

S U M M E R 2 0 0 5

Virtual leadership – a small school reality?

What impact can e-communication
have upon the role of a headteacher
in a small school?

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Context

The findings in this study are drawn from two major sources. Firstly from the North-South Network, which is a Networked Learning Community in Staffordshire and comprises 12 small rural schools (denoted in Staffordshire as having under 100 children) using ICT as a communication medium to enhance teaching and learning and school leadership and management.

The second source is a group of small schools in Staffordshire that have had no connection with the NCSL's Networked Learning group but are part of a small schools cluster. Clusters are groups of small schools which have been grouped on a geographical basis and are given a small budget by the LEA to carry out collaborative work. It is generally understood that these clusters vary in their effectiveness.

This report is concerned with the impact of computer-based communications, or e-communications, upon the role of the headteacher in a small school. Headteachers are specifically the focus since their role within a small school can often be a very isolated one when, in most cases, a management team is non-existent.

Data has been gathered in three ways:

1. from a questionnaire sent to all small school headteachers in Staffordshire
2. from the pilot group of headteachers who have had not connection with networked learning
3. from headteachers in the North-South Network

In the latter two cases, data was gathered at the start of the research project and at its conclusion.

This research began as a study of how headteachers in a group of schools, who may not have been connected in any way previously, could, by the increased use of ICT for communications, improve their professional practice and their schools. As the study progressed it became clear that the development of the North-South Network and the progress of the pilot group was impacting upon the general question of how small schools can, or cannot, manage the practice of school networking.

The hypothesis

Increased use of e-communications will give the small rural school headteacher greater access to support and resources from colleagues in a similar situation. Regular contact with other headteachers will result in a sharing of responsibility and in distributed leadership, and will open up the exchange of skills and resources.

The findings

The research investigated four particular questions:

1. What impact has increased e-communications had upon an established network of small schools?
2. Can increased use of e-communications have an impact upon a group of schools wishing to become a more effective network?
3. What are the requirements for an effective small school network?
4. What barriers stand in the way of small school headteachers using e-communications to network with other headteachers?

Lessons from question 1:

- E-communications have significantly increased headteachers' contact with other schools.
- There has been a greater sharing of planning, policies and other paper-based documentation.
- Heads have been willing to communicate with fellow professionals when they have felt that support was needed.
- There has been a feeling of support within the network.
- Greater communications engender a greater feeling of belonging and decrease the feelings of isolation.

Lessons from question 2:

- Increased e-communications between a group of schools does have a positive impact upon that group, but there must be commonality of purpose.
- Leaders that do not embrace the ethos of sharing will find e-communication a challenge.

Lessons from question 3:

For a small school network to succeed, its participants must:

- have an understanding of what networking is
- have a willingness to make networking a fundamental part of the school and not see it as a bolt-on extra
- be willing to initiate, promote and participate fully in the setting up and running of the network
- set targets that are realistic, achievable and challenging and a positive gain to the schools
- fully involve all members of the community, adults and children in the process and activities
- make a conscious effort to think of how what they do, or intend to do, can be of benefit to all schools in the network
- be willing to share, receive from others, and ask for and offer advice
- see ICT as a useful tool for communication

Lessons from question 4:

- ICT competency is not an issue. All headteachers who completed the initial questionnaire demonstrated the ability to use e-communication.
- There is a reluctance on the part of some to use a computer on a daily basis. In some cases this is simply due to time and teaching commitments.
- There is a simple equation: if a headteacher sees the advantages of working as part of a network, he or she will see e-communications as a boon and not a barrier.

Recommendations for small schools wishing to become part of a network of schools

- Talk to someone who is already in a network and find out what networking really means.
- Be willing to fully open up your school and for networking to be a part of your everyday thinking.
- Realise that you do not have all the answers, and be willing to seek help.
- See networking on a two- to three-year inception timescale.
- If you “get” the idea of networking, it will work!

The details behind the above findings and recommendations can be found in the full report, available at ncsl.org.uk/researchpublications

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