NCSL National College for School Leadership

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In Search of the X-Factor:

A group enquiry into the secret of maintaining continuous school success

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FULL PRACTITIONER ENQUIRY REPORT

Contents

1. Introduction

The study arose as a result of regular meetings of a group of five headteacher colleagues, from one medium-sized infant school, one large primary and three medium-sized primary schools. We set up the group to provide an opportunity for mutual support, collaboration, discussion and to assist each other to become the lead learners within our schools. We wanted, in particular, to examine the following questions:

- What influencing factors support or hinder high-level classroom performance in our own and other schools?
- As leaders, what do we need to do to ensure our schools are alive with excellent practice?
- What systems of self-evaluation are most effective in developing excellent practice?
- How can we use this learning to develop further effective teaching to its highest standard within our schools?

To explore these ideas further, we developed a set of aims and objectives to guide our learning. These are summarised below:

Aims

- to improve teaching and learning creatively and comprehensively
- to improve ourselves as managers
- to empower our workforce, by empowering ourselves
- to widen our vision, looking at whol-school, not just man-management

Objectives

- to explore methods of continuous school improvement
- to look critically at our own practice
- to develop a collaborative-leadership style of learning within the group
- to coach, encourage, support and trust each other within the group

It soon became apparent that this approach was having an effect. Fascinated with the idea that our own process of support and shared learning was helping our individual schools improve, we decided to research this concept further with the support of a research associateship from the National College for School Leadership.

2. Developing a set of assumptions

Our aim within this study was to identify the factors that would enable us to drive our schools forward to further success.

By looking collectively and comparatively at our own schools, and at each individual school's areas of strength and further development, we were able to develop a set of assumptions about school improvement and classroom practice generally. These are outlined below:

The assumed X-factors

1. Successful initiatives

School initiatives are successful because:

a. Staff have confidence in their ability to teach in an organised and purposeful manner and believe that they can influence pupil outcomes.
b. Staff are energised through their own continuing professional development, which provides them with skills to take responsibility for improving their own teaching and learning.
c. Staff are empowered to test out ideas and learn from their mistakes knowing that the standard of education remains high and children will not suffer as a consequence.
d. Children actively participate in the learning process. They are able to make mistakes, learn from them and still remain confident.

2. Development of staff teams

Headteachers in successful schools have implemented a coherent strategy for the development of staff teams, which includes:

a. Clear lines of responsibility, especially for middle management and subject leaders
b. Creative approaches to the continual assessment and improvement of classroom practice
c. Particular emphasis on trust, respect and support for all, which recognises each person's own strengths and areas for development
d. Mechanisms for building consensus and collaborative planning

3. Consultative leadership style

Headteachers in successful schools consult widely on their own and the school's performance. For example:

a. Through a supportive network of like-minded others, which facilitates a confidential discussion of issues; a collaborative approach to problem-solving; an outward-looking approach to school development; and self-reflection

b. By establishing ways to measure success that are based on high expectation for teacher performance and to utilise constructive feedback
c. Through informal feedback via an open communication network
d. Through self-reflection and self-evaluation

These assumptions guided this piece of work. At the outset, they represented our ideas about what the key to success might be. The next step was to gather evidence to see whether there was any support for our assumptions from current practice within successful schools, and from any models of good practice. We approached this in two ways:

- We considered practices within other known successful schools, gathering evidence using semi-structured interviews and comparing responses against the above assumptions. Section 3 outlines our approach and summarises key findings.
- We researched models of good practice by consulting other key professionals. We either invited them to talk to our focus group, or attended conferences at which they were speaking and produced reports for the focus group. We also undertook training together. Section 4 outlines the key findings.

The results of our research are then discussed in section 5.

3. Semi-structured interviews

Method

Nine schools were selected to take part in the study, chosen for their reputation as models of good practice. The headteachers were approached and asked if a representative from our group could visit the school. Interview questions were developed by the focus group, based on our assumptions.

The questions were piloted on a visit to one of the schools we were interested in involving in the study. This highlighted a number of problems, which were:

- The questions covered too broad an area and needed to be narrowed down.
- Some questions were not relevant to our assumption, eg questions about monitoring lateness and absences bear only minor relevance to our key interests.
- Interviewing more than one member of staff complicated findings and buried key pieces of information.

A discussion within the focus group led to agreement that we should direct our interest towards one specific area. We agreed that this should be how the headteacher develops and improves a successful school. The questions were re-drafted with this in mind, and it was agreed that we should interview only the headteacher from each school to enable a more complete discussion of the key issues.

We developed a semi-structured interview, which we hoped would give the headteacher an opportunity to talk at length about his or her role and provide us with a rich source of data relating to the assumptions. The questions were designed to be prompts for each interviewer to explore all areas of interest, and are linked to our assumptions in the table below.

Table 1: Summary of interview questions and how they reflect our assumptions

Theme/assumption	Description
Background	General overview – getting a feel for the school
Success of initiatives	How the headteacher decides which new initiatives to introduce; how he/she tackles the introduction of a new initiative; what techniques he/she uses to train, encourage and support staff; how he/she measures success; how he/she keeps staff motivated so they continue to use it
Development of staff teams	How the headteacher understands his/her staff and utilises their strengths in order to improve teaching and learning; how he/she encourages staff to address their weaknesses through a process of analytical and reflective learning; and how he/she empowers staff to learn from mistakes within clearly defined boundaries, what use is made of data , how expectations are realised throughout the school, how school evaluation is consistently applied
Leadership style	How the headteacher's personality and leadership styles influence his/her decision-making; what keeps him/her motivated; what spurs him/her on to further progress the improvement of the school, how the values of the school are developed and disseminated; evidence of wide consultation on school and own performance

Four members of the focus group were involved in the interviewing. Each school visit comprised of a tour and a closed interview with the headteacher, which lasted approximately two hours. Interviews were conducted using a tape recorder and handwritten notes.

Results

The key researcher compared responses against our assumptions by classifying each assumption as supported or unsupported by each school. Results were then presented to the focus group for further discussion and agreement. The outcomes of this process are presented in Table 2. A tick (   ) is used to indicate agreement that evidence supports the assumption; a cross (x) denotes agreement that evidence refutes the assumption; and a question mark (?) denotes agreement that there was insufficient evidence to support the assumption. A discussion of the evidence is presented in the following table.

Table 2: Support for the assumptions from the semi-structured interviews

	Assumption 1				Assumption 2				Assumption 3			
	Success of initiatives				Development of staff teams				Leadership style			
	1a	1b	1c	1d	2a	2b	2c	2d	3a	3b	3c	3d
School 1			?			?			?		?	
School 2			?			?			?		?	
School 3			?			?			?		?	
School 5			?								?	
School 6			?			?			?		?	
School 7			?						?			
School 8			?									
School 9			?			?						

Results by each assumed X-factor

1a) School initiatives are successful because staff have confidence in their ability to teach in an organised and purposeful manner and belief that they can influence pupil outcomes

All headteachers interviewed believed that the staff in their schools were teaching in a purposeful and organised way, which had been observed as part of the process of school self-evaluation. As a result of data analyses and target-setting, all heads interviewed believed that teachers thought they could influence the outcomes of pupil learning.

1b) School initiatives are successful because staff are energised through their own continuing professional development, which provides them with skills to take responsibility for improving their own teaching and learning

All headteachers thought that, through performance management and clearly defined roles, professional development was purposeful as it linked to the school improvement plan and school initiatives. Headteachers also felt that if there were weaknesses in skills they would be able to instigate a programme of improvement As one headteacher put it, 'Poor teaching or performance is not ignored, neither is it tolerated.' However, there was no evidence to support the view that professional development encourages teachers to be reflective, self-analytical and self-improving. Furthermore we were unable to measure whether staff were 'energised' through the CPD process.

1c) School initiatives are successful because staff are empowered to test out ideas and learn from their mistakes knowing that the standard of education remains high and children will not suffer as a consequence

Although the headteachers of schools within the foundation phases reported that they empowered staff to have 'freedom to be independent to do things their own way', and had developed a 'can-do ethos', the notion of risk-taking and empowerment to make mistakes in classroom practice was not evident from the interviews.

1d) School initiatives are successful because children actively participate in the learning process. They are able to make mistakes and learn from them and still remain confident
All schools in the sample used either target -etting or discussions to involve children in the learning process them. However, it was only the headteachers of children in the foundation stage who were able to say they had used children's own areas of interest to motivate them to learn.

2a) Headteachers in successful schools have implemented clear lines of responsibility, especially for middle management and subject leaders
All headteachers in the sample had developed team and individual roles and responsibilities

2b) Headteachers in successful schools have implemented creative approaches to the continual assessment and improvement of classroom practice
All schools had a models of school self-evaluation rooted in the Ofsted model of classroom observation for teaching and learning and scrutiny of work. For this, senior staff and the headteacher had observed teaching and senior staff becoming excellent role models. Only one headteacher within the primary phase mentioned other methods used in the school (critical friend/mentor). The headteachers within the early years phase also use coaching while working alongside members of staff as one of their main ways of carrying out school improvement.

2c) Headteachers in successful schools have a clear emphasis on trust, respect and support for all, which recognises each person's own strengths and areas for development
All headteachers in the sample expressed positive support for their staff.

2d) Headteachers in successful schools have developed mechanisms for building consensus and collaborative planning
All schools had established management teams and means of collaborating on whole school improvement and development planning, usually through the staff meeting timetable and the team network. Only one headteacher reported using audit and questionnaires to assist in this process, which enabled him to give feedback on decisions. This same process was often used to gain insight into staff views. Headteachers within the foundation phase were closely involved with the planning and used this process in addition to staff meetings to gain insight into staff views. All headteachers were confident that they had the consensus and support of staff for school improvement issues. They reported often beginning with data analysis to gain consensus. Some headteachers preferred to meet with their senior management team first, then all staff.

3a) Headteachers in successful schools have a supportive network of like-minded others
There was notable diversity of views here. A number of headteachers felt they had no like-minded professionals to talk with. One headteacher used a number of support networks, including e-mail links.

3b) Headteachers in successful schools have established ways to measure success that are based on high expectations for teacher performance and to utilise constructive feedback

All headteachers reported that they were using the self-evaluation process effectively to enable them to measure success and give constructive feedback.

3c) Headteachers in successful schools have an open communication network

Headteachers in the smaller schools and those in the foundation phase were aware of the informal as well as the formal communication network and they reported that they felt part of both. Headteachers in the larger schools tended to use more formal mechanisms, although they also felt that they had good professional relationships with all staff.

3d) Headteachers in successful schools self-reflect and self-evaluate

All headteachers reported that they were using the self-evaluation process effectively to enable them to measure success and give constructive feedback.

Discussion

Overall, it is worth noting that Table 2 shows that there was no evidence to refute any of the assumptions. This suggests that, generally speaking, our assumptions do reflect current practice in successful schools. However, there are some exceptions. For example, there were a few areas where the focus group agreed that there was insufficient evidence to draw a proper conclusion. This tended to happen when the qualitative parts of our assumptions were being explored — issues such as making mistakes; creative approaches to assessment; and reflection and self-evaluation. It is interesting that this pattern is reflected in the interviews with all, or most of, of the schools visited, with the exception of practice in the early years phase. Although this could be taken to indicate that current practice does not reflect these assumptions in many of the schools visited, it could also be explained in part by the method used in this study, so must be interpreted with caution.

Findings will be discussed in more detail in section 5.

4. Other evidence

Method

Models of good practice were researched by consulting other key professionals. They were either invited to talk to our focus group, or a representative from the group attended conferences at which they were speaking and produced reports for the focus group. We also undertook training together.

The information gathered was then compared with our assumptions. A total of seven pieces of evidence were considered in this way. They are summarised below:

1. Presentation of research on teaching and learning in mathematics in Hungarian schools, Dr Tony Harris University of Durham

2. Training in the Investors in Excellence Programme from the Pacific Institute

3. Conference with local headteacher and author, John Rowling, about his book *Heading Towards Excellence*, and a book review within the focus group

4. Conference with Mr M Tomlinson, Chief Inspector of Schools, about new directions for school self-evaluation

5. Conference with Shirley Clarke, where she presented research on a large-scale project for Gillingham Local Education Authority, and book reviews within the focus group

6. Conference for all headteachers and teaching staff from the focus group schools, looking at National Standards and the Teacher Training Agency's requirements for subject leaders

7. Training in NCSL's Headfirst Programme

In order to see whether each assumption was supported or unsupported by each model of good practice, a similar approach was used to the one outlined in section 3. The focus group worked together to reach a consensus view as to whether each piece of evidence supported each part of the three assumptions. The outcomes of this process are presented in Table 3. As can be seen, a tick ( ) is used to indicate agreement that the evidence supports the assumption. A discussion of the evidence is presented below the table.

Results

Table 3: Support from other professionals for the assumptions

	Assumption 1				Assumption 2				Assumption 3			
	Success of initiatives				Development of staff teams				Leadership style			
	1a	1b	1c	1d	2a	2b	2c	2d	3a	3b	3c	3d
Evidence item 1												
Evidence item 2												
Evidence item 3												
Evidence item 4												
Evidence item 5												
Evidence item 6												
Evidence item 7												

As can be seen, much of the evidence reviewed supports our assumptions about what makes a successful school. It is interesting to note that none of the models reviewed covered all of our assumptions. This is likely to be because much of the work we considered may have intentionally avoided a whole-school approach to school improvement in order to focus on specific areas of development. Bearing this in mind, it is worth noting that all of the assumptions receive support from at least two models of best practice. Therefore, it is still possible to conclude that, generally speaking, they do reflect current thinking about what makes schools successful.

Discussion

Two further points are also worth consideration: some of the assumptions that received little support from the school interviews (ie assumptions 1c, 2b) are supported by this evidence; and the bulk of work around models of good practice appears, from this evidence at least, to focus more on the areas of school initiatives and development of staff teams and less on the leadership qualities of a headteacher. This is perhaps further evidence for the view that there may be more emphasis on quantifiable measures of school improvement and factors that are less easy to quantify may be more likely to be overlooked.

These findings will be discussed and compared with the results of the semi-structured interviews in section 5, below.

5. Our findings

Vision

All of the headteachers interviewed had a strong, clear-minded vision for their school. They were also all passionate about improvement and this was reflected in the language they used to describe their determination to continue to improve their school's performance. Phrases such as "scanning the horizon"; "relentless pursuit of goals"; and "I do not accept second best" were commonplace. This suggests that one of the X-factors is likely be the vision, drive and commitment of the headteacher.

Measurement of school performance

The assumptions linked to the qualitative parts of measuring performance (eg assumptions 1b, 1c, 2b, 2c, 3d) received less support from the interviews than was hoped. There are two possible explanations for this:

- Schools tend to focus more on concrete, data-driven approaches to measuring school performance and driving school improvement.
- The interviews did not enable a full exploration of the more abstract parts of the assumptions since these concepts are inherently more difficult to describe and to measure.

As this was a very small study carried out by a group of enthusiastic, but relatively inexperienced, researchers, it is more than likely that the latter explanation holds the most weight. However, there is some tentative evidence to suggest that further research into the more emotive (and possibly more challenging) aspects of school performance would be a worthwhile exercise. This evidence is discussed below.

To support of the view that successful schools tend to focus more on concrete, data-driven, approaches to measuring school performance and driving school improvement, the interviews indicated a strong influence of the Ofsted inspection framework on current practice. The headteachers we interviewed all explained that they used the Ofsted model to improve teaching and learning, and expressed the view that the key to this was in the quality of feedback and follow-up. All of the headteachers in our study used performance data and the results of school self-evaluation to inform and develop school improvement development plans. They also linked all of these strands into performance management.

It is interesting that there was little evidence of the use of further innovative performance measures outside of the Ofsted model. Even so, it was encouraging to find that all schools set targets as a result of data analyses. All teachers set targets for individuals and groups as result of performance data evidence irrespective of phase and all of the headteachers believed that the targets were challenging, as one headteacher put it 'beyond the comfort zone'. Shirley Clarke explains that targets have three components: quantitative; qualitative; and non-recorded. We found that all schools used the quantitative SATs analysis data, except the early years phase, who were using baseline data. All schools also used qualitative targets for groups and individuals appropriate in

all phases. Interviews did not reveal the use of non-recorded target setting, but they may still have been used.

There was also some evidence of a wider approach to data collection in certain areas of successful schools. For example, our findings suggest that a wider spread of data (eg parent interviews and children's views) is used in the early years phase. Other professional evidence supports the view that this is a positive step for a school. For example, Mike Tomlinson, in his role as Chief Inspector of Schools explained to us that schools need a robust system of school self-evaluation that involves all managers and subject leaders, and that they also need to include a wide range of data not normally used when collecting standard hard data terms.

Development of teams

Linked to this is the finding that all of the headteachers we interviewed reported involving their senior management team (SMT) and subject leaders in school self-evaluation and the development of school improvement plans. They all also reported having clear lines of responsibility for middle and subject leaders. Some headteachers preferred to work directly with the SMT first, whilst others preferred to involve the whole staff from the outset. This seemed to be dependent upon the size of the school. This finding is consistent with the view that establishing a cohesive system that everyone understands and owns is vital to continuing school improvement through teaching and learning. The work of Dr T Harris, discussed with the focus group, is based on this view. However, Dr Harris's work goes beyond the confines of the school. For example, one of the findings from his research on the success of mathematics teaching in Hungary shows that the system is known and understood by teachers, children and parents across the whole country.

Innovation

The notion of how to develop and nurture inspirational teaching that allows for risk-taking (once the system for school self-evaluation and review is established) is one that intrigued our group. We were disappointed that the interviews found little evidence for the use of creative approaches to the continual assessment and improvement of classroom practice. Through a focus group discussion, it was tentatively agreed that this finding might be explained because innovation in classrooms can not easily happen in a climate of constant change. In periods of stability, when the criteria for what is very good, good and satisfactory practice are known, understood and owned by all, it is more likely that teachers will have the time, knowledge and will to innovate.

Aspects of leadership

Another disappointing finding was the lack of support for the assumption that the headteachers of successful schools participate in networking and support activities similar to our own focus group. Our experiences of this group have been very positive. We all agree that the personal and professional benefits far outweigh the costs of time away from school. Key benefits include:

- thinking 'outside the box'
- energising our roles as headteachers
- trusting another's perspective
- supporting each other's self-evaluation process
- assessing the generic aspects of leadership and staff development.

We also participated in joint training activities, which enabled us to develop further our school improvement skills. For example, the Headfirst training programme led us to introduce into our school improvement a process where we 'walked the walk and talked the talk' in each other's schools once a year. It also inspired one member of the group to embark on a study visit to Austria under the Comenius Project. Feedback from this trip revealed that even in flagship self-evaluation groups like SEQUELS, a support group such as ours is seen as a desired next step.

In conclusion, the notion of how to improve continuously the performance of a successful school is as difficult to define now as it was when we began our research. In fact, many of the X-factors remain elusive and not all of our assumptions were confirmed. Perhaps this is because they can not be described in concrete terms. Perhaps it is because the whole-school approach we have tried to capture with our assumptions is too broad to be researched using our chosen method. Putting potted explanations aside, we can conclude that, as successful headteachers of successful schools, the more abstract concepts of motivation, self-reflection, innovation, creativity and support, and their influence on school performance and school improvement interest us most of all. We hope that we have been able to give you a glimpse into the complexity of determining the secret of a school`s success and that more research will be carried out in the identified areas.