

A U T U M N 2 0 0 3

# No Key Issues:

## Only as good as your last Ofsted?

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

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## **Introduction**

### **Reasons for choosing the area of study**

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

### **Basis of the study**

The study was undertaken as part of NCSL's Research Associate Programme and carried out over the spring and summer terms of 2003. Visits were made to seven primary schools, which included one pilot school. Interviews were held with headteachers and other senior members of staff. These basically took the form of semi-structured interviews, to allow respondents to express themselves at length, but with enough shape to prevent aimless rambling.

Four of the interviews took place on a one-to-one basis; the remainder involved two people.

### **What the study aimed to assess**

In addition to ascertaining the immediate impact and acclaim of a 'no key issues' Ofsted inspection, a secondary aim of the research was to determine the role and leadership styles of the headteachers in driving their respective schools forward.

## Case studies

### Selecting the sample schools

I selected primary schools inspected during the 2001 calendar year Ofsted cycle as case studies. They were ideal because sufficient time had elapsed for them to reflect in the glory of 'no key issues' and move on accordingly.

To identify relevant schools proved to be rather a difficult task. It was initially suggested by Ofsted that I read through 3,500 inspection reports one by one! However, a most helpful officer provided a list of schools, separated by type of inspection, that were identified by inspectors as having no key issue. The list consisted of 16 schools which had undergone short inspections and 12 schools that had undergone full inspections. This, on the face of it, is an extremely low number, but Ofsted did point out that the list was not guaranteed to be definitive. Due to the time constraints of the research, I selected just six schools to visit (not including the pilot school).

### What the schools were like

The schools ranged in size from 54 to 408 on roll, with the proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals varying between 0% and 21%. Within the six schools, only five pupils in total had English as an additional language and the proportion of ethnic minority pupils was below 2.5%. The number of pupils on the register of special educational needs ranged from 13% to 21%, with two of the schools each having 11 pupils with a statement of special educational needs, many associated with physical disabilities.

The respective section 10 inspection reports showed them to be achieving well above average in the areas of English, mathematics and science compared to similar schools and in line with the Ofsted report, *The Curriculum in Successful Primary Schools* (October 2002).

The quality of the curriculum, leadership, management and pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development had all been judged to be good or better in their inspections.

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

The following three descriptions exemplify the range of schools which were included in the research:

**School A** is in the Cheshire LEA area. The junior school for 7–11 year olds is of average size and draws pupils from a wide range of social backgrounds. The number on roll has remained steady since the last inspection and is now 246 pupils. Two pupils are of minority ethnic heritage and all pupils speak English as their first language. There are 45 pupils on the school's special needs register (which is about the national average). This number includes 11 pupils who have statements (again, which is well above the national average). The school has a designated provision for pupils with physical disabilities.

**School B** is in the Leeds LEA area. The primary school has 372 pupils on roll and mainly serves the local housing estate. The housing estate is in a close-knit community. The ethnic background of pupils is mainly white European and there are three pupils for whom English is an additional language. Attainment on entry to school is generally well below the nationally expected levels, with many children having very low levels of language and personal development.

**School C** is in the Nottinghamshire LEA. This split-site Church of England school has 54 pupils on roll. No pupils speak English as an additional language and there are no pupils from an ethnic minority background. The very small number of pupils admitted each year means that their average attainment can swing either above or below national averages.

In general terms, the schools visited displayed many of the characteristics highlighted in the Ofsted report, *The Curriculum in Successful Primary Schools*. There was clear evidence of high standards in the core subjects plus a strong commitment to other areas of the curriculum, especially art and music. High standards in ICT were also a particular strength. Alexander (2002), in his response to Ofsted's report, clearly recognises that our most successful primary schools are able to "stand out against the belief that for young children 'education, education, education' means 'basics, basics, basics' and being prepared to defend a version of primary education in which other realms of knowledge and enquiry also have an important place". The 'no key issues' schools certainly relate to this philosophy but the main line of the enquiry was to ascertain reaction to and subsequent response to their highly successful Ofsted inspections.

## Initial reaction to the report

One element of the enquiry posed three questions:

1. What was your initial reaction to the report as headteacher?
2. What were the views of other stakeholders: governors, parents and pupils?
3. What were the views of other headteachers and LEA personnel?

Headteachers' recollections of their immediate reactions were quite marked:

I was relieved but the outcomes came as no surprise. We had identified a couple of areas where we needed to improve and it was confirmation of what we were doing well at school.

I knew we would do well because we had worked very hard since the last Ofsted. We are a proactive, forward-looking school and had moved forward from a position of strength.

I was thrilled! It was a wonderful feeling.

I was very pleased that Ofsted had agreed with the issues that the school had identified.

The reaction from parents had been variable. Some schools had received letters and cards of congratulations, but these school communities in all undoubtedly have high expectations and as one headteacher stated, "The parents knew prior to the Ofsted that this was a good school. They were not remotely surprised by the outcomes of the inspection."

Governors' reactions were also very mixed. In one case they were, "very pleased but I wondered how intimately they really understood the full impact of having no key issues". In complete contrast, there was an instance of total indifference being displayed: "There was no sense of well done, you have done a good job. There was no sense of celebration from the governors."

Views and comments of fellow headteachers were also varied. There had been a number of sincere "well done!" and many headteachers had been very generous in offering their congratulations. However, two schools had received no comments from fellow headteachers. There was a feeling amongst the headteachers interviewed that the competitive climate created by SATs and league tables was perhaps the reason for this display of indifference.

The interviews suggested that the headteachers were highly successful managers and leaders; they were also very humble and modest professionals and played down the impact of the no key issues outcome.

Where there was an opportunity to interview senior members of staff, their reactions were as follows:

There was a great feeling of relief, I felt very emotional! I couldn't believe it, everything was so positive across the whole school.

Really it was a rubber stamping exercise, although it was nice recognition. I was prepared to challenge any issues which might have been raised.

The staff was initially overjoyed but an anticlimactic atmosphere soon prevailed. We know we are not perfect. We had action plans in place to address our teaching area problems.

I walked ten feet tall when going to meetings and in contact with fellow colleagues.

Staff felt flat that little excitement had been generated from the Ofsted.

## Planning for future development and improvement

Headteachers' futures increasingly depend upon their schools' performance over successive academic years, so how do they ensure that their organisations continually meet ever demanding, challenging and prescriptive targets and the aspirations of their stakeholders? How do they determine priorities, and what scope is there for innovation, when the demands and constraints of SATs still overshadow even the most successful of schools?

Biddy Passmore's article in the *TES* (16 May 2003) highlighted the concerns recently expressed by Professor Barbara MacGilchrist, Deputy Director of London University's Institute of Education. Professor MacGilchrist claims:

Few schools can keep improving for more than three years and the performance of most wobbles up and down. Even the most successful schools tended to hit a wall after three years of continuous improvements in results. Those schools singled out for praise by inspectors saw their results slip and generally decline.

Many of the survey schools agreed that SATs did still weigh heavily on the academic year.

SATs are still obviously very important and we spend too much time preparing for them during the first two terms of Year 6.

We are very much driven by SATs and have the added problem of the 11-plus examination in the autumn term of Year 6.

If you do well and then there is a sudden drop with three or four pupils, you are under the magnifying glass.

The curriculum is driven by SATs in Year 6.

With this relentless pressure still imposed upon schools, the scope for radical innovation remains somewhat limited. Charles Clarke, Secretary of State for Education and Skills recently stated:

The key to innovation is freedom for heads to manage their schools the way they think fit. The 2002 Education Act was radical in the changes it laid out. Any school can put together proposals for how and what it wants to teach and how this will raise standards. I want to emphasise that one size doesn't fit all.

As standards continue to rise, there is no reason why all of our schools shouldn't eventually qualify for earned autonomy.

Then comes the sting in the tail!

However, freedom does not mean freedom from accountability. That in turn means that targets, tests and performance tables are here to stay. Accountability is not an optional extra. (Charles Clarke, 2003)

With this in mind, and numerous other external factors to consider, how have the 'no key issues' schools actually prioritised and moved forward?

The effective continuation of self-evaluation appears to be a crucial factor and although Ofsted and local authorities have championed this important element, the individual schools have been the real driving force. One school proudly proclaimed:

We are always self-evaluating.

There was evidence that an underlining reason for the success of the study schools was that they had undertaken rigorous self-evaluation prior to the visit of the inspectors. Heads claimed they regarded this as good practice and it was not an exercise in preparation for inspection. One



school's thorough analysis had identified the following as priorities: PHSE, ICT, performance management, writing and the role of support staff. Once recognised, these areas were supported by extensive action plans, thus leaving Ofsted with little scope for making any further suggestions regarding development.

There was evidence also of comprehensive questionnaires, far more extensive than the Ofsted format, being compiled by governing bodies and distributed to parents. The responses from one school were thoroughly analysed by governors and a succession of graphs and charts formulated in order to determine trends and the subsequent way forward.

Information from the varying aspects of self-evaluation certainly helped in the compilation of respective school improvement plans, which in the main have moved away from national priorities. All the schools have successfully implemented the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies and the general feeling was that only slight tinkering was required in these areas.

ICT featured highly on all the schools' agendas and several have become leading exponents in this field, with clear evidence of innovative concepts being implemented. Community matters, the role of teaching assistants and building projects were very often issues and a study support initiative featured highly at one school. A number of schools have, and are continuing to promote the concepts of Brain Gym, learning styles, thinking skills, problem solving and methods of preparing for work.

One senior member of staff showed some antipathy towards initiatives and claimed:

The LEA impression is that for every new initiative you do it and you do it well. You don't argue, you do it! We are doing well, why should we be constantly made to jump through hoops?

Particularly impressive developments related to inclusion were apparent at two of the schools. Ofsted noted that the provision for pupils with special educational needs was, "Excellent: the way in which the school provides for pupils with SEN is a major strength of the school".

Importantly in relation to school improvement plans, the survey schools no longer find it necessary or pertinent to align their plans with the local authority development plans. They have the confidence to be independent:

We know where we want to go regardless, we steer our own ship. We know what is best for our own pupils, the local authority has forgotten about children.

There was clear evidence in all the schools of planned and supportive professional development

Staff development plays a vital role in ensuring that schools improve performance and all the heads recognise that professional development is an entitlement for all teachers and echo the sentiments of Carol Adams, Chair of the GTC, who stated:

Development is absolutely essential to raising achievement because teaching has to be informed by learning. (*TES*, 21 March 2003)

All the schools stated that professional development was driven by performance management and opportunities were balanced between whole school objectives and individual needs. One headteacher enthused that there are:

Loads of opportunities for staff development and that the school spends a huge amount of money on training.

Many of the headteachers were very supportive of the Investors in People initiative and successfully implemented the scheme in their schools.

## Leadership and management

In the new Ofsted framework for inspection, inspectors will examine the extent to which leaders:

Influence and motivate, create effective teams, encourage an inclusive culture and provide good role models for other staff and pupils. (*Ldr*, May 2003)

Presumably the leaders of the 'no key issues' schools would have satisfied the new criteria for successful leadership. In fact, the new Ofsted framework may well be a result of inspecting such headteachers. The statements from the six 2001 Ofsted reports help to substantiate the claim.

The headteacher is an excellent leader and manager. He has a very clear vision of what the school should be and how it should meet the plans laid out to improve provision. He brings a rigorous analysis to school development planning and self-evaluation processes and sees the school as a place in which pupils should develop a joy in learning and knowledge.

The headteacher provides very good leadership and is a major force behind the school's excellent ethos.

The headteacher has high expectations for the school and a strong desire to continue the process of improvement that has produced a school with many strengths and no significant weaknesses in which pupils achieve very high standards.

The headteacher provides excellent leadership.

The headteacher provides extremely effective leadership to the work of the school and has been central in maintaining high standards during a period of staff instability.

The headteacher provides excellent leadership and educational direction for the work of the school. This has led to very good improvement in all areas of the school's work.

As my research only allowed for a half-day visit to the sample schools, it was very difficult to ascertain during such a short period of time the particular leadership styles of the headteachers. However, what I tried to determine was how, if at all, their leadership style had significantly changed since the time of the last inspection. They were rather reticent to comment on this subject and they only committed to rather simplistic statements about leadership styles and perceived changes in style since the time of the last inspection.

My leadership style is changing. It is being driven by external pressures.

I'm not a believer in conflict. I would rather take people with me.

I'm now more appreciative of people who work for me.

It isn't leading from the front any longer. I'm not the sole leader of inspiration.

I adopt a transforming learning style. I ask everyone's opinion but ultimately I do tend to decide on my own.

The desire to change and improve things, and trying to give staff a sense of vanguard is quite motivational.

All the headteachers in question had come to post without the benefit and support of the National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH) and the recently introduced New Visions Programme for Early Headship. Some had experienced the five day Leadership Programme for Serving Headteachers (LPSH) course, but in the main leadership styles had been developed and modified on the job. My impression in meeting these headteachers was that they possess innumerable valuable qualities. They may have been modest and humble but

they were unquestionably visionary, inspirational and loyal – all still being in post two years after the inspections in question. Long service may sometimes be derided in a culture of rapid transformation and successive changes to senior holders of political and educational high office but it can be a significant factor in a successful organisation.

Despite the modesty and humility displayed, all the headteachers lead primary schools which meet the criteria outlined in the DfES guidance on the Leadership Incentive Grant. Although this appertains to the secondary sector, evidence from the inspection reports and visits to the schools show that they aspire to the transformational sector of schools, whose characteristics display reflective, self-critical and imaginative leadership, able to articulate a clear vision of the school in the future with the capacity to maintain improvement.

All the headteachers agreed that success in the ‘no key issue’ schools would not have been possible without the support and commitment of a senior management team. Their value and contribution was recognised in the reports.

The senior management team supports the headteacher and contributes very effectively to the leadership and management of the school.

Senior teachers and the management team make a strong contribution through their involvement with organisational issues, the school’s development planning, and in communicating information.

Other members of the senior team have clearly defined roles and very effectively contribute their own particular strengths to management.

In each of the tiers of leadership, the headteacher has delegated real responsibility and a sense of ownership.

The importance of shared or distributed leadership is a key element of NCSL’s agenda and the survey schools have evolved in their thinking and actions in this area, supporting the notion that, “it is important for leaders to develop a participative, or team, approach which enables staff and others to contribute to the process of visioning rather than simply the leader’s personal vision”. (Bush and Glover, NCSL, 2003)

Comments from senior staff endorse the view.

All staff have so many responsibilities that they drive the momentum themselves.

We now have a more collegiate approach by the senior management team, rather than a top-down style.

The headteacher now sees a need to share the process more.

The headteacher is an innovator, but staff do come up with far more ideas now.

Our success is down to team effort.

There appears to be little agreement as to the meaning of the term ‘distributed leadership’. However, NCSL has “found a number of different interpretations of leadership which shared some characteristics that could be drawn together into a possible understanding of the term.” (Bennett et al, NCSL, 2003) Regardless of the complexities of the subject, the practice, in conjunction with the outstanding qualities of the headteachers, has been fundamental in maintaining and developing standards in the respective schools.

## Status

One would imagine that this small sample of unique and highly successful schools would have been acclaimed and acknowledged in many ways at a local and even national level. Recognition in the modern educational era also often equates to additional funding in various guises, especially in the secondary sector. However, the headteachers reported that official praise and subsequent recognition had, in most cases, been virtually non-existent. None of the schools were offered Beacon status. Even more surprisingly, not one of the schools was listed in the annual Ofsted report which identifies particular successful schools that have received an outstanding inspection report and have performed well in tests and examinations given the circumstances of the school.

I was disappointed that there was no recognition because other schools seem to achieve many awards and status.

We received absolutely nothing! I wrote to the LEA saying how well we had done. There was no response from the LEA, nobody said a word, there was never a mention.

I have been surprised how some local schools have become Beacon schools.

We heard nothing from the LEA. The director had to be invited in by the school before the success was acknowledged.

There was a bitter feeling over the lack of recognition and lack of access to pockets of funding.

We had one visit from an LEA officer but no further follow-up visits.

There was a letter from the Director of Education; eventually! The comments he gave were not exactly wonderful, sort of that's OK, but you could do more than that. A bit more of a pat on the back would have been more appropriate. They would have been in like a shot if things had been the other way round.

On a more positive note:

We did receive recognition from the LEA and requests from the LEA for other headteachers to visit the school.

Disappointingly then, there is no evidence of the sample schools being used as examples of good practice or their many outstanding features being modelled either locally or nationally. This is a failing that David Bell, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools appears to be addressing. In a letter to all headteachers in March 2003 outlining proposals for the new inspection format, he states:

In the most effective schools, inspection should be able to confirm not only that the quality and standards of the school are as high as the performance indicators suggest they are, but it should also be a vehicle for analysing, reporting and disseminating the sort of outstanding practice to which other schools can aspire.

I was fortunate and privileged to be able to discuss the issue of dissemination of outstanding practice during a personal, albeit informal meeting with David Bell in June 2003.

Mr Bell holds aspirations that there will be increased opportunities, for successful individual primary schools, to have examples of their good practice disseminated in two ways. First, by personal representation at HMI conferences, a facility afforded to the secondary sector in the past. Secondly, on the Ofsted website, where specific clips and references, observed during the inspection process, could be made available for modelling. Mr Bell is obviously aware of the

issues related to information overload and appreciates that actual visits to observe outstanding practice would be the ideal. Interestingly, Mr Bell does not see the role of Ofsted as being to deliver training on good practice, or any area for that matter, as he believes that his organisation is perhaps on the periphery of the training aspect of education. Finally, Mr Bell stated an admiration of headteachers prepared to nominate their schools as examples of good practice and literally place their heads above the parapets, recognising that it perhaps easier to resist being flagged-up in the first instance!

## Main findings, implications and recommendations

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

- Although many schools had probably only one key issue following their inspection – many of these being fairly insignificant – Ofsted could only identify 28 primary/infant/junior schools as having no key issues. From that cohort, six schools were visited and became the basis of the study.
- The sample schools closely resembled the schools whose many excellent features were highlighted in the 2002 Ofsted report, *The Curriculum in Successful Primary Schools*. The potential issue with that report was the small sample size, a claim which could be equally levelled at my own findings.
- The euphoria experienced by the school communities in attaining such a high Ofsted commendation was very short-lived and only lifted spirits and inspired in the short term. Praise from LEAs and fellow colleagues was limited and somewhat superficial, which is hardly surprising, for the educational climate of the past decade has been one of competition rather than collaboration. Perhaps competition, with performance judged on SATs results and league tables, has resulted in many schools becoming insular and reluctant to share ideas or praise other's successes.
- None of the sample schools had been afforded any status as a result of their outstanding inspections. They were not listed in the annual Ofsted report produced by HMCI of Schools and none of the schools has been awarded Beacon status. The general feeling coming through from the schools was that there was an inconsistency of policy, which leads to confusion, and a modicum of bitterness. There have been many initiatives of late which have attempted to recognise and reward good practice but to some they appear divisive and counter-productive.
- A vital factor, leading to the successful inspection outcomes of the survey schools in the first instance, was their ability to undertake thorough self-evaluation and identify pertinent areas for development. They have continued to excel at self-evaluation by various means, with governor-led questionnaires often providing the priorities for development, rather than nationally driven issues. Such questionnaires would form an excellent example of modelling good practice, an area which David Bell says Ofsted certainly intends to develop over the next cycle of inspections.
- The qualities of the respective headteachers forming the basis of this research are too numerous to mention. They match those previously reported upon by NCSL research associates, particularly Ronnie Woods' *Enchanted Headteachers* (2002) They were fundamental in leading their schools' success. Increasingly, however, many of the headteachers have looked to share leadership responsibility. The headteachers' successful period in post affords a feeling of trust, respect and wisdom, vital ingredients required to move an organisation forward. The status quo will not satisfy this group of headteachers and

although they are able to clearly articulate the destinations of their schools, they do have some reservations:

- How much further can we improve?
- We are all working harder but can we continue to improve?

These are the two main concerns voiced but nevertheless, they all recognise that schools cannot afford a couple of easy years, that more of the same will not work and that both sustainability and transformation are as important as the continual strive for further improvement.

The loyal, committed and dedicated headteachers of the 'no key issues' schools are inspirational characters, all of whom are still in post some two years on from the time of the Ofsted inspections in question. All are still keen to further their own personal development. Some have acted as associate heads within their LEA, and one is involved with the Consultant Leader Development Programme at NCSL. A number are now involved with Networked Learning Communities, which hopefully heralds a new and positive era of collaboration. This also may provide a possible basis for future development for this particular group of schools, with the backing and support of NCSL. The prospect of cross-LEA networking and collaboration is indeed an exciting one!

My judgement is that the following areas for future development are implied by these findings:

- In the Ofsted annual report, schools identified as having 'no key issues' should be included. Examples of good practice from those schools might be placed on the Ofsted website. This could include video clips of outstanding classroom teaching and links to respective schools' websites.
- Headteachers need help to become more courageous at sharing and spreading good practice. For instance, heads and senior staff from the schools might be invited to national conferences and local conventions in order to disseminate their good practice to fellow educationalists.
- All headteachers, regardless of length of service, must be encouraged to continually seek opportunities for further professional development. If the leader remains positive and receptive to change, the chances of successfully implementing related initiatives are far more realistic.
- The headteachers of these successful primary schools say that continual improvement without transformation is unsustainable. In order to transform their schools they need a reduction in the burden of the testing regime.

Thousands of successful primary headteachers could of course relate to many of the factors outlined in this report. However, this was a unique cohort and 'no key issues' brought its own related problems:

We are not liked by some because we are successful.

We are an island on our own!

'No key issues' is quite a dangerous statement as far as other colleagues were concerned.

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

Perhaps 'no key issues' is yesterday's news, perhaps you're only as good as your last Ofsted!

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