

# Leading Learning:

## Instructional leadership in infant schools

The headteachers in these infant schools demonstrate their commitment to learning for staff as well as pupils by promoting reflection, collaboration and leadership at all levels and by developing a range of teaching approaches

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## **Leading Learning:** Instructional leadership in infant schools

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 About the Study

The study sets out to add to the evidence base on how headteachers of infant schools use an instructional perspective to impact on classrooms. It aims to provide operational images of leadership in action. It is based on interviews with headteachers of infant schools that have been identified by OFSTED as being ‘particularly successful.’ The majority of the schools have also been awarded Beacon status.

The work of the headteachers of these very effective infant schools is presented using their own voices to explain the ways in which they work in classrooms and with staff to improve teaching and learning. The enquiry has led to a series of questions and answers, based on the case studies, which can be used in thinking about school improvement.

### 1.2 What is Instructional Leadership?

“Lack of explicit descriptions of instructional leadership (Foster 1986) make it difficult to assess the extent to which such leadership means the same thing to all those writing about it.” (Leithwood, K. et al 1999)

The term, which originates from the United States, refers broadly to a dimension of leadership in which school leaders are classroom-focused and are concerned with teaching, learning and pupil progress. Some useful definitions (NCSL 2002) focus the direction of this study:

- Focuses on improving schools (Southworth)
- Is a classroom focused leader? (Southworth)
- Reflects regularly on their own performance (Stoll)
- Emphasises skills and the conditions for their implementation (Hopkins and Brighouse)
- Emphasises teaching, learning and student performance (Hargreaves and Fink)

### 1.3 The Context

“The changes imposed upon the UK education system and indeed most other ‘developed’ educational systems have radically altered the role and responsibilities of the headteacher or principal. In particular, the devolution of responsibility for local management of schools in many systems has resulted in the headteacher or principal becoming a manager of systems and budgets as well as a leader of colleagues. Also the increasingly competitive environment in which schools operate has placed a much greater emphasis upon the need to raise standards and to improve the outcomes of schooling.” (Hopkins 2001)

In addition to the issues outlined by Hopkins, the many recent initiatives introduced by the Government, such as performance management and the implementation of the literacy and numeracy strategies, have been considered by some to be overly prescriptive and to inhibit professionalism. The study into instructional leadership considers how headteachers of very effective infant schools operate in and use this contextual framework to improve teaching and learning.

## 1.4 Research Questions

The study sets out to find answers to three key questions:

- How do headteachers of infant schools advance teaching and learning through their formal working systems?
- How do these headteachers promote teaching and learning through their day-to-day behaviours?
- How do these headteachers work with other leaders within the school to promote teaching and learning?

## 1.5 How to Use the Study

It is intended that the study be used by practitioners in their work towards school improvement:

- To reflect on practice
- To promote dialogue with colleagues
- To trial some of the ideas used by the heads of very effective infant schools.

A more detailed account of the methodology is presented at Appendix 1.

## 2. The Work of the Headteachers: Case Study Pictures

### 2.1 Lynda - “You have to find ways to improve things that are very good”

Lynda has been head at this small infant school for seven years. She was trained for the infant age range and has always worked in Key Stage 1, apart from a couple of years when she ran a nursery unit. Lynda considers that her impact as a leader has been through the promotion of reflection and evaluation:

“We’ve had ideas and tried them out and we’ve seen how they’ve worked. We have thought, what’s good about that? Let’s keep that because that was really good and it worked well or that wasn’t so good let’s not bother with that anymore.”

Lynda’s understanding of how young children learn centres on the importance of reading and thinking skills, because they enable ‘access to all other things’. She believes that by ‘supporting things that I think are important I’m thereby passing on messages which are being picked up by everybody else.’ Lynda is regularly involved in teaching reading. In doing this she believes that she is ‘actively promoting the drive towards improved reading’.

Lynda uses the expertise of others in a variety of ways to develop teaching and learning. For example, the deputy, who she describes as ‘very strong ... she plays a strong role in many ways,’ worked with a teaching assistant to extend the role of support staff in group reading. Lynda explained how the deputy ‘planned the aims and objectives for these group reading sessions and talked with her about them and helped her set it up.’ The assistant was then able to train the other support staff.

Lynda believes that 'the teaching of knowledge was fantastic but the opportunities for children to discover things were limited' when she began her headship. The development of a range of approaches, including experimentation, discovery and problem solving, to promote children's learning became a school priority and is now much more firmly embedded in the culture and ethos of the school.

Lynda considers that national initiatives to improve teaching and learning have supported the school's efforts to promote a variety of ways of learning:

"The numeracy strategy came along and was full of mental maths, the skills, the handling of numbers and making decisions about what kind of sum you need to do. We put together, from various sources, a problem solving booklet for the children work through."

She believes that embedding the idea review, 'of what I've learned', is significant for retaining learning. Lynda also considers that the 'brainstorming of ideas and then planning what I might do next, how did it go and what do I know now that I didn't know before' is an approach that can be used in all subjects.

Lynda has also worked with staff to introduce various projects to extend writing and maths skills for more able pupils. She describes how a project, which used ICT as a medium to extend writing skills, motivated the children.

The development of research skills has also been part of Lynda's drive to move the balance from the acquisition of knowledge to a more active approach to learning. A dinosaur theme, with children using internet sites and reference books, has been used to develop their skills of finding out information.

Lynda believes that the most significant thing she has done to improve teaching and learning is:

"Promoting the investigative skills approach across the curriculum and bringing that up to match the high standards in the knowledge-based teaching because it was out of balance."

## **2.2 Vicky - "In the classroom I am working the changes to practice"**

Vicky is nearing retirement after 14 years of headship at a small infant school. She was trained for the infant age range and still acknowledges the influence of her initial training tutor who 'made me have the highest of standards.' Vicky strives to pass on her high expectations to all at the school. She extends her understanding that young children learn through first-hand experience to her work with staff, saying that she never asks them to undertake anything she is not able to do herself.

Until recently Vicky taught for two days each week. She used this opportunity to impact on teaching and learning, for example, she was able to display her expectation that classrooms should be well organised, to help develop children's independence, to other staff.

Vicky has used recent funding initiatives to free herself from her part-time class teaching commitment. This has enabled her to drive improvements in teaching and learning across the school. For example Vicky models how she wants the teaching assistant to respond by sitting at the side of the group and talking very quietly to direct the children to the teacher. At lunchtime Vicky evaluates the children's progress with the teaching assistant and the class teacher.

"I would then be able to say but they were too confused, there were too many concepts. If we had done it this way they would have learnt just this part, but because they were expected to do this they got confused."

Vicky believes that this work impacts on teaching and learning by showing all staff involved what children's problems are and how they can assist them. It also helps her to support a teacher new to a year group by helping to target specific needs. Vicky considers this discussion to be a feature of the school with 'all the dialogue going on ... a lot of informal chat.'

Vicky is currently working with staff to develop enquiry skills in history and improve techniques in art. Subject co-ordinators are responsible for leading these developments, although Vicky organises time for them to carry out their duties and discusses any issues highlighted during lesson observations.

Vicky has set up a comprehensive monitoring cycle to ensure that school development priorities are successfully implemented. She likes to observe literacy and numeracy lessons by each class teacher twice a year. An observation schedule covering aspects such as objectives, activities, pace and differentiation, as well as strengths and areas for development, is used. Vicky also uses the classroom observations to help in her decisions about staff deployment. Subject co-ordinators use the same schedule for their lesson observations. After feedback to staff, co-ordinators talk with Vicky to discuss any issues and suggest action.

Vicky believes that target setting, within a framework of effective relationships, is the most significant thing she has implemented to improve teaching and learning. This seems to typify her commitment to challenging standards and aspiring to greater things as well as reflecting an infectious enthusiasm and energy. She says 'I feel as much enthusiasm now as when I started. I just feel I could start the job again!'

### **2.3 Beth - "Schools are learning communities for all of those involved."**

Beth is in her 12th year of headship at an inner city infant and nursery school. The school is considered to have a challenging context. For example, last year the staff included many who were trained overseas as well as temporary members, which put the school in a 'stop-gap' situation. Despite regular staff turnover, the school has recently been awarded Beacon status. Beth has worked in a variety of educational contexts including advisory work and supply teaching. Beth believes that schools are learning communities for all of those involved. She works extensively with parents, wanting to promote their learning and self-esteem so that they have the confidence and skills to support their children's learning, '... as the children get older they need their parents, especially their mother, to support them to go on wanting to learn.' This approach to the development of skills alongside growth in self-esteem and confidence are integral to Beth's work to develop teaching and learning.

Beth does not have a regular classroom teaching commitment but often teaches maths, perhaps using the lesson as an opportunity to extend children's learning by involving parents. For example she has invited parents in to sit with their children while she gives a demonstration lesson with the aim that the parents will be able to reinforce their children's learning at home. Beth has also worked with parents to make number games to develop their children's mathematical concepts in a numeracy course in the adult learning centre.

Beth is currently working with a new reception team to develop their confidence and skills. She describes the team as being 'keen to improve' and describes how 'you can feel a buzz with them, they're willing to work extremely hard.' Beth regularly visits the reception classes to observe what is happening:

"I do a lot of going in and out of the classrooms and then talking to them afterwards about how things are going. Then being positive about something that's going on and giving them lots of feedback on the good things that are happening and how well they're doing."

In this way Beth promotes staff confidence and reflective thinking.

Beth has recently been able to use funding to enable the deputy head, who 'has always set the standard ... she sets a wonderful example', to move out of a full-time classroom commitment to work with other staff. Beth and the deputy work together to look at teachers' short-term planning as a means of extending the use of reflection to develop teaching and learning. The new reception team's planning was used to consider whether staff thought the evaluation was effective and if it was informing to the teacher. As well as helping staff to reflect on and improve their practice Beth feels that this method of sharing evaluations helps to increase staff self esteem.

During classroom monitoring Beth initially looks at the implementation of the planning. She then looks at issues she has picked up when she is 'in and out' of the classrooms. Because Beth makes regular visits to the classrooms she is able to pick out individual areas for development with staff. Beth is also careful to highlight positives during her monitoring. For example she might praise an aspect of teaching she has observed in another lesson, perhaps literacy, in order to boost staff confidence. To follow up her monitoring Beth will arrange visits for staff members to observe colleagues modelling relevant approaches. She will also work with the deputy, discussing 'how can we change this?' and organise whole staff INSET sessions which include feedback from everyone. Beth might also do follow-up observations to assess 'how something has gone or what's gone well.' Beth is determined that her monitoring should 'change something that's not quite acceptable.'

Beth believes that supporting and building teams to manage the children's behaviour is the most significant thing she has done to improve teaching and learning at the school. This approach typifies Beth's belief that growth in staff self-esteem and confidence are inherent to the development of teaching and learning.

#### **2.4 Jasbir - "We have a particular way of doing everything ... and we all support new staff into doing it our way."**

Jasbir has been head at this small infant and nursery school for seven years. She stresses continuously the distinctive approaches that underpin all areas of the school's work, explaining that 'we have a particular way of doing everything and we all support new staff into doing it our way, which we do in every area of the curriculum.'

Jasbir teaches in the mixed age group classes for two sessions each week to encourage 'a structured approach to teaching'. She also works in classrooms to support or teach alongside staff, particularly if something new is being introduced or some special event is taking place. She may also work with a small group of children 'because I want to be involved.'

When a new teacher comes into the school Jasbir will ask an established member of staff to act as mentor, usually this is the deputy 'because she's so good' but it could be another member of staff, 'to give real support but also making sure that it's done the right way.' Jasbir considers that the ethos of the school is 'ever so supportive', for example staff 'go to each other's classrooms a lot and we often, for planning, will say oh, we'll meet in Pam's class today.'

Jasbir explains that staff never stop talking about their work 'because that is the culture in school ... they always want it to be better, they're never satisfied, they're always looking for a way of improving it.' Jasbir describes 'persistence and coming back to things and it's never finished until it's finished right' as a feature of the school and explains that:

"It works in everything that the children do ... so children will paint perhaps for half a morning one day and not for a few days and the next time its their turn to paint they'll come back to it and work on it and work on it and work on it until it is finished."

Jasbir feels that 'the only reason we're here and the only priority, the only thing that matters to me is what children experience in the classroom.' She uses all her energy and ideas, therefore, to 'make that experience as effective and productive as possible.' She believes that the most significant thing she has done in the school to improve teaching and learning has been the development of the curriculum planning system:

"Putting the structure in to it, making sure the learning objectives are really clear so that teachers know exactly what they're doing in every area every half-term, it saves teacher time ... It's given us a really sound structure to the teaching and learning."

## **2.5 Heather - "Every single member of staff has a very valuable role to play and everybody impacts on the children"**

Heather has been in this, her second headship, at a small market town infant school for four years. She trained first as a NNEB and then as a teacher for nursery and infant aged children. Heather has also set up and run a playgroup as well as teaching within Key Stage 1.

Heather believes that:

"Every single member of staff has a very valuable role to play and everybody impacts on the children. The whole atmosphere and ethos of the school is learning and growing together."

Heather considers that adults and children are learning partners with the adults demonstrating that learning is 'an exciting journey'. Indeed, valuing the work of the whole school team seems to underpin Heather's approach to teaching and learning.

Heather teaches for three days every week. She recognises the importance of her teaching commitment in her approach to leadership when she says 'a great part of making it a team that pulls together is the fact that it is a teaching headship.' Heather believes that she 'would not want to be a head that did not teach' and explains that staff 'see you with your sleeves rolled up, so to speak, you're in the hurly burly of every day, you're meeting parents, children, you're dealing with all the little incidents ... you're not putting yourself above any of those things.'

Heather uses her classroom practice to model her expectations to other staff because 'I know that I have an influence in that way.' Although Heather recognises the benefits of using her classroom practice to demonstrate her preferred ways of working, she recognises that hers is not necessarily the only way. She explains that 'I will never hold my model up as the one way of doing things' and instead talks about using her classroom practice to engender a discussion. Heather considers that informal discussion as a basis for reflection is 'something that permeates the whole place', for example, asking colleagues for advice 'what do you think the best way of doing this is?'

Heather is currently using her work with her classroom assistant to develop the role of support staff across the school. Together they have put together a planning sheet that can be used by all teachers and their classroom assistants. The sheet highlights the lesson's learning objective and an evaluation to inform future planning. Heather has also set up a classroom assistants' group and is making some time available to them for a fortnightly meeting. The group will be used initially to feedback on courses and then it is hoped that it will contribute to teaching staff meetings. It is typical of Heather that she wants to show non-teaching staff that their contribution to teaching and learning is valued.

Heather is also interested in promoting inquiry methods of learning and has built the focus of her performance management targets into the development of the school's wildlife garden. The inquiry approach is developed through exploration of the garden's layout, observation of the new pond liner and comparisons with the original smaller pond.



Heather uses a range of approaches to monitor teaching and learning through classroom observations. She may, for example, focus on the children's learning 'to see how the children approach tasks, how they apply themselves, (their) concentration span' and at the same time consider how the teaching is impacting on these areas. Heather might also look specifically at the teaching 'how the teacher engages with the pupil, expectations, whether children have a clear idea of what they are doing and what they are going onto next?' When she gives feedback Heather likes to enthuse and celebrate the successes of the lesson. If she has any concerns she finds it most effective to 'tease that out of the people themselves ... you have to support people ... they have to know that you're there for them.'

Heather considers that the most significant thing she has done to improve teaching and learning is to value the whole school community 'I think it's valuing people, valuing the children, valuing the parents, valuing the staff. I don't think you can do enough of it.'

## **2.6 Sally - "The most important thing is that teaching and learning come first."**

Sally is in her second year of headship at an average-sized infant and nursery school. She trained for the infant age range and has always taught in Key Stage 1. Sally's leadership is characterised by a focus of 'striving to improve' centring on the individual needs of staff and children. Sally's belief that 'the most important thing is that teaching and learning come first' is paramount to her work.

Sally has done a lot of teaching since she's been at the school. 'You've got to have credibility as a headteacher... I shouldn't ask anybody to do anything if I'm not prepared to do it myself.' She says:

"I don't know how you can support your staff if you don't know what sort of children they've got in their class. We've got some very demanding children in school at the moment and I need to know about those children so that I can give staff support."

Sally spends a lot of time in the classrooms and knows all the children in the main school, as well as the very able and the poorer children in the nursery. Sally said 'I would like to think that I could go into any class ... and know where each child would be in that class.'

Sally has set up a system of peer mentoring where teachers work with partners from opposite key stages:

"... so that people get to see what is going on elsewhere and to share expertise. I'm a great believer that what goes on in nursery is so important that we should all be seeing what they're doing."

The peer-mentoring scheme involves partners watching each other teach, as well as considering how successfully items from whole school training are being implemented. Sally describes the arrangement as being informal but with carefully selected pairings, with the more confident able teachers working together because 'I didn't want it to be a case of one person presuming the other was going to be able to offer everything.' Sally arranges time for the peer mentor system to be built into the school programme. Staff work in classrooms during morning sessions with opportunities for follow up discussion at lunchtime.

Sally's commitment to the development of teaching approaches to promote a range of learning opportunities has led to the consideration of a variety of teaching strategies, including accelerated learning methods. Sally hopes that this approach will promote 'vibrancy, enthusiasm and enjoyment' in the children's learning, helping children to understand how they learn. The children will then be able to say, for example, 'I access information best by reading a book or I access it best by watching the television'. Sally wants the children to be broad rather than narrow-minded.

Sally has set up an extensive programme of classroom observations. She is keen to observe how the accelerated learning approaches are being implemented 'unless I can go into the classrooms to see what people are doing I'm not going to see if any of this is actually happening.'

Sally thinks the most significant thing she has done to improve teaching and learning is responding to the needs of individuals:

"I think the key to everything is understanding the school in which you work, understanding the staff that you work with, empathising and being aware of the needs of those individuals and that those needs change and that you can't expect the same things from everybody all of the time, so its getting that balance...if you don't present it to people in the right way it isn't effective."

## **2.7 Jan - "A commitment to learning underpins my approach to headship."**

Jan has been head of this large infant and nursery school for 12 years. She trained for the infant age range and has worked in a variety of infant and primary schools. Jan is quick to acknowledge the strengths of her staff, saying 'we've got a good team, we have got some really good teachers.' Jan says that people should 'go for it', should try things and 'you've got to make mistakes, it's the only way you learn... it's not the end of the world if it doesn't work.'

Jan's understanding that young children learn through active experience, using their initiative rather than being over directed, is reflected in her approach to headship. Jan wants staff to work co-operatively and to use their initiative to interpret national requirements for their own context.

Jan believes that she has become more distant from teaching and learning as the school has grown, but she does occasional supply cover, which provides her with an opportunity to observe issues related to teaching and learning in the school. Jan regrets the change in her role but has structured her staff so that the deputy and the assistant head have no regular class teaching responsibility and are able to work directly with staff and pupils in classrooms. Jan talks regularly with her deputy. They talk together all the time to evaluate, plan and direct the work of the school. The deputy carries out a range of activities that enable her to take a significant lead in working with staff to improve teaching and learning. For example, she worked on an action research project to improve standards in literacy with the special needs support teacher.

Jan considers the development of the whole child to be important and has worked with the deputy to promote a range of teaching and learning approaches, which encourage children to use their initiative and be self-reliant in the classroom.

Jan monitors classroom practice in literacy and numeracy. The observations generally have a focus and a criteria sheet, which teachers are familiar with, is used. Jan gives feedback to teachers highlighting strong points of the lesson and offering reassurance, as well as any suggestions for improvement. Jan also talks casually with staff at lunchtime and in classrooms.

Jan believes that the most significant thing she has done to improve teaching and learning is to develop a collaborative working culture. She has successfully used the leadership group as a model to promote collaborative working across the range of school teams, in driving whole school decision making as well as in smaller groups such as the early years team and special needs department. Jan says 'I think people like working together. It gives them more confidence and, of course, it cuts down on the work.' This seems to reflect Jan's understanding that both children and staff learn by active experience and by being co-operative as a basis for school improvement.

## 2.8 Judy - "I'm able to use the idea of gradually turning the wheel little by little to notch up my expectations"

Judy has been head at this small infant and nursery school for four years. She was trained for the primary age-range although her teaching experience has been principally in the infant age range. Judy has a special interest in working with parents. Judy continuously strives for excellence, explaining:

"I do quite a lot of reflection and don't just accept. If I do accept, I choose to accept, so at times I will choose to ignore things because I don't want to overwhelm people."

Judy believes that her understanding of how children learn underpins her approach to headship:

"As a teacher I was always looking for the next step for the child within their learning ... I'm able to use the idea of gradually turning the wheel little by little to notch up my expectations, just as you do when you're teaching a class."

This approach is reflected in Judy's work to improve teaching and learning.

Judy no longer considers a regular teaching commitment to be a priority. She does, however, work in classrooms to release staff for 'something specific'. Judy believes in 'leadership by doing. I'll do anything ... that anyone else will do' and considers it important that 'the staff see that I work hard.'

One of Judy's first tasks was to re-organise classrooms so that parallel classes in each age range were together. This ensured that teaching staff were not in isolation. Judy then planned time into the staff meeting schedule so that staff could plan together.

Judy considers that:

"One of the best, most effective ways for staff to develop is actually to go and see somebody else teaching, I think you learn more through that than going on a course. So we've tried to do that for all of the staff not just within this school but going outside school ... all staff went to see other leading maths teachers."

Judy believes that this enables staff to see alternative approaches, resources and classroom layouts and 'gives them time to think about their own practice ... it's quality time, it's during the day, they've got that time to go in.'

Judy has worked with staff to develop a range of approaches to support teaching and learning and to raise achievement. As with other aspects of her leadership she has paced these developments so as not to overwhelm staff. Judy began by asking staff to consider the value of worksheets 'are there other ways we can let children record their work which show higher level thinking skills than just filling in worksheets?' She encouraged staff to think about the use of role-play and drama in history and RE. Judy found the introduction of the literacy and numeracy strategies to be useful as they 'have provided a lot of training for staff on whole-class interactive teaching and learning.'

Judy has also worked with staff to extend opportunities for children to learn collaboratively:

"We feel that children, in the younger stage, find group work very hard so we try to do quite a lot where they're working just with one other child as the first step. If they're in a play situation in the nursery there might be five of them using the building blocks to build a train but within the more formal classroom teaching and learning environment we'll structure it so that they'll do quite a bit of work just with one partner, and that's where we got our 'carpet buddies.' Also at the tables they'll work with their partner at the table but then, in year 2, they'll do group work as a whole group."

Judy feels that this collaborative approach to learning:

“...focuses on the processes, enabling children to articulate, to say, for example, ‘well I think we should be doing this’ or ‘look you can do it this way’ or ‘if you put this and this together you can do that.’”

Judy believes that the most significant things she has done to improve teaching and learning have been to involve parents in their children’s learning, to play to people’s strengths and to choose not to do certain things. She seems to have successfully used her notion of ‘turning the wheel little by little to notch up my expectations’ to improve teaching and learning.

### 3. Practical Questions ... and Answers

#### 3.1 The Impact of Headteachers in a Teaching Role

Question: I have a full time teaching commitment. How can I promote teaching and learning when I am in the classroom every day?

Answer: Vicky uses her classroom practice to model expectations to staff but has also been able to use her small school funding to free herself from her full-time teaching commitment. You might want to consider using your support fund to free yourself to provide time for monitoring too, but you could also consider Beth’s idea of using the funding to free other teachers to observe or work alongside staff in other classrooms. Resnick et al (2001), in their US perspective, do not consider a classroom commitment to be a barrier to the provision of instructional leadership as non class-based school leaders become ‘more distant over time from questions of instruction and learning’, a view which is reinforced by Jan. In fact, Vicky considers that her classroom practice is fundamental to her work in promoting teaching and learning, as staff know that she is able to ‘work the changes’.

Question: I teach regularly so as to maintain credibility as a practitioner with staff. How can I use my classroom work to have more impact on improvements in teaching and learning?

Answer: All of the headteachers in the study use their teaching as part of their work to promote teaching and learning. Sally and Judy, for example, consider that credibility is an important element of their instructional work. Using practice to support development initiatives is also considered to be important, for example, Jasbir’s involvement in the teaching of spelling and Beth’s work to promote parental learning and self-esteem. While Heather recognises the benefits of using her classroom practice to demonstrate her preferred ways of working, none of the heads in the study have considered using their classroom work to model good teaching.

Blasé and Blasé (1998), in their USA study into teacher perspectives of the characteristics of instructional supervisors, found that ‘powerful effects on teachers’ thinking and behaviour resulted from principals modelling good teaching.’ The authors give an example in which a teacher developed her practice after watching her principal teach:

“Now when I create lesson plans, I think in terms of how to make a concept understandable. I understand that I should present material in digestible parts. I also tend not to get annoyed if a student misses something, instead I redirect my method of instruction.”

You may find it useful to use your classroom work to model good teaching as a means of increasing your impact on improvements in teaching and learning.

### 3.2 The Impact of Using the Expertise of Others

Question: How can I develop the role of my deputy as an instructional leader?

Answer: Many of the heads in this study use their deputies as instructional leaders to develop teaching and learning. Beth and Jasbir, for example, describe how their deputies model highly effective teaching. Beth explains that her deputy 'has always set the standard, she sets a wonderful example' and describes how she gives practical ideas and works with the new teachers to encourage creative rather than formal approaches to teaching. Similarly Jasbir describes her deputy as 'a brilliant teacher' whose 'biggest strength in the school is as a leading teacher' and uses her as a mentor who offers 'quiet words of support and advice.'

Other heads seem to use their deputies to develop policy and practice. Lynda, for example, uses her deputy to enhance the role of the classroom assistant through the development of planned activities to support literacy and numeracy. This use of the deputy seems to concur with the views of Southworth (1998) who believes that deputies:

"Should be encouraged to draw upon their teaching craft knowledge and expertise to lead the school's efforts to improve the quality of teaching."

Question: My teachers and classroom assistants have much expertise, how can I use them as instructional leaders to improve teaching and learning?

Answer: The concept of instructional leadership often highlights the importance of the principal in exerting an influence, which is underpinned by expert knowledge and positional power. The work of the headteachers of very effective infant schools in this study seems to extend the concept to include a range of staff in an instructional role. Jasbir and Lynda, for example, use the expert knowledge of their class teachers to improve teaching and learning by taking on a mentoring role, a role that might be considered to belong to the head of a school. Jasbir also uses the expertise of other staff to introduce new teachers to the school's way of working, for example in dance. Heather and Lynda use their teaching assistants to lead developments, Heather in an initiative to develop joint planning between teaching and support staff and Lynda by using her classroom assistant to train other support staff.

These references to the use of staff working as leaders at different levels across the school to develop teaching and learning are in line with a construct of instructional leadership presented by Leithwood et al (1999). The authors note the work of Kleine-Kracht, who develops the concept into 'direct' and 'indirect' instructional leadership, believing that principals are not able to meet a school's needs alone and Davidson, who believes in the value of teachers working as instructional leaders. The notion is developed further by Glickman, as highlighted by Blasé and Blasé (1998), who described the principal of a successful school as 'the co-ordinator of teachers as instructional leaders.'

Question: My teachers enjoy planning with their year group partners. How can I enhance this way of working to further improve teaching and learning?

Answer: Many of the headteachers in the study describe how staff work together to complete their planning and sometimes, evaluations. Lynda, for example, describes how teachers plan as year group partners and in small groups, as well as a whole staff for subject development. Judy develops this idea further by building time into the staff meeting schedule so that staff can plan together, believing that staff find this method supportive. Beth works to build the new reception teachers into a strong team. She explains:

"I encourage them together to evaluate what they've done and what's not gone right, to work with their colleagues, or myself, to say how could it be improved?"

Blasé and Blasé (1998) describe how:

“Sustained improvement in teaching often hinges on the development of teachers as learners who collaborate with one another to study teaching and its effects.”

The authors found that good principals use a variety of strategies, including consistent modelling of a teamwork philosophy to encourage collaboration. It is interesting to note that Jan, one of the headteachers in this study, practises this ideal. She considers that the most significant thing she has done to improve teaching and learning is to develop a collaborative working culture. She has successfully used the leadership group as a model to promote collaborative working across the range of school teams, for example, in driving whole school decision making as well as in smaller groups such as the early years team and special needs department. Jan says, ‘I think people like working together. It gives them more confidence and, of course, it cuts down on the work.’

Question: How useful is it for staff to visit other classrooms and schools to observe colleagues teach?

Answer: Many of the heads in the study acknowledge the importance of staff visiting other classrooms as a strategy to improve teaching and learning. Jasbir, for example, describes how ‘staff go to each others’ classrooms a lot and we often, for planning, will say oh, we’ll meet in Pam’s class today.’ Heather would like to make classroom observations by peers a regular part of the cycle and Lynda acknowledges, ‘We’ve been quite poor about getting out of our own classrooms and into other people’s classrooms.’ The Blasé and Blasé study (1998) found that good principals recommend visiting as an element of coaching to promote teacher development. Encouraging teachers to model for each other was found to be useful both in terms of improving teaching and motivating and recognising outstandingly good teachers. Indeed Judy considers that:

“One of the best, most effective ways for staff to develop is actually to go and see somebody else teaching ... I think you learn more through that than going on a course.”

Judy has arranged for staff to visit other schools ‘all staff went to see other leading maths teachers.’ Judy believes that this enables staff to see alternative approaches, resources and classroom layouts and ‘gives them time to think about their own practice. It’s quality time, it’s during the day, they’ve got that time to go in.’ She recommends that staff always come away with an idea to adapt and try out but also to look for something that they or their school do better. Similarly, Blasé and Blasé (1998) found that observing in other schools had positive impact on teachers’ self-esteem and risk taking, as well as promoting reflection and ‘reflectively informed behaviour in the classroom’.

Question: How can I develop the collaborative planning approach used in my school to include coaching?

Answer: Sally has developed a system of peer mentoring whereby teachers work with partners from opposite key stages to develop teaching and learning. Her peer-mentoring scheme involves partners watching each other teach, as well as considering how successfully items from whole school training are being implemented. Sally says staff might say something like ‘oh I really like the way you did that, or have you thought about doing ...?’ Sally arranges time for the peer mentoring, which she describes as an informal arrangement, to be built into the school programme. Staff work in classrooms during morning sessions and have opportunities for follow-up discussion at lunchtime. Sally’s system of peer mentoring is in-line with a notion of coaching described by Brighouse and Woods (1999) as being ‘beyond teacher talk and the sharing of ideas to the specific enhancement of skills.’ The system could be developed through visits to other classrooms and schools or extended into a useful framework to promote staff development. Such a framework might be built around the activities of a sports coach, as outlined by West-Burnham and O’Sullivan (1998).

The authors list these coaching activities as:

- Observing performance
- Analysing that performance
- Measuring performance against standards
- Identifying remedial and/or reinforcing strategies
- Evaluating those strategies against changes in performance
- Consolidating improvements

Blasé and Blasé (1998) share insights from research by Joyce and Showers into the impact of coaching on school development.

“Classroom implementation of the training design was far more effective if the training included coaching from a peer at the classroom level and if it occurred after presentation of theory, demonstration, and practice of a skill.”

### 3.3 The Impact of Developing Teaching Approaches and the Curriculum

Question: I am concerned that the approaches outlined in the literacy and numeracy strategies are very prescriptive and that we may be limiting rather than extending the children’s learning by following the recommendations.

Answer: All of the heads in the study are actively involved in promoting teaching and learning as part of the national drive to raise standards in literacy and numeracy. Sally, for example, has worked with staff to build a jungle area as a stimulus for creative writing. Two of the heads, however, have found that the approaches highlighted in the literacy and numeracy strategies are particularly useful in their work to develop a range of teaching and learning styles. Judy has found that the emphasis on interactive teaching and learning resources, such as white boards and number and letter fans, has contributed to the development of higher order thinking skills and Lynda appreciates the links with the development of problem solving:

“The numeracy strategy came along and supported that because it was full of mental maths, the skills, the handling of numbers and making decisions about what kind of sum you need to do. We put together, from various sources, a problem solving booklet that the children work through.”

Lynda also welcomes the approaches of ‘children remembering, identifying what they’ve learned for themselves’ in the current initiative to improve early literacy skills for children in year 1. She believes that embedding the idea of ‘what I’ve learned’ is significant for retaining learning. Lynda also considers that the ‘brainstorming of ideas and then planning what I might do next, how did it go and what do I know now that I didn’t know before?’ is an approach that can be used in all subjects. It seems that the ideas expressed here by Judy and Lynda support Hopkins’s view (2001):

“To ensure maximum impact on learning, any specific teaching strategy needs to be fully integrated within a curriculum. Too often ‘thinking skills’ or ‘study strategies’ are presented in isolation which results in difficulties with transferring the strategy to real settings.”

Question: I read that 'sound education requires a combination of personal, social and academic learning by pupils'. How can I develop teaching approaches to promote these elements of learning?

Answer: Most of the heads in the study have begun to think about the development of teaching approaches to promote children's learning. Vicky, for example, is currently working with staff to develop enquiry skills in history, while Jan is promoting an active learning approach. Lynda believes that the most significant thing she has done to improve teaching and learning is to promote investigative skills, for example through research and problem solving, across the curriculum. Other heads in the study are considering a range of approaches to meet different learning needs. Judy, for example, is considering the social element of learning in her drive to extend opportunities for children to learn collaboratively, as well as academic learning through the promotion of higher level thinking skills. Heather is considering the importance of emotional well being to children's learning as well as promoting enquiry approaches.

Sally, however, is committed to the development of teaching approaches to support individual learning styles and is developing the school's work with accelerated learning strategies to help children understand how best they learn. Sally wants children to be able to say, for instance, 'I access information best by reading a book' or 'I access it best by watching the television.' Sally hopes that by developing the children's understanding of their own learning styles the school will be able to 'switch on more' of those children who are 'switched off a lot of the time'. As a development of this thinking, Blasé and Blasé (1998) believe that teachers should collect information:

“... about students' cognitive development, social history, personality and learning orientations. Then drawing on their repertoire of teaching models, teachers can help students increase their learning aptitude.”

The authors are referring to the four families of teaching models (information-processing models, social models, personal models and behavioural systems models), identified and discussed with reference to the types of learning promoted and how people learn, by Joyce and Calhoun.

Question: Should I be developing collaborative learning as part of the school's work to raise achievement?

Answer: Joyce, Calhoun and Hopkins (1997) highlight the importance of the social elements of learning. The authors believe that:

“The social family of models help students learn how to sharpen their own cognition through interactions with others, how to work productively with individuals who represent a range of personalities, and how to work as a member of a group.”

Two of the heads interviewed in the study spoke of their work to develop collaborative learning. Jan, for instance, uses circle time activities, followed up by discussions in which the children offer ideas and support the rest of the group, as a basis for the development of self-esteem. Judy has worked with staff to extend opportunities for children to learn collaboratively and has developed an approach that is 'quite structured.'

“We feel that children, in the younger stage, find group work very hard, and often when people are saying it's group work actually it's not, it's individuals at a table, it's not true group work.”



Judy is interested in developing play activities in the foundation stage, before moving to partner work in year 1. In year 2 the children will work as part of a group, for example, in a maths challenge where the children work together to compile collections of numerals using a given set of digits. Judy feels that this collaborative approach to learning:

“... focuses on the processes enabling children to articulate, to say for example, ‘well I think we should be doing this’ or ‘look you can do it this way’ or ‘if you put this and this together you can do that.’”

Judy’s thinking is in line with Joyce and colleagues (1997) who explain:

“In terms of cognitive and academic growth the (social) models help students use the perspectives of other persons, both individual and group, to clarify and expand their own thinking and conceptualisation of ideas.”

Question: Should I be developing inquiry methods of learning?

Answer: Hopkins (2001) believes that:

“The most effective curricular and teaching patterns induce students to construct knowledge – to inquire into subject areas intensively. The result is to increase student capacity to learn and work smarter.”

Certainly, three of the headteachers in the study agree with Hopkins on the importance of promoting inquiry methods of learning. Heather, for instance, is developing this approach through the exploration of the layout of the school’s wildlife garden, observation of the new pond and comparisons with the original smaller pond, while Vicky is working with staff to develop inquiry skills in history. The development of research skills is part of Lynda’s drive to move the balance from the acquisition of knowledge to a more active approach to learning. A dinosaur theme, with children using internet sites and reference books, has been used successfully to develop the children’s skills in finding out information. Lynda is also buying sets of history books to further develop this approach to learning. In terms of the families of teaching models, which can also be considered as models of learning, inquiry methods link with the information processing models which ‘emphasise ways of enhancing the human being’s innate drive to make sense of the world.’ (Joyce, Calhoun and Hopkins 1997)

### **3.4 The Impact of Classroom Observations**

Question: I like to make regular, informal visits to classrooms to observe how the school is operating. Are these types of visits useful in terms of improving teaching and learning?

Answer: Beth and Jasbir both describe how their informal visits to classrooms contribute to their work to improve teaching and learning. Beth, for example, explains how she looks at issues she has picked up when she is ‘in and out of the classrooms’. Similarly, Jasbir describes how she is ‘in and out (of classrooms) all the time’, which enables her to have ‘total faith’ in her staff because she knows ‘enough about what they do and how they do it.’ Sheppard found this ‘high visibility’ element of leadership, as reported by Blasé and Blasé (1998), to be one of the most influential instructional leadership behaviours in elementary schools. Blasé and Blasé also noted, however, a negative impact when principals interrupted lessons, leading to feelings of frustration and resentment by teachers. You must, therefore, consider if your visits have a positive or negative influence on teaching and learning and focus on using them to increase staff motivation, perhaps by using them to show your accessibility and willingness to provide support.

Question: I'm concerned that I will intimidate teachers by offering suggestions on how to improve their practice. Is suggestion a useful response to classroom observation?

Answer: Blasé and Blasé (1998) found that:

“Making suggestions, pro-actively giving advice for the improvement of instruction, was one central and powerful element of principals' verbal interactions with teachers.”

Indeed, offering suggestions is an approach used by Vicky, who suggested that a teaching assistant could be used to target the needs of a particular group, as well as Jan, who also offers suggestions for improvement during her response to classroom observations. Lynda, whose work seems to be characterised by the notion that 'you have to find ways to improve things that are very good' admits to an uncertainty about giving suggestions, explaining that 'sometimes I feel insecure in whether I will be able to see things to make it better.' Lynda could, perhaps, increase her knowledge of teaching methods, skills and repertoires by, for example, studying the families of models of teaching (Joyce, Calhoun and Hopkins 1997) or by looking into accelerated and other learning strategies to enable her to make suggestions. Lynda could also consider developing further her reinforcement of elements of good teaching and use of praise by encouraging teachers to reflect on their practice, by asking themselves 'what do you think you could have done better?' Blasé and Blasé (1998) describe how one teacher found that this approach 'keeps me from being complacent with my planning from year to year. It keeps me thinking' and how another teacher finds that 'praise motivates me to think of new ideas.' In this way Lynda would be able to support teachers in making their own suggestions for improvement.

Question: Is there a simple format that I could use to promote teacher reflection during feedback to lesson observations?

Answer: All of the heads in the study spoke of feedback to lesson observations, and many of them described how they used suggestion and praise in their follow-up discussion with staff. None of the heads, however, appeared to use a structured framework of questioning to develop reflection as a basis for improvements in teaching and learning. Blasé and Blasé (1998) offer such a format, suggesting the use of the following questions:

- What did you plan to do in the lesson?
- Why did you approach it that way?
- What happened during the lesson?
- What does that mean to you?
- How might you do things differently?

You might find that the format is a useful structure for the development of reflective thinking.

#### 4. Summary of Findings

The study considers how headteachers of very effective infant schools use an instructional perspective in their practice, focusing on the strategies they use to impact on classrooms. Whilst taking into account the unique qualities of schools and the backgrounds, values and beliefs of their leaders, the study highlights generic aspects of practice that are used to improve teaching and learning.

## 4.1 Credibility

“Those who enter the administrative track, typically by first becoming assistant principals, become more and more distant over time from questions of instruction and learning.” (Resnick, Glennan and Lesgold 2001)

All of the headteachers in the study consider that credibility as a classroom teacher is fundamental to their work to improve teaching and learning. Vicky, for example, is in the classroom ‘working the changes’ to practice while Heather believes that ‘a great part of making it a team that pulls together is the fact that it is a teaching headship.’ Heather believes that she ‘would not want to be a head that did not teach’ and explains that:

“Staff see you with your sleeves rolled up, so to speak, you’re in the hurly burly of every day, you’re meeting parents, children, you’re dealing with all the little incidents ... you’re not putting yourself above any of those things.”

Similarly, Sally explains how ‘you’ve got to have credibility as a headteacher, I shouldn’t ask anybody to do anything if I’m not prepared to do it myself.’ In line with Resnick and colleagues, Jan, head of a large infant and nursery school, considers that she has become ‘more distant from teaching and learning as the school has grown.’

## 4.2 Reflection

“Reflective practice is founded on the assumption that increased awareness of one’s professional performance can result in considerable improvements of performance. Specifically, reflection on teaching has been advocated by many as a means to question teaching/learning events in order to bring one’s teaching actions to a conscious level, to interpret the consequences of one’s actions, and to conceptualise alternative teaching approaches.”  
(Blasé and Blasé 1998)

The need to reflect as a basis for improvement in practice is promoted by all of the heads in the study. It is seen to be an essential element of professional learning at an individual as well as a whole school level. Vicky, one of the heads in the study, used a reflective approach to support a new staff member who was experiencing problems, while Judy explained how she ‘does quite a lot of reflection’ in her drive for excellence. Heather, another of the heads interviewed, described reflection as ‘something that permeates the whole place’ through informal discussion and by asking colleagues for advice. Another of the heads in the study, Beth, describes how she develops reflective thinking as a basis for improvements to teaching and learning in her work with a new reception team.

“I encourage them together to evaluate what they’ve done and what’s not gone right, to work with their colleagues, or myself to say ‘how could that be improved?’”

## 4.3 Collaboration

“Studies of innovation show that sustained improvement in teaching often hinges on the development of ‘teachers as learners’ who collaborate with one another to study teaching and its effects.” (Blasé and Blasé 1998)

All of the heads in the study promote collaboration as a basis for school improvement. Lynda, for example, described how teachers plan as year group partners and in small groups, as well as a whole staff for subject development. Judy develops the idea further by building time for collaborative planning into the staff meeting. Sally has developed the school's collaborative approach to improvement to include a peer-mentoring system whereby teachers work with partners from opposite key stages 'so that people get to see what is going on elsewhere and to share expertise.' The scheme is in-line with a notion of coaching described by Brighthouse and Woods (1999) as being 'beyond teacher talk and the sharing of ideas to the specific enhancement of skills.'

Blasé and Blasé note that good principals use a variety of strategies, including consistent modelling of a teamwork philosophy to encourage collaboration. Indeed, Jan, one of the headteachers in the study, practises this ideal. She considers that the most significant thing she has done to improve teaching and learning is to develop a collaborative working culture. She has successfully used the leadership group as a model to promote collaborative working across the range of school teams, for example in driving whole school decision making, as well as in smaller groups such as the early years team and special needs department. Jan says 'I think people like working together. It gives them more confidence and, of course, it cuts down on the work.'

#### 4.4 Dialogue

"We know that the kind of social interaction necessary for teacher learning and growth can be promoted, in part, by instructional leaders who value dialogue that encourages teachers to become aware of and critically reflect on their learning and professional practice." (Blasé and Blasé 1998)

Many of the heads in the study recognise and promote, by taking part in, professional dialogue as a means of impacting on classrooms to improve teaching and learning. Vicky, for example, considers discussion to be a feature of the school with 'all the dialogue going on ... a lot of informal chat' and Jasbir explains that staff never stop talking about their work 'because that is the culture in school, they always want it to be better, they're never satisfied, they're always looking for a way of improving it.' Similarly, Lynda acknowledges that 'we talk so widely amongst ourselves we do know a lot about what's going on' and Heather considers that informal discussion, as a basis for reflection, is 'something that permeates the whole place.' Additionally, Blasé and Blasé (1998) believe that professional dialogue during feedback appears to enhance 'teacher reflection about teaching methods and expected student outcomes' as well as informing 'teachers' classroom behaviour.'

#### 4.5 Leadership at all levels

"The principal of a successful school is not the instructional leader but the co-ordinator of teachers as instructional leaders." (Blasé and Blasé 1998 quoting Glickman, 1991)

All of the headteachers involved in the study use the expertise of staff in a variety of ways to improve teaching and learning. Beth and Jasbir, for example, describe how their deputies model highly effective teaching. Other heads use their deputies to develop policy and practice. Judy uses her deputy to carry out classroom observations, which include feedback to staff, as well as working with her to develop the effectiveness of aspects of teaching and learning such as classroom groupings or behaviour management.

Other headteachers use teachers and classroom assistants to develop teaching and learning across the school. Jasbir and Lynda use the expert knowledge of their class teachers to improve teaching and learning by taking on a mentoring role. Jasbir also uses the expertise of other staff to introduce new teachers to the school's way of working. In addition, Heather and Lynda use their teaching assistants to lead developments, Heather in an initiative to develop joint planning between teaching and support staff and Lynda by using her classroom assistant to train other support staff.

## 4.6 A Range of Approaches to Teaching and Learning

“We have found models of teaching in abundance. There are simple procedures that students can easily respond to; there are complex strategies that students acquire gradually through patient and skilful instruction. Some aim at specific objectives, while others are casual and emergent. Among them, they address a great variety of objectives in the personal, social and academic domains – our major responsibilities as teachers.” (Joyce, Calhoun and Hopkins 1997)

All of the heads studied are promoting a range of teaching approaches to improve children’s learning. Heather is developing enquiry methods of learning as part of the work towards her performance management targets. The approach is developed through exploration of the layout of the school’s wildlife garden. Sally’s commitment to the development of teaching approaches to promote a range of learning opportunities has led to the consideration of accelerated learning methods. Sally has integrated the approach into the curriculum, through the development of a jungle area to promote role-play as a stimulus for creative writing. Judy has worked with staff to extend opportunities for children to learn collaboratively. She feels that this approach to learning:

“... focuses on the processes, enabling children to articulate, to say, for example, ‘well I think we should be doing this’ or ‘look you can do it this way’ or ‘if you put this and this together you can do that.’”

## 4.7 Conclusion: Professional Learning

“Fundamental to the core purpose of the school, student’s learning, is the notion that those who are responsible for student learning should also be learners themselves – not just subject experts but people who make mistakes, are anxious, fail, are exhilarated by understanding and filled with awe when something new is discovered.” (West-Burnham and O’Sullivan, 1998)

The work of the headteachers of these very effective infant schools shows a commitment to learning for staff as well as for pupils. It seems that professional learning underpins the work of these heads and is demonstrated in their teaching commitment as well as in their efforts to promote professional dialogue, reflection, collaboration, leadership at all levels and the development of a range of teaching approaches. Beth, for example, believes that schools are learning communities for all of those involved. The development of skills alongside growth in self-esteem and confidence are inherent to her work to develop teaching and learning with children, parents and teachers. Jan’s commitment to learning underpins her approach to headship. She encourages people to take chances, saying that people should ‘go for it’, should try things and ‘you’ve got to make mistakes, it’s the only way you learn... it’s not the end of the world if it doesn’t work.’ Jan used her MEd studies to support her work in changing the organisational culture of the school and encouraged her deputy to complete a masters degree saying ‘this is brilliant, this course is just what you want to do.’ Lynda also values risk taking as a feature of professional learning in her work to improve teaching and learning. She said:

“We’ve had ideas, and we’ve tried them out and we’ve seen how they’ve worked and have thought ‘what’s good about that, let’s keep that because that was really good and it worked really well, or that wasn’t so good lets not bother with that anymore.’”

Additionally, informal and formal visits to classrooms by heads promote motivation, self-esteem and morale. The use of suggestion and praise supports and promotes professional learning for teachers.

Indeed, professional learning seems to characterise the work of these heads and provides the context by which they impact on classrooms to improve teaching and learning.

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## 6. Correspondence

Please send any comments or contributions to the author of the report at: [BensonSuej@aol.com](mailto:BensonSuej@aol.com)

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# Appendix 1

## Methodology

### Sample

Eight schools, highlighted as being 'particularly successful' (OFSTED 1998/1999, 1999/2000), were selected on the assumption that their leadership would display features of instructional leadership. The schools were situated in a range of LEAs, in the East Midlands and London areas, to provide a range of context and practice.

### Data Collection and Analysis 1

OFSTED summary reports for the eight schools were analysed. Some frequent issues emerged which confirmed that elements of instructional leadership were used.

- Focus on improvement
- Emphasis on teaching, learning and pupil performance
- Reflection / evaluation/analysis → response to strengths and weaknesses
- Curriculum development eg problem solving, planning, promotion of quality learning and progress, academic and social skills, independent work, make interesting and dynamic, questioning, investigative
- Learning ethos eg fun, enjoyable, love of learning, challenge.

### Data Collection and Analysis 2

School documentation was scrutinised for further evidence of instructional leadership and to inform the focus of interviews.

### Data Collection and Analysis 3

Interviews with headteachers were categorised and written up in narrative form as case studies.

### Validation

- Respondent validation to confirm accuracy and consider whether narratives a true representation.
- Questionnaire responses from senior staff members to confirm headteacher evidence.

### Discussion

A series of questions and answers brings together themes from the interviews with perspectives from the literature.

### Findings and Conclusions

A compilation of generic aspects of practice that are used by the heads of these very effective schools to improve teaching and learning.