pupils) pupils are supported through extra funding for those with English as an additional language – Turkish, Yoruba, Cantonese and Arabic.

From the data available on the school's 2001 PANDA report, it is possible to surmise that although the numbers on roll have changed, the number of children eligible for free school meals has remained consistently high since 1998. The number of pupils with English as an additional language has reduced by about a third over five years. The number of pupils identified with special education needs (SEN) has increased by over a half, most significantly in the last two years.

The percentage of pupils identified as having SEN is well above the national average (55.2% school / 23.7% national). The percentage of pupils with statements of SEN is broadly in line with the national average (1.4%). Attendance in 2000/2001 was well below the national average for primary schools (bottom 10%) and the unauthorised absence rate was well above the national average.

The school is located in an inner city area. Wide streets with grand Victorian houses, modern flats and housing converted into flats surround it. Until March 2002, when the local council introduced parking charges, the streets offered plenty of space for free parking, indicating how far from the city centre the school is located. The street on which the school's main entrance lies is grubby, and large pieces of rubbish are often dumped.

The Victorian school building, on five levels, has a myriad of rooms, corridors, stairways, entrances and halls. The school has an indoor swimming pool. High walls surround the site and the gates are secured by an entry phone system. There are several outbuildings and rooms that are no longer used for teaching and have been converted for parent and community use. The local Education Action Zone (EAZ) headquarters is housed on the site.

There is limited outdoor play space. There is no access to a playing field or other green area in the immediate vicinity. The concrete playground, divided into two parts, has had some attractive features added. Nevertheless, it strikes as bleak and cold and is often strewn with litter. The drains, blocked after heavy rainfall, cause mucky streams across the playground.

Leadership history

Timeline	Pre-1998 until December 1998	January 1999 until July 1999	September 1999 until July 2000	September 2000 until July 2001	September 2001 and current
Head-teacher	Headteacher A	Acting Head B Failure to recruit a new head. (Current deputy) is appointed as Acting Head B.	Headteacher C appointed.	Acting Head D Headteacher C resigns in July 2000 and leaves in December 2000. Failure to recruit a new head so Acting Head D appointed.	Headteacher E Angela is appointed.
OFSTED and HMI		OFSTED inspection in April 1999	HMI visit in May 2000	HMI visit in March 2001 & July 2001	HMI visit in December 2002
Comment (from LEA adviser)	Left the school before the OFSTED inspection. A poor legacy identified by the inspectors.	During this time the school is judged by the LEA as causing concern and this is confirmed by OFSTED who judge it as having serious weaknesses.	The task of moving the school out of serious weaknesses is too difficult and the school is judged to require special measures. At around the same time the LEA has an unsatisfactory inspection, which means that for a period of time the	Acting Head D begins to make some impact on the school but decides to leave to teaching in another context.	

			school is not well served by the LEA with no permanent link adviser and considerable upheaval in the aftermath of outsourcing.		
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Angela White had previously managed a middle school through closure. She wanted to move to a new area and had family connections with the city in which Brightside is situated. She was appointed in March 2001 and was fortunate to be able to visit Brightside frequently during the summer term before taking up the appointment.

Angela is a cheerful and independent person who has used her experiences in life, personal and professional, to get to know herself better. She is small in stature and full of energy. Her personality is engaging and open. She retains a strong sense of privacy about her personal life, which she values.

She says she is not afraid of making choices and taking decisions but thinks about them carefully before acting. She says she is decisive once her mind is made up. She knew she was taking on a big challenge when she applied for the post.

Staff

In September 2001 Angela had 12 teachers including the deputy headteacher, for 10 mixed age classes. Just four teachers (two with no class teaching responsibility) had worked at the school previously – three had been there for some years and one was a newly-qualified teacher (NQT) whose probationary year had been extended because she had failed the Qualified Teacher Status maths test. Of the eight teachers who were new in September 2001, four were agency staff (long-term supply) and the other four had permanent appointments to start in September, but Angela had appointed only one herself.

OFSTED

Brightside was inspected by OFSTED in April 1999 and was found to have serious weaknesses. Within one year of the inspection the school was judged to need special measures.

OFSTED reported that the school's strengths included:

A positive ethos where children are cared for and their diversity is valued. The children have a secure and pleasant environment for learning... the school is successful in engendering a love of books and a delight in physical education.

The weaknesses that were reported included:

A high proportion of unsatisfactory teaching across the school... poor curriculum planning and assessment arrangements... the school does not monitor or evaluate the quality of education with sufficient rigor.

Six key issues were identified to ensure that the school would work towards raising attainment in the core subjects at both key stages. These included improving the quality of teaching and raising teachers' expectations of the quality, quantity and range of work attempted by pupils. More rigorous monitoring and precise collation and analysis of data were also identified among the key issues.

The implementation of the school's action plan was monitored by HMI from OFSTED. One year later in May 2000, HMI and an additional inspector visited the school. The visit was also deemed to be a Section 10 inspection.

A further year later, following the HMI visit in March 2001, the school notes from the feedback session recorded:

HMI said she was aware that morale was very low. The situation at Brightside was entirely rescueable and that everyone should tackle all the problems together to move the school forward. This was a matter of urgency. The overall judgement is that the school has made limited progress in the key issues and limited progress towards coming out of special measures.

At the third monitoring visit made in July 2001 the HMI report said:

Standards have not improved enough over the last year. At this point, more than halfway to the LEA's target date for the removal of the school from special measures, the target date looks even more ambitious than it did to HMI at the time of the first monitoring report.

This was the report with which Angela began her headship at Brightside. She started in September 2001 to find a full-scale refurbishment programme underway, which had slipped past its initial deadline and was now well behind schedule.

The first 100 days of leading and managing

Refurbishment

As part of the rebuilding and refurbishment, a new entrance was planned for the school. The first stage of the plan was for the school office to be relocated to the second level, the school's ground floor, for security reasons and to ensure parents and visitors were able to report directly to the reception desk once the school gate was open. The school secretary was therefore located some distance from the headteacher and communication between them was difficult to manage.

The staff room was relocated to a large disused classroom on the second floor. It was decorated, carpeted and fitted with display boards, storage cupboards and equipment for

use at dinner and break time. The room was designated for all staff, support and teaching. The caretaker's room, in the basement, continued to be used as the smoking room.

The deputy head retained her office and to date there have been no changes in its use or decor. It is some distance from Angela's office.

Angela's office was located in the old staff room. It is large and has enough room for a director's table and chairs for governors' meetings and other formal meetings. The table is also big enough to hold the sheaves of paper that Angela was working through. She has her own computer, a raft of cupboards, a refreshment area with sink and fridge and a small, less formal sitting area. The size of the room was a real advantage. It always looked orderly, even if the table was covered with documents. It always felt light and was always clean. It never felt oppressively full. There is also a video intercom, which looks onto the entrance security gate. She quickly established a system for filing and she appeared to me well organised and tidy.

Angela's time was taken up with architects, builders, plumbers, electricians and decorators. My first visit to the school was delayed due to the major building work that was going on.

However essential the refurbishment was, it was also a major distraction from Angela's role in leading the development of the teaching and learning.

Teamwork

During her summer term visits to the school, Angela had taken account of the fact that there were different rooms in use for different staff teams. She had noted the lack of teamwork and team spirit. Roles and responsibilities were blurred and it was easy to be lost in the rambling building.

Communication was difficult because people did not get together. Relationships were difficult because there was no way to get to know anyone else. There was no opportunity for informal, day-to-day professional discussion about children, teaching and learning. The atmosphere was unconsciously unwelcoming and wary. I noted just such an atmosphere on my first visit.

Angela introduced a morning briefing meeting as well as regular weekly staff meetings. All staff were expected to attend and a wide range of matters were brought to everyone's attention. She gave everyone the opportunity to contribute to the sharing of information by posting a suggestions list on the staff room board as well as encouraging contributions during her contact with the staff throughout the week. She also provided an agenda and the notes from the meeting were pinned up afterwards to ensure everyone could find out what had been discussed, agreed or directed.

The description I have given above belies the animosity with which people started to attend the meetings. At the first one at which I was present, I observed several latecomers chat across Angela's talk and a sulky kind of atmosphere. Eye contact was poor and body language suggested discomfort and awkwardness. Angela continued

valiantly and positively, using a style of language that acknowledged what people were saying, when they did contribute, but keeping to the point in hand. She rarely used 'I', nearly always 'we' or 'you'.

Angela commented to me that it was a challenge to keep everyone involved. The contributions to discussions at staff meetings were at a very basic level at this time. However, she tried to develop her staff's confidence by accepting and appreciating the contributions that were made. Angela persisted with attempts to develop a feeling of the staff as one team, ensuring they met together both formally and informally.

Angela used the development of the curriculum and teaching methods to achieve greater consistency and commonality. As she continued to exert calm, good-natured and relentless pressure some teachers began to strive to improve and develop and some to resist and engage in a battle of wills. As Angela and her deputy headteacher grew more confident, especially after the HMI visit, they became a strong team together.

I noticed that the staff room seemed to become more comfortable and more professional as the school's information and communication technology (ICT) developments took shape. An area was set up with a computer for all to use. Messages were left for the ICT technician who came in each week to provide technical support. The staff board often held anonymous, cryptic messages, which were treated with humour. A memorable one said "hit the target miss the point".

Angela saw it as important to develop a team ethos in the school. She used a range of strategies to try to engender this ethos, including a focus on a commonality in teaching methods. However, there was resistance from some staff. This resistance did not make it easy for her to concentrate on the key task of finding out what was happening in the classrooms and developing the teaching and learning skills of her staff and pupils.

Administrative support

Angela became aware very quickly that the administrative support was very poor. The secretary had an unfortunate manner on the telephone and face-to-face was (unknowingly?) unhelpful. She did not answer queries or solve problems but appeared to pass them onto someone else. I observed her at work one morning and was intrigued at her unhelpful manner. It seemed almost harder to do the job her way than to resolve the parents' queries, which were about mundane issues such as dinner money and school photographs. She was neat and tidy but ineffective and inefficient. Her filing system, for example, was to file everything by month not by name. It was therefore very difficult to trace or track anything.

As an interim measure, to ensure that the work was done, Angela took on more aspects of the administrative work. She said that, although it made more work for her, it was helpful too. It meant she saw all the papers coming into the school. Angela set up a comprehensive filing system in her own office, for convenience and for confidentiality.

Angela identified another member of the support staff to join the secretary in the office and deal with all cash matters, as well as fulfilling a role similar to that of the secretary. Angela discovered several unpaid invoices dating back some considerable time,

including straightforward tasks like the milk return. The finances were in a muddle. As budget-setting time approached, the secretary was absent from school on sick leave. Angela, together with a new finance governor, set to work to unravel the school's finances.

Angela closely monitored the secretary's work and shared her concerns about the quality of her performance and the quantity of work she was achieving with her. The secretary responded by saying she needed more time and more help. The outgoing head, she said, had promised these. Angela countered by asking for the secretary's job description. They reviewed the role and Angela reorganised responsibilities. The secretary's inefficiency escalated as Angela established more rigorous systems of administration and the secretary was unable to adapt to or accept the changes.

It was Angela's tenacity and focus on the task, not the person, which brought the matter to a head and eventually to resolution. The secretary involved her union and, by negotiation, a package was put together to release her from her duties with severance pay on certain conditions. The school would foot the bill.

Angela had brought to the post her previous experience of headship and she had a realistic idea about the degree of administrative support she needed. She involved the LEA personnel department and as my time at the school came to a close, it looked as if she was nearer to getting the quality of administrative support that she very much needed.

Problems with administrative support were one further distraction from Angela's core task of improving learning and teaching.

Sharing subject leadership responsibilities

After only two or three visits to the school I could see that few support systems were in place for Angela, making her task that much harder. She told me that it was a challenge to keep everyone involved. The temporary posts held by some staff made it more difficult for her to delegate subject responsibilities. A skeleton programme to develop the role of subject leaders for short-term contract teachers would have been very useful to help make an impact on the quality of teaching across the subjects.

Angela was convinced that the key to improving the standards of achievement lay in ensuring and developing consistently good teaching and classroom support. A supportive staff development system like working towards Investors in People (IIP) could have provided a useful framework for the school.

Lack of a suitable staff development programme for teachers, especially those on short-term contracts, impeded the process of development for subject leaders, in turn weakening the process of improving learning and teaching across some subjects.

Teaching resources

During Angela's visits before she took up the post, the staff had told her that they found planning difficult because there were no teaching resources in the school. As she planned how the school site was to be used, she had re-sited the library, the computer

suite and the curriculum resources so that they would be readily available to everyone and so that these resources could be stored and maintained easily. It had been a major undertaking to move the resources in the school into these new locations.

Angela was able to involve parents in the process of relocating the library and found one very skilful parent who catalogued, repaired and shelved the books, and generally took over the library project. It became an excellent area and caches of untouched books were found hidden across the school.

Setting up the computer suite proved easier than relocating the library because there were no computers in the school that worked which needed to be moved! The old hardware was relegated to the skips. The designated room was agreed and with funding from the EAZ and the LEA the equipment was bought and set up. The EAZ decided to employ a technician to maintain the equipment and to work with the ICT subject leader to develop the staff's skills.

Curriculum resources were moved to an unused classroom together with shelving and cupboards. Angela bought some colour co-ordinated boxes to store the curriculum resources. As with the books, a collection of previously unused resources came to light. However, a lot of out-of-date, damaged or unsuitable material also came to light and good use was made of the skip.

I first visited the new resource areas in November 2001, shortly before the next HMI visit. The library and the computer suite were almost complete. The reorganising of the curriculum resource area was unfinished and the room looked rather a mess. Angela said that the impetus had gone and the last stage of preparing this room would fall to her, when she had time.

Considering the huge need there was for the school to improve the quality of teaching in the classroom and to raise standards, Angela seemed to spend a large proportion of time sorting out teaching resources. She explained that the reason that some teachers gave as an excuse for poor performance was that there was a lack of teaching resources. Angela considered that the resource issue was a logjam in moving forward. She allocated some staff meeting time to the task because it gave everyone a chance to see just how many resources there were in the school.

It was at this time that Angela's link adviser visited and reminded her that her priority was to monitor the teaching in the classroom. Angela readily acknowledged to me that she recognised the risk of spending too much time out of the classroom. She was possibly sending signals to the staff that the teaching was not as important to her and as time passed she could lose the opportunity to make an impact on her staff.

A feature of this failing school was that it had few effective management systems in place. Therefore the new headteacher needed to spend time establishing the systems and structures that would scaffold the work of the school. The task was essential but time consuming and a distraction from other key concerns, such as monitoring teaching in the classroom.

Human resources

Angela recognised that the school had been through a significant period of staffing uncertainty and high turnover during the previous two years so she had decided to give everyone the chance to prove themselves. This is how she described her tasks to me during the first half of the autumn term in 2001:

- find teachers for each class
- assess the quality of teaching
- establish roles for the teachers without a class responsibility
- appoint and allocate classroom support – SEN, EAL, EAZ mentors
- train midday supervisors and administrative support
- appoint cleaners
- clarify the roles for all members of staff

Due to the lack of useful records, Angela had to investigate to find out what the various adults employed by the school were doing, how their time was used, to progress chase directed tasks, to evaluate their effectiveness and make decisions based the evaluation. By the time two terms had passed, she was getting to know her teaching staff very well and she had been able to achieve some changes.

Angela gathered her information and data about her staff from the link adviser, through monitoring by the deputy and from her own monitoring programme. She frequently toured the school and spoke with everyone she met. She monitored the quality of teaching through lesson observations and looking at planning and, increasingly as the time passed, by work sampling. During the first term she met with all the teachers for performance management discussions, sharing the role with her deputy.

Angela started to establish more regular monitoring procedures after the autumn half term. She had been overwhelmed by the amount of day-to-day tasks that needed to be done. I asked her whether she thought the leadership history had exacerbated some of these tasks. She acknowledged that the frequency of changes in leadership, each bringing a different set of ideas could not have been helpful.

It did seem that the legacy of each short-term, acting headteacher arrangements had not worked for this school.

Twelve teachers and 100 days

The staffing organisation that Angela inherited was particularly complex and the challenge to develop the team was considerable. Understanding and tracking the staffing organisation almost defeated me. Angela was able to hold much of the information about the staffing organisation in her head and I tried to map it out on paper to get a clearer picture.

Of the four teachers who had worked at the school previously:

- The NQT passed the required maths test but left the school in December 2001 to move to another part of the country. Monitoring of planning and lesson observations by both Angela and her deputy had shown that her teaching had improved as the term had progressed.
- The senior teacher without a class responsibility replaced the NQT. Although Angela had misgivings about the move, she knew she had to find out about the teacher's teaching ability. The school could not afford an expensive supernumery on the payroll. Angela's fears were well founded. This person's teaching was deemed unsatisfactory.
- The deputy continued in a non-teaching capacity.
- Angela considered the fourth teacher a good teacher.

Of the eight new appointments, among the permanent appointments:

- The most effective teacher was the one whom Angela had had the opportunity to appoint. He was judged by her to be a very good teacher.
- The second new appointee was also considered by Angela to be a good teacher. The children made good progress in her care. Like all the staff though, she needed a good deal of support to develop her subject leader role.
- The third teacher's work was deemed satisfactory but the attendance was erratic. Angela felt that this teacher gave the minimum.
- One teacher's work was less satisfactory and following a confrontation about her subject leader role, behaviour management and her relationships with children, parents and staff she resigned and left at the spring half term. A series of supply teachers covered the class until eventually a more suitable long-term supply teacher was found.

The agency staff:

- As a result of monitoring the impact of their teaching and their relationships with children and parents, Angela found that three of the agency teachers were good teachers and she was keen to recruit them to the school staff.
- The fourth teacher was unsatisfactory and she left at the autumn half term. Angela felt cautious about making a hasty permanent appointment for the important post of nursery teacher. She appointed a replacement on a two and a half term temporary contract, which she would consider extending if all went well. This proved unsatisfactory and a series of supply teachers covered the class.
- Along with the events described in this brief summary, Angela had to deal with long-term sickness, three separate serious family matters for members of staff that required time away from school and, in the spring term, national strike action. There were also the more usual instances of sickness, lateness and the inherent difficulties of using a variety of supply staff.

During the 100 days, the school only had time to develop very simple strategies to manage the teaching situation. The school had not developed "simple, straightforward induction programmes... or lesson plans... with supply teachers in mind" (The Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools 2000/01). Longer-term temporary staff did fare better and the school was keen to recruit some of them to the permanent staff.

Angela knew that it was crucial to get effective teachers working in the school, and to ensure staffing continuity, but circumstances prevented this happening. Staffing problems were a major barrier to school improvement.

School governors

I only saw one governor in the school on any of my visit days. Angela felt that her key task of improving standards through good quality teaching was not made any easier by the attitude of one governor who was unwilling to support the recruitment of the good agency staff already working in the school. The governor said that by recruiting the agency staff it would prevent equality of opportunity for other candidates.

I began to notice that by the end of each of my visits Angela would have talked through her concerns about the staff, reviewed her actions to date and run through her proposed strategies with me. Often by the next visit she had already taken the next step. The process of talking her ideas through with her deputy, as well as the LEA adviser and me, gave her several opportunities to rehearse her plans.

The LEA played the major role in supporting Angela during the first 100 days of her headship. Angela found the frequency of my visits and the intense focus of our dialogue very useful.

Monitoring and evaluating

Most schools use the school improvement plan or OFSTED action plan to map out and monitor the work ahead. Angela and her staff had little ownership of the existing documentation. Angela said that, once she was in post, she became so caught up in the immediate day-to-day events that adhering to a rigorous, regular classroom-monitoring programme was proving difficult, although both she and the deputy had established a monitoring programme. She knew this was essential if she was going to make any impact on the teaching in the school. The LEA adviser also carried out classroom monitoring during her visits.

Angela became more confident after the first term and after her first HMI visit in December 2001. By January 2002, as she confronted each difficult and complex situation she encountered outcomes that had not been anticipated. On the one hand some of her staff grew more confident and teachers wanted to stay at the school and work with her. On the other hand unexpected additional dilemmas came to light.

The LEA adviser shared an example of such a dilemma with me. One teacher was held in very high regard by the parents. They thought she was "wonderful". The teaching had been given an unsatisfactory judgement following several lesson observations carried out by internal and external observers. Angela came to realise that what some of the

parents perceived as good teaching had little to do with knowledge, skills or understanding about pupil achievement and inclusiveness.

For Angela, the question was what to do with the outcome from the monitoring that she did manage. There was no culture of looking at issues, trying to understand them or approach to problem solving in place. It was very tiring and demanded a good deal of emotional intelligence on Angela's part.

As she was newly in post, she had not built up a record of wise decisions leading to positive outcomes for the school. There seemed to be no solution except to do one's best and weather each storm, knowing that things could get better. And if they did not, then they would get worse, and the process of trying to understand would begin again.

Initially, few issues could be dealt with easily. There was no culture of good staff relationships or an agreed process for handling difficult situations. Angela said she needed to respond to problems, develop an ethos of trust and fairness and create systems or procedures at the same time. This was particularly wearing and potentially dispiriting for her.

The sheer jumble and muddle of issues confronting Angela required more than an ad hoc response but could not wait for the full consultation process associated with school development planning. She needed an interim, basic action plan with a menu of priorities, many of which would be common to other schools in OFSTED categories, to plot a pathway through her particular muddle.

The judgement of progress

Angela's first HMI visit and the fourth since the school had become subject to special measures was due in December 2001. Two and half years had gone by since the original inspection had identified serious weaknesses. One and half years had gone by since the school had become subject to special measures. Angela had been in post for less than 100 days.

When I saw the focus for the visit and realised how much of Angela's time had been taken up with things that were fundamental to the school's systems of support but were not focussed on the classrooms and the children's learning, I asked her what she would provide as evidence of progress. She told me she had typed up copious pages of notes for the HMI later that evening.

We met again shortly before the HMI visit. Angela had also been supported by visits from the LEA adviser since her appointment. Action points were recorded after each visit. The school improvement plan had been on the To Do list since September 2001 and unfortunately was no nearer completion before the HMI visit.

The HMI findings reported that the school had made satisfactory progress. The report said:

This is a better finding than on any previous visit and it promises well for the future. The quality and quantity of children's work is improving generally... The

leadership and management of the school are in the capable hands of an experienced, substantive headteacher and fully staffed governing body. The deputy headteacher has grown in confidence and is working effectively in partnership with the new headteacher... The new headteacher has achieved a great deal since September. However, the hard work has not yet impacted sufficiently on the causes of special measures.

Areas where progress had been made were linked to teaching and the quality and quantity of children's work and improved presentation. Standards in lessons were found to be satisfactory and timetables were more balanced, offering a broader education. Teaching strengths included good behaviour management, positive relationships with the children, generally high expectations and some good differentiation.

Areas highlighted for further improvements were linked to the children's attainments. Teachers need more frequent monitoring with detailed feedback and clear targets for improvement. Teachers need to identify children's needs more precisely. Poor subject knowledge, unclear instructions and poor marking and feedback to the children were also aspects for further development. The key message for Angela was the need for a plan, a school improvement plan, to guide the work of the school and to increase the pace of the improvements.

The report, although encouraging, stressed the urgency for signs of improvement in standards. It gave some very clear guidelines on how to improve, for example marking. It emphasised the school's need to know its pupils even better and Angela began to look at other ways of supporting the teaching in the classroom.

During the spring term of 2001, Angela and her deputy completed the school improvement plan following an Away Day led by the link adviser and attended by all the staff, including support staff and nearly all the governors. This was a significant act of teamwork almost unknown in the recent history of the school. Angela achieved something which she did not recognise at the time – the first coming together of the school community. The LEA took a more proactive role in helping the school to identify the needs of the pupils for whom English was an additional language and Angela arranged a parents' day for the most highly represented language group, which was very well attended and supported. Some specific staff training provision was identified for supporting and teaching the lowest achieving groups of pupils.

All the teaching assistants were able to attend a range of training courses to upgrade their classroom skills. Angela identified the weaker members of the teaching assistant team and redefined their roles within the school. She began to look to recruit additional support.

During my final visit to the school, Angela showed me the growing collection of data about the pupils. She recognised that there was still a long way to go and moreover, that time was beginning to run out. The next HMI visit was planned for the beginning of the summer term followed by another in September 2002 when the fate of the school would most likely be decided. A decision would then be taken as to whether or not the school could come out of special measures, and whether or not the LEA would need to take any further action.

Findings

Immediate is not necessarily important

The complexity of the leadership role and the task with which Angela was immediately confronted risked driving her to focus so much on the immediate, and in particular the school environment, that she was disabled from looking at the big picture and asking herself, "What's this got to do with improving the children's learning and achievements?"

At Brightside a programme of major refurbishment commenced just prior to Angela's appointment. On taking up her new post she found she was spending a considerable amount of time in discussion with architects, builders, plumbers and the like. Managing this scale of refurbishment can prove frustrating and time consuming and can be daunting even in a well-managed, successful school. These were not tasks that should have taken up the new headteacher's time in a school such as Brightside however essential the improvements were.

One of the useful aspects of participating in the preparation towards assessment for the IIP standard is that it gets heads to think about and devise an audit trail so that aspects of the school's development can be tracked. Such a procedure would have helped Angela avoid the constant risk of always dealing with urgent but unimportant rather than the less urgent but important.

This very small-scale enquiry supports those who suggest that the prime role of the headteacher is to ensure high quality of teaching and learning. Distractions from that task serve to undermine the head's work and ultimately impacts on the children. The evidence of the study is that, when a headteacher is appointed to a failing school, it is essential that all who claim to support the head's work ensure that the head maintains a clear focus on teaching and learning.

Temporary measures designed to help can in fact hinder

The study suggests that temporary appointments by an LEA can exacerbate the situation for a failing school. Brightside had a long and protracted period of time before a substantive head was appointed. During that time there was a downward spiral of deterioration in staff morale, the school's reputation, and the school's capacity to improve.

After a school has received a very critical OFSTED report, an acting headteacher may be required. Even though the acting headteacher will have the full weight of the LEA behind him or her, they will, at the end of the specified period, leave the school, meaning further disruption. The clarity of brief that a temporary headteacher has is important. The brief provides the platform for the next incoming head. The degree of positive or negative impact of acting heads in failing schools is an area for further enquiry. Brightside did not benefit from effective interim measures before the substantive headteacher was appointed. The situation for the new headteacher then was even worse than that which existed at the time of the OFSTED report.

Get the right people on the bus

The most important resource in the school is the people who work there. The success of the school depends on what they do. In muddled schools, like Brightside, poor teaching standards in some classrooms can remain without attention unless they are given explicit focus. At Brightside a large amount of effort went into simply making sure there was someone in front of the class. Monitoring of teaching was given a surprisingly low priority. Angela did though use a range of strategies to enable and encourage people to do what was right for the pupils in the school, or to enable them to decide that they did not want to stay and work in a school with a culture of achievement. Headteachers need to pan for nuggets of gold to celebrate progress, especially where improving the performance of staff, including supply staff, is a major part of the task of school improvement. They may also though want to find ways of encouraging staff who are not comfortable in a climate of achievement to move on.

Look far ahead but take one step at a time

Alongside her prime task – to raise pupils' standards of achievement – Angela was faced with a multiplicity of immediate problems confronting Brightside, which were powerful diversions because they needed resolving immediately. She agreed that she was diverted from preparing a medium to long-term plan of action because updating the school improvement plan seemed daunting and time consuming. At an early stage of improvement, when the school still has very serious weaknesses a long-term school improvement plan can seem overly ambitious. But to improve there must be a vision. Producing an effective interim action plan to include the immediate problems, would provide a headteacher with the time and space to focus on developing the key systems and structures needed to frame the scaffold for the long-term challenging task.

Lean on others

Angela said that she found it useful to meet with me at frequent, if irregular intervals, and review the progress the school was making. My visits coupled with those of the LEA adviser proved instrumental in helping her maintain her focus. The expectation, when a new headteacher is appointed to lead a failing school, is that the school will become successful. The evidence from Brightside is that if there is sharply focussed support and training in place at an early stage and this is followed with the opportunity for the head to have frequent, planned visits to provide further help, advice and support for the school leadership team, it is more likely that issues can be addressed swiftly. It is important to give headteachers someone to lean on, so that they do not carry the burden alone. The LEA advisors, school governors, mentors, and consultant headteachers might each fulfil such a role.

Endnote

Obviously the story of Brightside does not finish with the end of my contact. During my last visit to the school, Angela showed me the growing collection of data about improving pupil achievement. She recognised that there was still a long way to go. The next HMI visit was planned for the beginning of the summer term followed by another in September 2002. A decision would then be taken as to whether or not the school could come out of special measures.

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