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Leading First-Age Learning

How 12 school leaders are applying
the University of the First Age
philosophy and methodology
in Newcastle-upon-Tyne
primary schools

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Introduction

This project grew out of a Newcastle-upon-Tyne LEA induction programme for new heads. Following an introduction to the University of the First Age (UFA) philosophy and methodology, which was part of that induction programme, a group of 12 (10 headteachers, two deputy headteachers) became interested in UFA's potential to enhance pupils' learning. With the active support of LEA advisory staff and of NCSL, it was agreed to mount a project based on introducing UFA methods into teachers' practices.

It was agreed that there would be four strands of this action research, namely developing the following:

- teachers' teaching and children's learning through applying the UFA philosophy and methodology in everyday classroom practice
- effective coaching techniques and practices for use with their staff
- awareness of the impact of their own and others' leadership upon learning through engaging in a process of reflection and self-evaluation
- an understanding of the value of a collective approach to leadership

An independent researcher investigated how the 12 headteachers and deputies – who were designated NCSL research associates – had introduced UFA methods and principles into their schools. The research sought also to determine what impact this had had upon teachers' classroom practices and pupils' learning.

The UFA training

The 12 research associates were provided with the equivalent of five days of training on the UFA philosophy and methods. They learned about brain-based learning, visual, auditory and kinesthetic learning styles, multiple intelligences, thinking skills, the accelerated learning cycle, and mind-mapping techniques. In addition, they considered the principles of adult learning, strategies for monitoring and evaluating lessons, and training in coaching skills. All 12 participants were highly complimentary about the training.

They reported the main benefits as follows:

- knowledge about how the brain functions and an increased awareness of how children learn
- understanding of the UFA philosophy and methodology
- increased confidence to engage their colleagues in discussion about how children learn, how learning might be made more effective, different ways of approaching learning and the kinds of learning that they wished to encourage and foster
- a chance to share information, ideas and expertise and jointly resolve problems
- an opportunity for reflection
- first-hand experience of the power of group learning
- direct experience of peer support

Main lines of development

Six main areas of development were identified:

- enhancing the learning environment, for example improving the physical fabric of the school, making display work more creative and purposeful, making fresh water readily available
- focusing on improving pupil attitudes and behaviour by, for example, making use of display work and motivational posters, teachers accentuating the positive, the use of music to calm pupils
- improving teaching and learning by using UFA methods, for example setting achievable targets and regularly reviewing progress, deploying older pupils as peer tutors
- developing relevant resource materials
- monitoring classroom practice more regularly and purposefully
- investing substantially in the professional development of the staff

Research associates as leaders of learning

A range of actions in the schools were either directly taken or actively supported by the research associates. Not every headteacher and deputy did all of the things mentioned below, or to the same extent, but their involvement in helping to shape an evolving practice was readily apparent. The actions were:

- shaping and driving the learning agenda by providing a guiding vision for the school and securing staff support for this, by promoting a climate and culture within which change and improvement can flourish, by closely monitoring classroom practice more widely and more intensively, and by praising and publicising good practice
- developing staff by encouraging and supporting, by steering particular teachers toward certain forms of training, finding ways of moving on teachers who are fixed in their ways, appointing new staff whose thinking is more in line with the development desired, mixing up the composition of teaching teams, and utilising paired teaching arrangements
- leading on learning by drip-feeding information and ideas into classroom practice, by leading training workshops on brain-based learning, conducting demonstration lessons, coaching individual teachers on selected aspects of their performance, and encouraging experimentation and teacher-based action research
- integrating UFA into the school's organisational structure by means of the school improvement plan

Lessons learnt

The research associates thought that the following skills or attributes were necessary:

- being personally committed to the change being attempted
- being both knowledgeable and convincing when attempting to implement change
- providing a positive role model, ie being seen to do the things that you ask others to do
- persisting with and continuing to believe in the innovation being attempted
- recognising that it may be more productive to work with those who are willing
- being prepared to allow staff to experiment and take risks

Evidence of early impact on staff knowledge, attitudes and practices

While overall practice was more advanced in some schools than in others and the impact on individual teachers varied substantially, nevertheless all 12 research associates were of the view that some benefit had accrued for substantial numbers of staff by the end of the school year. The main benefits were seen to be:

- increased understanding of how children learn
- deeper engagement with issues to do with teaching and learning
- greater experimentation with teaching and learning approaches
- more collaboration and teamwork
- increased enjoyment and satisfaction concerning their work
- increased appreciation of the significance of the learning environment itself

Evidence of early impact on the pupils

The research associates were cautious about proclaiming that UFA learning and teaching methods had notable consequences for pupils in the short time they were being used, although the signs were encouraging. Teachers in the schools did report benefits for pupils though, the most widely mentioned being:

- increased confidence and self-esteem
- greater enjoyment and increased motivation to learn
- increased self-knowledge as to how they learnt best
- some raising of aspirations
- increased autonomy
- development of social skills
- improved attendance and behaviour
- improved levels of concentration, and sustainable for longer periods
- improved capacity to remember and retrieve information
- greater independence as learners
- more purposeful discussion, especially in relation to ideas, and listening carefully and respectfully to each other

Conclusions

The enquiry has uncovered convincing evidence to show that teachers' teaching and children's learning, as a consequence of applying UFA methods in everyday classroom practice, were developing. The rate of progress varied, both within individual staffs, and across the 12 schools. There are two key messages relating to the impact of the project. Firstly, it has focused attention firmly on learning – primarily children's learning but underscoring the significance of adult learning too; and secondly, it has enabled the school leaders to experience for themselves different approaches to learning. It was equally apparent that while the research associates recognised the importance of providing active leadership, they had come to realise that this did not require them to do everything themselves. It was also evident that they had swiftly come to appreciate the strength and value of peer support. There were various instances of these headteachers and deputies seeking out allies to assist them in facilitating change, and of their investing in developing the leadership potential of certain staff.

Much valuable progress has been achieved, although much remains to be done. The challenge is for the school leaders who engaged in this project to sustain the quest to improve their leadership of learning.

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