NCSL National College for School Leadership

Research Associate Report

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Does the 'Net work?

How can a networked learning community promote and develop leadership?

Summer 2006

Contents

Introduction

Networks of schools are becoming increasingly important in education as the benefits of collaborative learning are recognised (DfES 2004). The network that forms the focus of this study developed as a result of the enthusiasm and vision of 23 headteachers from a range of educational establishments in the Huntingdon area under the banner of 'transforming learning communities'. The network is called HuntSNet, and three years on it continues to respond to the local and national agenda in its aims to meet the needs of its stakeholders.

This study investigated how HuntSNet encouraged the leadership development of its members. The definition of leadership used here incorporates the notion that people are inspired to work willingly towards group goals (Yukl 2002; Northouse 2004). The nature of this study also gave an insight into how a network can be developed and sustained.

The research sought to uncover the journey of this network and consider the influence on leadership within it, including:

- the importance of inspiration and motivation to take part in the network;
- the leadership and management structures and processes within the network;
- the contribution of an Assessment for Learning (AfL) action research project. This is featured as a case study.

The research focused on the key question:

'How can membership of a networked learning community promote and develop leadership?'

It is hoped that this report, in exploring the findings and reflecting the learning in relation to this, will both add to the field of knowledge around effective networked developments as well as offer its readership implications for undertaking a similar journey.

Background to the network

Huntingdon network of schools, collectively known as HuntSNet, and referred to as that in the remainder of this report, was formed in 2002. Its purpose and origin is reflected in its banner statement:

> Transforming Learning Communities

At this time, the existence and very notion of networking schools together for common purpose and goals was innovative, cutting edge and very new to educational establishments. The National College for School Leadership (NCSL) was proactive in promoting the development of, and pioneering networks among, schools. The process of networks applying/bidding for Networked Learning Communities (NLC) programme funding commenced in 2002.

In June 2002 an NCSL conference for some 500 plus schools from 40 networks launched the ground breaking NLC programme, the aim for all participants being to learn from one another, promote innovation and share best practice.

The project, jointly funded by NCSL and the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), involved groups of schools working together in partnership with other educational bodies such as local education authorities (LEAs), universities and community partners. Each network receives up to £50,000 a year in matched funding over three years, starting from September 2002.

The following quotes from David Jackson and David Miliband are from a press release from the NCSL conference on the 26 June 2002 (NCSL 2002). David Jackson, Director of Networked Learning at NCSL, said:

> "This is about groups of schools working in partnership for the benefit both of one another and the whole education system. There are already wonderful things happening in England's schools but we need to be able to share and to learn from what we know. This bottom-up initiative is specifically designed to achieve this sort of collaborative learning and knowledge sharing. Through the networks school leaders and their teams will be able to support each other in tackling problems, learn from each other's experiences and experiment with new and innovative ideas."

Further to this, clear support and endorsement from the DfES and government ministers set the tone for this innovation. David Miliband, Minister for School Standards, said:

> "The next phase of reform for our schools is not more of the same. It is about releasing innovation and creativity at a local level. The Networked Learning Communities programme promises to do exactly that. By bringing schools together to share their ideas, the best practice displayed by the most innovative schools will become standard practice for all schools.

> "For some of the successful networks the programme will provide a springboard for them to formalise and build on existing partnerships, but the majority of the networks are new groupings of schools inspired by the values of the programme and the desire to work interdependently for the benefit of pupils and adults."

Amidst all of this creativity and pioneering work existed a minority of schools already established in or indeed establishing flourishing NLCs.

HuntSNet applied for NLC funding; they were unsuccessful. Despite this the network had started on its journey of collaborative learning and knowledge sharing, in which school leaders and their teams were able to support each other in tackling problems and to learn from each other's experiences, experimenting with new and innovative ideas.

By June 2003 the number of networks had increased to 84 and David Jackson (NCSL 2003) stated:

> "This new spirit of collaboration marks a radical departure from the previous climate of fierce competition among schools. By working together, the schools in each network feel they've got more control over their futures, more power to achieve what they want and a greater base of expertise to draw on.
>
> "Pupils are also benefiting hugely from the new culture of shared responsibility and support inspired by the programme as staff work together to make lessons more stimulating and children are offered a wider range of opportunities, including the chance to link with pupils from other schools.
>
> "There is a new atmosphere evolving in which staff want to improve the educational experiences of all children, not just those in their individual schools."

The development of HuntSNet came at a time when the culture of local clusters of headteachers was firmly established. The group typically met once every half term throughout the academic year. The research findings demonstrate that while some value could be gained from these meetings the general viewpoints expressed from a group of interviewees were:

- "The meetings did not have an agenda – a bit of a talking shop."
- "A lot of moaning tended to predicate the meeting."
- "The meetings tended to be dominated by experienced headteachers."
- "Typically we responded to the here and now – no visionary thinking."
- "It was very difficult for a new headteacher to join in."
- "There was very little value in attending."

On 1 October 2002 David Bell, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector for Schools, officially launched HuntSNet at Hinchingbrooke Performing Arts Centre in front of an audience of school staff, governors, representatives from the LEA, local government and local businesses.

The clear statement of purpose and intention of the network as detailed at the launch were:

HuntSNet
Transforming Learning Communities

We are a professional learning community committed to:
Prioritising staff retention and well-being
Providing innovative career opportunities including:
- Continuing professional and personal development
  - Training and liaison groups
  - Partnerships with universities
Offering professional support networks for all who work in our schools
Enhancing curricular opportunities through joint events
Working in partnership with local business and community
Securing joint funding for joint projects.

The schools have collaborated together as a group to enable shared initiatives as a Networked Learning Community. The schools, helped considerably by Huntingdonshire Regional College, have funded a part-time coordinator who has worked with each school to develop a needs analysis to take the project forward. The outcomes of this include planned work with children in five key areas. Heads and other colleagues from all the schools form five committees to fulfil these identified aims:

ICT, Inclusion, Continuity, People and Partnerships, Creativity.

We are confident that in working together towards our joint aims, HuntSNet schools can maximise resources, offer staff support and provide additional curricular provision in our venture to truly become a transformational learning community.

Prior to the launch of HuntSNet, however, a great deal of thought had been given to the organisational structures, core purposes, leadership and management that would exist within the HuntSNet network of schools.

Members recognised that the work of the network would have to be carefully managed and led, action plans formulated to plot the vision, agendas for every meeting agreed, clear roles and responsibilities identified and distributed to ensure valid and valued interaction across all organisations within the network.

> "All of this was to create a culture of involvement and a real feeling that you must be at the table for fear of missing out on something rather special." (HuntSNet headteacher)

All schools contribute funding to support the work of the network. This is on a lump sum plus formula-led calculation based on the number of pupils on roll. The funding arrangement allows for variance in school size and affordability while ensuring a further commitment to the network. Several points of interest arise when considering the cost to the secondary schools within the network. The sustained participation of the secondaries and Further Education (FE) college demonstrate how strong the mutual collaboration and support has been embedded within the network.

HuntSNet has representation from all phases of education – nursery, infant, junior, primary, secondary, special and FE. The commitment from all establishments provides breadth of experience and much valued insight and contribution.

The functional aspects of HuntSNet were established from the outset – working groups coordinated by a network facilitator (a non-teaching post). Each of the working groups established chairperson type roles and action plans and met once a half term. The network facilitator supported the groups with communication, planning and expenditure/fund-raising issues as well as ensuring that meetings had been arranged, held and minutes distributed. All of this ensured that everyone knew what was happening. Initially five working groups were established (ICT, Inclusion, Continuity, People and Partnerships, Creativity); however, that has now been extended significantly. Membership of the groups was largely dictated by personal interest, expertise and experience. Each working group was populated by headteachers or deputy headteachers from each of the network schools with the exception of the Strategic and Heads Group – headteachers represent this group. A snapshot of the working groups activities are detailed below.

HuntSNet working groups

The Strategic Group implements the strategic direction of HuntSNet based on decisions made at the HuntSNet heads and deputies conference. The group also manage finances and liaise with the HuntSNet coordinator to determine agendas and future planning.

The Heads Group. This comprises all the headteachers of the HuntSNet schools and meets every half term. Sometimes the group invites guest speakers and recent presenters have included Cambridgeshire's Chief Executive, the Director of Education and members from the workforce reform team.

People and Partnerships Group. The work of this group centres on the well-being of, and continuous professional development (CPD) for, all school staff across the HuntSNet schools. The development of a recruitment brochure with commercial sponsorship was a major achievement for the group. In addition to this, recent work includes:

- developing an AfL training day for HuntSNet staff;
- instigating the formation of the HuntSNet leadership group for deputies and senior staff;
- assessing the CPD needs of school administrative staff;
- investigating training for higher level teaching assistants;
- planning training for recently qualified teachers on mind mapping;
- planning the HuntSNet whole staff professional days.

A new element of the agenda is the open forum, for discussion of key educational issues. Other agenda items include regular reports from the working groups and responses from any issues HuntSNet have raised at county level and beyond.

Inclusion Group. Supporting the inclusion strategy is apparent within much of the work initiated to date. This group works on issues relating to the special needs of pupils. Resourcing for pupils' individual needs in terms of staff expertise and specialist provision such as speech and language, has been a major focus. HuntSNet is fortunate to be able

to call on expertise from colleagues at a special school, as well as LEA sources, and has been able to undertake an audit of areas of staff specialism across all its schools.

Recent work has included:

- developing a transition Individual Education Plan (IEP) for pupils moving into a different phase of their education;
- collating a list of individual staff expertise across the schools;
- facilitating outreach work from a special school;
- considering special needs funding within Cambridgeshire and implications for support services;
- promoting community links for special school pupils;
- liaising with the LEA services regarding speech and language provision;
- running joint creative projects for HuntSNet pupils, including those from the special school;
- working within the Continuity Group to develop a 'soft landing' strategy for any pupils across all phases to facilitate a smooth transition.

Creativity Group. This group concentrates on organising and facilitating curricular opportunities for pupils over and above the provision of individual schools. On these occasions various professionals are brought in to give extra expertise. Working collaboratively with pupils from other schools broadens children's and staff's experiences and these sessions have proved very popular.

ICT Group. The HuntSNet ICT Group is set up to promote the use of ICT to meet the needs of the schools, their staff and pupils. It also gives HuntSNet schools a means of communication and enables them to promote their achievements.

Recent work has centred on: broadband connectivity; schools equipment audit NAACEMark project; cross-phase pupil email transition project; development of the HuntSNet website through the county portal; Key Stage 2–Key Stage 3 ICT transition Unit 7.1; and a practitioner-led ICT showcasing fair.

The Leadership Group. The Leadership Group consists of deputy heads or assistant heads from all the HuntSNet schools. The group devises its own programme that concentrates on CPD for this group, and the sharing of good practice among the schools. Recent meetings have centred on ICT in schools, creativity and using the portal.

Their work has been considering:

- workforce reform – a case study; the new Ofsted framework;
- impulse online – management information/pupil data;
- cultural diversity; AfL;
- HuntSNet action research supported by De Montfort University, Leicester.

SENCOs. The HuntSNet SENCOs (special educational needs coordinators) meet three times a year to share good practice and opportunities for professional development. This group is cross-phase and considers the experiences of the child at all stages. The SENCO Group have met to discuss budget issues, transition arrangements and continuity. The HuntSNet schools are trialing a transition IEP for school action pupils that has been devised by the Inclusion Group.

Governors. This newly formed group for HuntSNet governors will consolidate work already being undertaken by heads, senior management teams and others. HuntSNet governors want to find out more about HuntSNet and consider ways they could work together as a group, concentrating on the governors' strategic role.

In addition to the working groups identified above there are three other groups involved in extended network activity in 2005, namely:

- HuntSNet AfL Action Research Group
- HuntSNet team research associateship
- two primary strategy learning networks – Literacy and Numeracy.

Central to the vision of HuntSNet is a biannual leadership conference attended by the headteacher and deputy headteacher from every organisation/school within the network. A constant feature of the conferences is a review of the past year in addition to the vision and looking forward and planning any changes. All of the working groups feed back regarding progress towards achieving their action plans as well as contributions from significant leaders within the Office for Children and Young People Services.

The core purpose of the conference is to gain affirmation from the representatives of the key issues in the here and now as well as those on the horizon. The issues raised are then taken back to the working groups to assimilate and plot the way forward, creating a new action plan for the next two years.

Network features: a short literature review

An aspect of the research project investigated the commonly agreed notions of what a network is and the features of effective networks. Since 2002 the growth of NLCs has attracted a great deal of attention.

> "Networks are now the most important organisational form of our time, reshaping the activities of families, governments and businesses. They are increasingly fundamental to any successful enterprise and they challenge our notions of leadership."

This quote from Valerie Hannon, Director of the DfES Innovation Unit (2004), makes clear the progression and popularity of network growth and highlights the notions of leadership being challenged.

John Craig, a researcher from Demos, reflects on the notion of competition in his paper 'Collaboration and competition' (Craig 2005). He notes that competition in education has for many schools meant a continuous struggle to attract students, teachers and money and that competition bred risk aversion and isolation. However, in the current climate, where facilitation within communities can support risk taking and where innovation can occur within the learning environment, he suggests that school boundaries are being blurred and that opportunities such as peer observation and school-to-school team teaching are making allies out of people who were once rivals. NLCs reduce the risk and costs associated with collaborative work, helping schools to create shared protocols for joint working.

Networks have many functions; however, it appears that all networks have core and essential functions, a notion supported by Darren Holmes and Louise Johns Shepherd (undated):

> Essentially a learning network has as its primary functions that of linking, coordinating and facilitating joint work and promoting collaborative solutions to common learning issues.

In NCSL's *What are we learning about…? Establishing a network of schools* (undated), four effective things that networks do are highlighted:

> Design around a compelling idea or aspirational purpose and an appropriate form and structure.
> Focus on pupil learning.
> Create new opportunities for adult learning.
> Plan and have dedicated leadership and management.

Essentially, a learning network has as its primary functions that of linking, cocoordinating and facilitating joint work and promoting collaborative solutions to common learning issues. Monitoring and evaluation in this context must be about those functions.

Kubiak and Bertram (2004: 4) identify five key activities/stages within networks. In different situations, one or more of these activities may well take on greater importance than the others, as the network adapts to the specific set of challenges that it faces at any one time. This may result from a natural process as the network matures, or take place due to external pressures.

1. *Courting:* approaching potential network partner schools, developing proposals for networked activity, winning headteacher buy-in though individual or group negotiation.
2. *Aligning:* preparing plans for the network – creating a shared agenda and establishing objectives, developing norms and protocols for collaboration between schools.
3. *Connecting:* turning structured opportunities and clear foci into shared programmes of work, with teachers visiting other schools, collaborating through working groups, innovating and sharing their practice.
4. *Embedding:* institutionalising network groups – a networked approach becomes the established way of addressing some issues.
5. *Re-focusing:* re-energising 'stale' networks. A need for new partners is identified, and some groups may be dissolved. A new focus for the network?

Organisational structures within successful networks

Successful networks typically have leadership and management structures to sustain activity and growth. Effective networks also therefore feature dedicated leadership and management. The leadership, internal facilitation and management of the network is seen as crucial to sustaining development. NLCs have also demonstrated the significance of shared or co-leadership arrangements (Anderson and Thomas 2004). This spreads the load and builds leadership succession and distributes the leadership function across the network. This shared leadership creates capacity for dialogue and debate.

Organisational structures reflecting the above when embedded within the leadership and management, and dedicated to collaborative working groups, develop shared capacity for leadership enabling clear and purposeful dialogue, debate and network growth.

In HuntSNet, the working groups structures combined with varying levels of leadership experience and job role provide a helpful combination for strategy and grass-roots activity.

It is very clear from research findings that the role of the facilitator is crucial. The facilitation of collaborative opportunities is essential to maintain the momentum, with part of their role being that of information broker (Wohlstetter et al 2003) irrespective of whether this facilitation is provided by an external consultant, a critical friend or network partner, or an internal member of the network. It suggests that a useful starting point is to consider the key barriers to, and enablers of, successful facilitation that have been identified by participants in learning networks.

The HuntSNet facilitator role has grown with additional administrative support being deployed. This is evidence of the increasing strategic role and presence of the facilitator within the network.

Methods

It was decided that data needed to be collected as several strands. Only when this was done would it be possible to produce meaningful findings. There are representatives from nursery, infant, junior, secondary (including a special school) and FE in the HuntSNet group. In addition the establishments varied hugely in size, not only between sectors but between establishments in the same sector.

When the information was being collected it was recognised that different establishments, particularly in different phases, would not have the same opportunities provided for them by HuntSNet, in particular the working groups; each had a resonance for particular establishments. It was not expected that all establishments would be equally represented on the groups.

The following data strands were collected and analysed:

1. *Leadership questionnaires*
- Questionnaires were sent to each of the network establishments with a covering letter and a request that headteachers/and or deputies filled them in.
- The questionnaire itself was in two sections, the first part collecting background information about the person filling it and the second part giving respondents the opportunity to express their views on HuntSNet and the contribution the network had made to leadership development in their establishments.

2. *Headteacher interviews*
- Four headteachers were interviewed to collect substantially more information about their views on HuntSNet.
- The headteachers were specifically asked their opinion about any leadership development in their establishments that they perceived to be due to membership of HuntSNet.

3. *Analysis of meeting attendance*
HuntSNet carries out many of its functions through a number of groups, meeting throughout the year. An analysis was made of attendance of staff and representation of establishments at all the group meetings related to HuntSNet over the three years the network has been in existence.
- Minutes from each of the groups was analysed with the overall attendance at the meetings being recorded as well as a record of the representation of individual establishments.
- This analysis was also used to gauge the degree of involvement of the network establishments across all the groups.

4. *Professional development meetings*
Records relating to participation in several HuntSNet large professional development opportunities for staff were drawn on. Some of these were for members of specific groups, others for the Leadership Group and the staff. The main whole-school events were AfL, well-being and mind mapping.

5. *Participation in events for pupils*
A number of events were arranged to involve children. Participation by network members was analysed from the records of the various events.

6. *AfL case study*

This area was chosen because there had been high attendance at the CPD event and implementation of AfL was a priority in most establishments. Other colleagues in five of the HuntSNet worked with De Montfort University to look at various aspects of AfL in their establishments.

Findings

Using the definition of leadership by Yuki (2002) and Northouse (2004) found in the introduction, there is evidence to support the impact of HuntSNet on leadership. This cuts across all HuntSNet activities both in relation to working group and whole-school/network contexts. The leadership experiences and gains from taking forward a HuntSNet proposal, stimulus or activity within one's own school was seen to have a significant impact for individuals as well as organisations.

Leadership capacity was positively enhanced at all levels within HuntSNet establishments as a result of belonging to the NLC. The effects were dictated generally by the level of engagement. From establishments supplying school improvement plan evidence, membership of HuntSNet was clearly linked to developing leadership capacity and enhancing standards of teaching and learning.

One of HuntSNet's key aims was to enhance curricular opportunities through joint events. This combined with a central CPD role has typified the work of the network. Substantial collaborative work has been carried out, secured at times through external funding. Over the past three years, thousands of pupils and hundreds of teachers and other staff have been involved in collaborative activities. One aspect of the network's activity and development has been concerned with AfL. If the AfL innovation is considered within the network, clear evidence of high levels of participation and impact on leadership within establishments is to be seen.

1. Leadership questionnaires

The questionnaires produced a wealth of data about how school leaders viewed HuntSNet in general and on its contribution to the leadership development of existing leaders as well as its provision of opportunities for other staff to develop their leadership skills.

Fourteen school leaders completed the questionnaire from 13 establishments. Of these, 12 were headteachers and two were deputy headteachers. The responses were remarkably similar with the same themes reoccurring time after time. There was a strong feeling among the headteachers that HuntSNet performed a very valuable role for them personally, which was true for both recently appointed heads and those who were more established. These can be summarised as:

- HuntSNet provides a forum for headteachers' leadership development and CPD.
- The structure of the network and the work undertaken allowed them to keep up to date with important educational issues.
- Several headteachers expressed an appreciation of the 'critical friend' element of the network.
- The work of the network was strongly supported by headteachers with 12 out of 14 respondents aiming to remain active in groups as well as leadership groups (one leaving the area).

The respondents to the questionnaire also felt that HuntSNet provided an opportunity for leadership development for other staff as well:

- The organisation and planning done by subject coordinators and other staff for many of the pupil events provided leadership development.
- Staff at all levels gained confidence through their involvement in HuntSNet and its activities.
- Headteachers and other staff in small establishments benefited from meeting, discussing and planning with other staff.
- The major CPD activities would not have been financially possible if establishments had to arrange this alone.
- Whole staff from many primary establishments took part in the major CPD events. This gave them collective ownership of what was being developed later in their own establishments. Headteachers felt this contributed to leadership development as more people were involved in the planning and implementation of changes.

Impact themes from the questionnaires

There were major benefits for the Heads and Leadership Group.

- The opportunities to have a critical friend within the many levels of the network were considered profound.
- There were reported to be high levels of mutual support, sharing of information and honesty within the network.
- The website was seen to be a very positive feature and many expressed the need for this to become increasingly effective.
- Real value has been placed on collaborative learning for HuntSNet's children and adults alike.
- Master classes have had a substantial impact in respondents' establishments.
- Smaller establishments value the networking and opportunities for engagement at adult and pupil level.

Quotes from the questionnaires

"The togetherness of the group in working towards agreed goals has added to my leadership experience and expertise." (headteacher, three years in HuntSNet)

"I am greatly encouraged that, as a new head, there is such a community to provide support for me, especially as we are a small school." (headteacher, first year in HuntSNet)

"The real strength of the group is continued cooperation in organising and sustaining a range of activities that improve learning and raise achievement across all phases." (headteacher, 16 years in HuntSNet)

"[HuntSNet has been important for] … promoting the role of other members of staff as leaders." (headteacher, 12 years in HuntSNet)

"HuntSNet has … provided a forum for learning about leadership styles in other establishments." (headteacher, four years in HuntSNet)

"HuntSNet has provided … shared development opportunities eg AfL have been excellent and had a real impact on our school. Leadership group has given deputies access to ongoing development activities – excellent." (headteacher, eight years in HuntSNet)

2. Headteacher interviews

Four headteachers from HuntSNet establishments were interviewed; all of them proved enthusiastic proponents. The following are the main points from the interviews:

- Diversity of opportunity and representation exists in each working group.
- The network provides a powerful voice – especially for smaller establishments as part of the network. Each member has equal influence irrespective of school size.
- There is mutual trust and openness between all the establishments.
- The support offered by all members of HuntSNet provides a real sense of belonging.
- The network functions through professional respect, motivation and participation.
- Membership of HuntSNet represents value for money.
- The vision for senior leadership in establishments is enhanced.
- New educational initiatives are taken on board and developed by the network.
- The role of the coordinator is vital to the success and development of the network. The coordinator needs to have many strengths including awareness, energy, drive and enthusiasm and must be able to participate in a strategic role for the network.

  "It's too hard to run a school and a network."

- The development of the Leadership Group.
- HuntSNet provided a focus, purpose and a strategic element.
- The network is set up to embrace change and broaden its appeal with varied activity, focus and sense of identity.
- Headteachers gain support from a network of colleagues

3. Analysis of meeting attendance

From the analysis of participation within the network the research evidence demonstrates wide participation and mutual support. Every establishment within HuntSNet has had and continues to engage with the network at some level or other. Very good representation from all phases within the network was evident, contributing to the rich discussion and experience on offer or available to members of the network.

a) *Attendance at group meetings:* the analysis of meeting attendance did not include the annual meetings where headteachers and deputies and coordinators meet, nor did it include the biennial review cycle meetings. The working groups were changed slightly after the first of these meetings to keep them fresh and relevant; attendance at these new groups was also analysed for this study. Attendance at this meeting is always excellent, with few if any senior staff from the 23 HuntSNet establishments missing them.

All the groups are composed of senior staff or staff with relevant expertise and leadership responsibilities at each of their individual establishments. Staff have usually volunteered to become a member of the group. Meetings of the groups are held in school time and this puts pressure on staff wishing to attend and has financial implications if cover is required. There are eight groups and the attendance for these by individuals is in the range 50-69% with an average of 59%.

b) *School membership of groups:* not only was it important for the network to have high attendance at all the group meetings, but for a thriving network the support of all the establishments is required. Looking at how involved each was with the network revealed that they were all members of at least two of the groups. This was often the leadership group and one other. The most groups any establishment belonged to was six.

c) Although all the establishments belonged to two or more groups the attendance of representatives from them at meetings did vary significantly with variance between 19-85%. It is difficult to draw any firm conclusions from this given that there was no way of knowing the reasons for the low attendance. It may well not have been an indication that the institution did not support HuntSNet, but due to the member of staff who was due to attend or his/her personal circumstances.

d) The leadership development of group members was further enhanced by having members of outside agencies including the LEA. Indeed five out of seven currently running groups have invited LEA representation on them.

4. Professional development meetings

a) Twenty-one HuntSNet establishments were represented at the Shirley Clarke conference held by HuntSNet in June 2004. A total of 163 teachers from the HuntSNet establishments were joined by 40 teachers from 16 additional establishments at the conference. This typifies the work of the network with a commitment to sharing professional days for key activities. Leading practitioners invited to address the network in high-quality surroundings proves to be a recipe for success.

b) The second large event was on well-being. All the HuntSNet establishments attended this, a total of 153 staff in all.

c) The third event was on mind mapping, which was attended by staff from seven establishments.

The network has the ability to commission high-profile trainers that individual establishments would be unable to afford.

5. Participation in events for pupils

HuntSNet has only been operating fully for 2004 and 2005. Prior to this, groups were still at an initial planning stage and working out their aims for the biannual period. All the major activities for pupils (and staff) analysed for this study took place in 2004 and 2005.

Provision of events for students was seen as a key aim when HuntSNet was set up and numerous events have been organised over the past two years. The summary of the events is included below.

Master classes were put on in the two mainstream secondary establishments for more able students in Year 6 in English, Maths, Humanities, ICT and Science. In 2005 these attracted students from all the HuntSNet establishments with a Year 6. Again this is an indication of the value establishments place on activities such as these and the value of having the ability to organise these events centrally.

The 'Make it Real Game' is the well-known business simulation held in the summer term for Year 6 pupils at one of the secondary establishments. Staff at the school were

trained for this and students from eight primary establishments took part (which was the majority of establishments who were sending students to that secondary school).

Other events were organised for other pupils in Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2. The 'Big Draw' was a creative art event. Each year two 'Big Draw' events were put on, one for Key Stage 1 pupils and the second for Key Stage 2 pupils. Over the two years this involved 36 establishments (establishments took part in more than one of the 'Big Draw' events) and a total of 1,220 pupils. Numerous staff were involved in the organisation of the events as well as those who took part on the day.

Music festivals were put on each year, one for Key Stage 1 and the other for Key Stage 2 pupils

The King John event took place in the summer of 2005 and was the celebration of the 800 years since the granting of Huntingdon's Charter; it was organised by the Creativity Group and was well supported by 11 primary establishments and two secondary establishments. Local dignitaries attended several of the events.

An email project involved Year 6 students corresponding by email with Year 7 pupils in the secondary school they would be attending in the following September.

The curricular links between primary and secondary establishments have been developing, allowing leadership development of middle managers and other staff as the organisation of these links has grown. Science coordinators from some primary establishments and the two secondary establishments worked together to produce a bubbles project that would be started in the summer of Year 6 (and for some involve visits to secondary school laboratories) and continued in Science classes in Year 7. This was very successful with the opportunity for all partner primary schools to take part with the two secondary schools.

As can been seen from this, there was a great deal of enthusiasm among HuntSNet establishments for the events organised for pupils (this came through strongly from the questionnaires and headteacher interviews as well). The opportunity for staff to work with others and plan complex events provides CPD and leadership development for a range of staff, not just those belonging to the leadership team. This benefits both the individuals and their establishments.

6. Evidence for leadership development from the implementation of AfL in establishments

AfL was (and is) a major part of recent government strategies. It is used in this research to assess the impact of HuntSNet leadership on the implementation of AfL strategies in establishments. The 'leadership trail' starts with the identification of AfL as a key area for development by the relevant working group. This led to the AfL conference by a leading speaker. This conference had been identified by many establishments in their school improvement plans as a key resource for launching their AfL development. The burgeoning interest in taking AfL grew further and so was born the AfL action research project. Association with HuntSNet enabled further participation for establishments to work with a lecturer from De Montfort University to undertake this action research. Action research took place in six of the HuntSNet establishments (one secondary, one junior and four primary schools). Staff at each school researched around the same basic premise:

Assessment for Learning enables the learning community to become active and reflective learners.

Each research project examined an aspect of the following research questions.

- How does the use of success criteria enable students to become more reflective learners?
- How does self-assessment promote learning?
- How does the teaching in the Foundation Stage enable children to become more reflective learners?

Four schools focused on the use of success criteria and the other two on self-assessment.

The research from these schools has been analysed as an indicator of how information from the course became a feature of classroom practice, which in turn is an indicator of successful leadership.

It was clear from this research that AfL had become well established in the schools where this research was carried out. It also pointed out areas for development. Anecdotal evidence from the schools where all staff attended the conference suggests that the shared vision that this produced was invaluable in implementing the AfL initiative. The staff doing the action research demonstrated leadership skills in carrying out the project. These included organisation with outside agencies, strategic planning centred on school improvement, classroom impact and the development of monitoring and support skills.

Conclusions

> "… leadership is like the abominable snowman, whose footprints are everywhere but who is nowhere to be seen." (Bennis and Nanus, 1995, p.19)

HuntSNet activities have allowed senior leaders to develop their leadership skills and have also given a large number of other staff leadership development activities, through:

- developing and sharing the vision for the network;
- CPD for all teaching staff and a growing number of non-teaching staff;
- staff taking leadership roles in developing and implementing group action plans;
- headteachers and other staff chairing and/or having membership of groups;
- headteachers enabling, encouraging and supporting their staff to participate;
- evaluating network impact and outcomes through self-evaluation activities.

Sustainability has been achieved by maintaining the relevance to and interest of participants through changing the focus of groups to respond to both national and local priorities and by maintaining the voluntary nature of participation.

Hints for building and sustaining successful networks

The following points have contributed to its success, and may be applicable to other networks:

- a clear commitment from all headteachers and governing bodies, indicated for example through its inclusion in school improvement plans and by providing funding;
- a commitment to the network's autonomy to create local solutions;
- a clear and shared vision for the network that is represented in the written aims and values;
- regular evaluation and impact of network activity alongside a biannual conference that reviews the work of the previous two years and informs updating of the action plans for the following two years. This includes redefining the structure (for example of working groups) and strategy according to need;
- enabling and promoting active participation by large numbers of staff;
- providing CPD for staff, for example using whole-school and network conferences;
- encouragement of a creative approach for staff and pupils, for example through music festivals and arts projects;
- clearly defining the facilitation role and allowing time for this to be done, for example by appointing a network facilitator.

The influence of the network has been reflected in the development of two primary strategy learning networks for Literacy and Numeracy. These are comprised of schools from HuntSNet and have got off to a very effective start due to the well-defined operating procedures and expectations established.

Issues and actions

Three examples of issues to which the network needed to respond were:

- Diminishing attendance in specific groups. Action was taken to evaluate and reflect on the causes and consider solutions at the half-termly headteachers' forum. This resulted in changes to group membership and/or headteacher intervention to assess reasons for non-attendance and secure members' commitment.
- At the biannual review, it was felt that there was a need to extend participation to other members of the school communities. Positive action to involve more staff within schools beyond the leadership team has resulted in much wider participation.
- The need to increase effectiveness evaluation, for example, impact on learning. In response, every working group has built in self-evaluation activities for all action plans to ensure increased rigour, for example, post-activity questionnaires completed by teachers and/or pupils.

Acknowledgements

Staff members at NCSL who supported us as research associates.

All staff and pupils who took part in any aspect of the research.

Katherine Pike, HuntSNet facilitator, for giving her time so generously in support of this research study.

Governors at both the associates' schools.

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