

Building teacher leadership through Teacher Led Development Work groups¹

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Abstract

Joanne Mylles graduated from the Herts. MEd in Teaching and Learning in 2005. Her project focused on the way she and her colleagues have been developing teacher leadership through the establishment of Teacher Led Development Work (TLDW) groups in Hertfordshire schools. In this article she provides an account of her research in which she evaluated TLDW groups in two contrasting schools.

Sir John Lawes School, Harpenden, is one of a group of schools in Hertfordshire engaged in an effort to build teacher leadership. Through the HertsCam Network, experienced teachers work in partnership with University staff to support Teacher Led Development Work (TLDW) groups.

Sir John Lawes School has been on an upward curve of development for ten years and has recently achieved Training School Status (DfES, 2004). This involves a commitment to provide Initial Teacher Training (ITT) but also enables the school to address questions related to teachers' professional learning more widely.

The well-established partnership between Hertfordshire and the University of Cambridge Faculty of Education (HertsCam) enabled the school to establish a Teacher Led Development Work group. The model set out in 'Teacher Led Development Work: Guidance and Support' (Frost & Durrant, 2003a) was adopted. Through a series of twilight seminars, teachers undertake development work, documented in a portfolio of evidence leading to academic certification up to masters level. The group sessions scaffold teacher leadership by supporting their enquiry-based development work, helping them to design a range of improvement initiatives that will have direct impact on the quality of teaching and learning in the school. The sessions give teachers the opportunity to clarify their vision, values and professional concerns and plan for maximum impact (Frost & Durrant, 2003b). The process is supported by occasional visits to the Faculty of Education library, occasional participation in county-wide networking events and online research. The aim is to help the teachers to build their 'agency' so that they can act strategically to make a real difference to professional practice and to pupils' achievement (Frost, Durrant, Head & Holden, 2000).

¹ A similar article also appears in *Improving Schools* 9(1) March 2006.

At Sir John Lawes, the group is led by myself and Head of Humanities, Maria Santos Richmond in collaboration with David Frost from the University Faculty of Education. Maria plays an additional role which involves mentoring the teachers, facilitating meetings between them and the Headteacher, organising opportunities for them to share their work and giving support and advice on a one-to-one basis.

Changing policy environment

Since the inception of the National Curriculum at the end of the 1980s successive governments have pursued reforms aimed at raising standards and improving schools. It has been a multi-pronged attack that includes initiatives such as the publication of attainment data, the performance management of teachers, the spread of ideas about leadership through the NCSL² and, more recently, training in pedagogy through the Key Stage Three Strategy (DfES, 2002). A significant feature of the national reforms has been the gradual devolution to schools of funding to spend on continuing professional development (CPD). Recent policy initiatives encourage schools to engage in school-based learning that is more collaborative and makes better use of teachers' existing knowledge (DfES, 2001; DfES, 2005). There are clearly competing discourses here, but there is increasing support for strategies in which teachers can identify development needs and priorities for themselves. More than ever before there is scope for schools to be more imaginative in creating the conditions for teacher leadership. For Sir John Lawes and the other schools in the HertsCam Network the policy environment is now more conducive to teacher-led development work.

At Sir John Lawes, the impetus to establish a teacher-led development programme was also provided by a successful OFSTED inspection in 2003. The report highlighted the excellent leadership provided by the Headteacher, praised the quality of teaching and learning and described the school's programme of leadership and professional development opportunities as excellent. However, given the spotlight on pupil attainment as a measure of a school's success, it was imperative that the school maintain its momentum. Although the school was flush from its success there was uncertainty about how best to move forward. There was a mixture of excitement and trepidation about how to create further capacity for improvement and success. One strategy which emerged was to develop the collegiate and collaborative work at the school as a way of further empowering staff to engage in development activities to innovate and make a difference.

Discussions within the school's Senior Leadership Team focused on the school's capacity to innovate (Harris & Lambert, 2003). The discussion was nourished by some of the recent literature on distributed leadership (Bennett, Harvey, Wise & Woods, 2003; Gronn, 2000; Spillane, Halverson & Diamond, 2001; see also Spillane, 2006). Additionally, articles by David Hargreaves (1999 & 2001) offered a vision of what a 'knowledge creating school' could be like. Hargreaves argues that the potential for change is rooted in schools rather than something which can be orchestrated from outside, and that innovative schools need to engage in knowledge creation.

² NCSL – National College for School Leadership

It was in this context that a Teacher Led Development Work group was established: within an already successful school where staff are hungry for leadership opportunities; where collaborative work is well-established; and where the Headteacher is passionately committed to empowering colleagues and de-centring his leadership (Murphy, 2002). I had been a strong advocate for the idea of teacher-led development work and undertook to carry out an evaluation of the initiative as part of my research as a participant in the Herts. MEd in Teaching and Learning (Mylles, 2005). My evaluation included a comparison with the working of a group in another school in the network.

I began my research by establishing a dialogue with Caren Earp, the Deputy Head who co-led the TLDW group in the other school; we subsequently agreed that she would interview the Headteacher in my school and that I would interview the Headteacher in her school. We would carry out reciprocal observations of TLDW group sessions in both schools and I would interview three of the participants in each group.

In this paper I provide a brief glimpse of what I learnt about the potential for teacher leadership by focussing on just two cases. Discussed below is the work of two of the nine original members of the Teacher Led Development Work group at Sir John Lawes School.

Danielle Heley's story

Danielle's development work centred on girls' self-esteem which she had been concerned about within one of her classes and also within her work as an Assistant Head of Year. She read around the subject and found a useful 'self-esteem checklist' that could be used to identify pupils with low self-esteem (Lawrence, 1996). She talked with a range of colleagues who taught Year 8 girls and asked them to use the checklist to help her identify a group of target pupils. She followed this up by talking with the teachers concerned to get their views on these pupils' dispositions and achievements.

In spite of what was said in the leaflet inviting teachers to join the TLDW group, it took a long time for Danielle to embrace the idea of leadership. During an interview about her work, she explained that at the beginning she had assumed a traditional idea of what leadership was: *'I thought if you have a title or management point then you are a leader'*. At this stage the concept of leadership, for Danielle, was bound up in role and title rather than a set of skills or behaviours.

During the first year, Danielle was modest about her capacity to influence others and in the TLDW group sessions her accounts of her own leadership had to be coaxed out of her. She struggled to articulate her aims in this regard. In an interview she confessed: *'I had the conflict, what do I lead? Do I lead? Am I just doing this for the children? Am I doing it for the school or for me?'*

A key part of Danielle's development project was a series of interviews with the target girls and the subsequent creation of materials to use with pupils. In the early stages, the

development of her own practice in this way was the main purpose. However, as the process gathered momentum, the scope of Danielle's influence grew. Later in the year, she involved outside agencies in her work, produced a guidance leaflet for colleagues and led a workshop on self-esteem at the school's annual residential conference.

Towards the end of the process Danielle was more confident about linking her leadership to pupils' needs but also about using the knowledge she had gained from her project with a wider audience. She eventually became confident about her ability to influence others.

People can come and observe me. I have been to observe people as well, where things aren't going as well as with the same students in my lesson. I feel quite able to do that and share how to move pupils forward.

(Danielle interview)

Towards the end of the academic year, Danielle assembled the evidence of her development work in a portfolio which she presented at the HertsCam Network Event at the local authority Professional Development Centre. She was subsequently awarded a Certificate of Further Professional Studies. Her portfolio concluded with a brief reflection on her experience with the TLDW programme.

My understanding of what a leader is has changed vastly during this programme. My initial thoughts were that leaders and managers were synonymous; that to lead on a subject you had to have some management responsibility. I now see that there is no link. Leaders can be anyone who has a passion and the knowledge to lead in an area. To be a leader doesn't mean you hold all the answers; it is the process that's important – the continuation of learning.

(Heley, 2005:29)

Central to the development of Danielle's leadership identity was the support of the Headteacher. Danielle drew confidence in her own ability from the Headteacher and felt that his confidence nurtured belief amongst the staff in her leadership potential.

I am now going to be Head of Year at 24 and I feel quite confident that I can do it. I think that other people have the confidence in me because of him. He sees me as fine and he encourages me with his confidence.

(Danielle interview)

These comments resonate with Murphy's description of the role of the headteacher as a community builder. One element of this is the importance of fostering leadership in others. 'They must learn to lead by empowering rather than controlling others' (Murphy, 2002: 77). In the period immediately before the launch of the TLDW group, the school's Senior Leadership Team had discussed a report of research into the impact of teachers' development work in schools in Hertfordshire and Kent (Frost, 2004). The report emphasised the crucial role that headteachers play in enabling teachers to have the confidence and belief that they can exercise leadership.

Anne Kenney's story

Anne was Head of Science. She had a position of responsibility and already considered herself as a leader, but there were clear limitations to her leadership. She was a leader within the Science Faculty, which she saw as being ‘*in a safe pond*’, but the leadership did not extend beyond these boundaries.

Her development project centred on her concern about the space and time provided within the science curriculum for pupils to develop their thinking and metacognition. She was concerned that pupils were wasting valuable thinking time copying material from the board and she wanted to try out other approaches to enable them to think through the scientific concepts. She tried out a range of different strategies with one of her groups and evaluated the work as it progressed. Of central importance was that the pupils were partners in the project from the outset. She used a technique based on the Force Field Analysis from John Macbeath’s ‘Self-Evaluation Files’ to get feedback from pupils about what helps them to learn and what hinders their learning (MacBeath, 2003).

Anne developed a new set of resources for Year 9 pupils to avoid the need for significant copying; notes were provided for them in the ‘revision booklet’. She then used this work in discussions within the Science Faculty to influence the future direction of the science curriculum. She arranged with a local authority Science consultant to carry out a ‘book look’ in which they analysed pupils’ notebooks to see the range of writing tasks and to gauge the extent to which pupils were being asked to copy material from the board. She also used a learning styles inventory based on the VAK model to provide additional insight into the range of ways in which pupils prefer to learn. All of this evidence enabled Anne to work with colleagues in the team to review schemes of work within the Faculty.

Through her work in the TLDW group Anne was able to share her work with a wider audience. In addition she used the lunch time teaching and learning forum to share accounts of the work. At the end of the year she considered that she could influence others outside her Faculty.

(at the beginning) I would never have said I had any impact on the rest of the school whereas now I actually think I do.

(Anne interview)

In an interview about the work, Anne pinpointed two factors which had helped her widen her view of leadership. Firstly, Anne’s development as a leader was supported by Maria, co-leader of the TLDW group. Maria’s support and mentoring underpinned Anne’s confidence to influence beyond her Faculty.

If Maria hadn’t been doing her role I wouldn’t have done the Learning Lunch. There are lots of things I wouldn’t have done. She says, how about this? What about talking to him? Leading the Learning Lunch is not something I would have put myself forward for ever.

(Anne interview)

This is in line with Holden’s (2002) view of the kind of mentoring someone on a

leadership team can provide.

The accumulation of shared wisdom through ongoing critical conversations was at the heart of a particular and effective vision of school improvement, a vision founded on a commitment to building and supporting communities of practice.

(Holden, 2002:20)

Secondly, the collaborative and collegiate culture at the school enabled Anne to widen her conception of leadership. She talked about the prevailing culture of trust and respect where risk taking was encouraged but no blame attached if things did not go as well as expected: *'chatting about teaching and learning, it is nothing official it is just part of the conversation at school'*. Anne spoke of how she had found the discussions at the Teacher Led Development Work group enriching and that this wider forum enabled her to think more deeply about how to move her work forward.

I talk to Alan about stuff and I will say how do you do this and he will tell me how he does it in Maths and I might not do it exactly the same but I will certainly take his ideas and work on them.

(Anne interview)

This is akin to the *tinkering* which Hargreaves (1999) argues contributes to knowledge creation. It also underscores the suggestion that universities can be brought in to nurture critical discourse through the establishment of a support group such as ours (Frost, 2004). In an interview, the Headteacher at Sir John Lawes school suggested that the Teacher Led Development Work group had contributed to a greater level of critical discourse in the school.

It is an interesting coincidence that this year we had an INSET day for the first time which started from pre-conference reading which was discussed at the conference. It has been quite a research-led period over the last term. There has been a variety of times that we have published research documents in advance to promote further discussion. Well we didn't do that a year ago. It's a funny co-incidence if it's nothing to do with it.

(Headteacher interview)

However, research in this case has to be understood as an integral part of teacher leadership rather than a separate activity.

The impact of teacher leadership

The Teacher Led Development Work group at Sir John Lawes School is now into its second year. At the beginning of year two another ten teachers joined the group and five of the teachers from the first year continued their involvement in the group; they are now pursuing their project work at masters level. These five may achieve the Advanced Diploma or proceed all the way to an MEd. Anne has joined the Herts. MEd in Teaching and Learning based at the Hertfordshire Development Centre, but she still attends all the sessions of the school-based TLDW group. Maria's role in supporting the group has developed and her own research project is helping us to understand more about how to scaffold teacher leadership in the school.

The impact of the TLDW group has been substantial and this has been demonstrated recently through an evaluation exercise we conducted using the Impact Framework devised for this purpose (Frost & Durrant, 2002). We used this framework to discuss a range of development initiatives within the school with the Heads of Faculty involved in the TLDW group, other colleagues in the group and the Headteacher; subsequently several colleagues were interviewed on camera so that their views could be easily shared with wider audiences. The Headteacher offered the view that the TLDW group is '*the key contributory factor to school improvement at Sir John Lawes School at the moment*'. The impact of the group members' work grows exponentially because of the emphasis on teacher leadership. One example is where a newly qualified teacher, Tom Murphy, picked up on Anne Kenney's work and has developed some very exciting work involving student leadership in science classrooms. In turn, Tom, together with some of his students, made a presentation to the whole staff at a recent staff conference. The idea of 'Student Led Learning' has been adopted as the focus of the school's development for the forthcoming academic year. Another member of the group, Lisbeth Ricciardi, has convened a research and development group specifically to investigate and develop strategies for supporting 'gifted and talented' students.

The impact of the initiative is being felt beyond the school. I am now also supporting TLDW groups in other schools in the region and many members of our group at Sir John Lawes have had the opportunity to share accounts of their development work at HertsCam Network events. At the time of writing there are TLDW groups in 10 schools. This network constitutes a rich community of practice in which teacher leadership is flourishing. Increasingly teachers are discovering that leadership is an important dimension of their professional role and that it enables them to fulfil their desire to make a significant difference to the quality of pupils' learning.

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