

## **Introduction**

Over the past 18 months, I have enjoyed the privilege of participating in an innovative international school leadership development programme. This has promoted collaborative work involving nine trios of headteachers from each of the following education authorities:

- Vejle, Denmark;
- Tuscany, Italy;
- Carmarthenshire/Ceredigion, Wales.

The **aims** of the whole programme have been to:

- Raise school effectiveness, especially pupil learning, by developing leadership;
- Foster international understanding;
- Provide challenge for individual school leaders to develop;
- Use action based, inquiry approaches;
- Foster leadership mentoring;
- Develop a transnational model of leadership.

The **main activities** during the programme have been:

- Professional development, focusing on leadership effectiveness;
- School development, identifying an appropriate theme based on an organisational challenge;
- Mentoring and coaching, by personal and electronic means.

**Programme delivery** has involved a series of reflective conferences for all participants in each of the three countries, followed by collaborative working as trios, in the form of action research in each other's schools. My partners are:

- Signora Paola Conti, headteacher of the Istituto D'Istruzione Superiore Raffaello Magiotti, Montevarchi, Tuscany, Italy;
- and Mr Karsten Damgaard, headteacher of Jeulsminde Folkeskole, Vejle, Denmark.

The first cycle took place in West Wales in September 2002. The second cycle was held in Tuscany between 7<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> March 2003. The third and final cycle took place in Vejle between 3<sup>rd</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> October 2003, during which I undertook the following:

- assisted with the planning and delivery of a conference for 25 heads from Wales, Tuscany and Denmark on the theme of 'Coaching as a school leadership technique';
- attended a Vejle regional conference on values in education;
- visited 5 different schools (including my headteacher partner's Folkskole at Jeulsminde);
- met senior county officials in the administrative districts of Jeulsminde and Vejle;
- took part in various educational activities (e.g. an assembly and an English lesson);
- learnt more about myself and about effective leadership from experienced colleagues.

### **Aims of Cycle 3**

Each of the three cycles has had its own complementary aims with an increasingly sophisticated approach to school leadership being adopted. For Cycle 3, that sophistication was exemplified paradoxically in the simplicity of the agreed aims:

- Be clear;
- Do differently;
- Share learning.

Whereas Cycle 1 focused on 'reality', Cycle 2 focused on 'value and vision', Cycle 3 focused on the use of reflective coaching as a tool for personal, professional and organisational development.

## **Key learnings from Cycle 3**

During the week, I gained much more in relation to my understanding of school leadership:

### **1. Context**

It is a truism that a school leader is bound by the context of the system within which s/he works. As far as the Danish Folkeskole system is concerned, the following contextual features emerged strongly:

- a) Danish schools enjoy a high level of investment, both financially and socially. The average PTR is 1:10.7, average class sizes are 19 and government expenditure per pupil is 47,851 DDK (approximately £4,800);
- b) Danish schools are not exam-oriented. They are dominated by the class teacher system, comparable to our primary system whereby pupils have the same teacher for the majority of their time in school, s/he having the responsibility for monitoring and supporting pupils' subject-specific and social development;
- c) The curriculum has a strong emphasis on Danish history and language;
- d) Pupils, parents and members of staff are encouraged to engage in critical debate and to participate in decision-making (see below);
- e) Staff development is pedagogical, but it is gradually becoming more subject orientated.

## **2. Values**

One issue that my trio agreed to explore during our stay in Vejle was that of educational values. Our initial premise was that a transactional level of working involves a focus on skills, competences, results and the environment. At a transformational level, it involves values, beliefs, identity and purpose.

Our starting point was the Danish Folkeskole system which is grounded in the following very clear personal, professional and organisational values:

- Involvement of parents and pupils (daring to express themselves);
- Development of independent judgment in relation to responsible personal actions;
- Promotion of intellectual freedom, equality and democracy (including pupil councils from a very young age).

We then began the process of considering the values unique to the Jeulsminde Folkeskole. The school has gone through a process of redefinition, involving new school buildings, new structures and new members of staff. This has prompted the head to take staff through a redrafting of their values, leading to the adoption of the following as the agreed values for the school:

- Openness;
- Engagement;
- Responsibility;
- Unity/community.

The next stage will be for an external 'agent provocateur' to come in and challenge staff on the practical realisation of these values in each section of the school. The head will also use the revised values to draft a statement of educational entitlement for young people.

In my view, this emphasis on values has ensured that the head is not 'trapped' in transactional work, but has developed the transformational characteristics mentioned above.

Vindication of the head's approach came in our attendance at a key regional conference called 'The Caravan of Values', held on Monday, 6<sup>th</sup> October at the Skamlingsbanken Conference Centre. The vision for this emerged out of an international 'Roots and Wings' conference held on the island of Elba in 1999. It is symptomatic of a general desire in Denmark and other European countries to revive social values. In this process, it is maintained that teaching has a central role in providing children with a framework of values.

The location for the Conference was intrinsically significant as it was held in a much-disputed territory on the Danish-German border. In that area, the Danish language was used historically as a 'weapon' against the Germans in order to maintain identity and tradition, demonstrating that what may be lost externally can be retained inwardly. This influenced the model for 'the Caravan of Values' as a means of reconnection and rebirth of Danish society.

The timescale for the process is as follows:

June 2002 – Aug 2003 – initial consultation on values including a national Conference held on 7<sup>th</sup> May 2003 led by the Education Minister;

Sept-Oct 2003 – 14 regional Conferences held across Denmark;

Sept 2003 – June 2004 – participating schools will be expected to adopt the values in their planning and development processes;

May 2004 – an international Conference in Copenhagen;

October 2004 – a final Conference to be held in the Old Parliament building in Copenhagen.

Symbolism is strong in the whole process; a runic stick is passed from one region to another, with one value of 7 syllables from each conference being etched onto the stick. At the October 2004 final conference, the stick will be presented to the Danish government.

The Conference also gave us an opportunity to examine an educational paradigm known as 'the triangle of general motivation, general skills and general values' (H. H. Knoop). Underpinning this model is research which has shown that knowledge and skills taught in schools are transitory, whereas general skills (initiative, creativity, collaboration, communication, social responsibility) are required in all aspects of life and are characteristic of a strong person. The aptitude for general skills comes from birth, so people are motivated to develop them early on. Subject skills are lost easily, so their value is limited. As individual skills are often prerequisites for possession of political and pedagogical values, it makes sense to talk about a triangle of general motivating drives, general skills and general values.

One of the values underpinning this approach is that social competition works to the detriment of the whole community, as the individual only tries to promote him/herself at the expense of the whole community. Therefore,

there is a close relationship between what one does for oneself and what one does through learning.

The impact of this is maximised when there is appropriate challenge underpinned by a comfortable learning environment (the contention of Vitaly Csiksenminalyi, 1993) the preconditions of which are:

- Concrete, liberating aims;
- Practical, participatory rules;
- Adaptation of challenge to match skills;
- Clear feedback;
- Removal of distractions.

We live in a world of social contradictions where we are able to travel to space but unable to solve a Friday afternoon traffic jam. We are immersed in information from the media but are unable to choose qualitatively. In this contradictory world, what is the relationship between the values of school and society? The aim is for 'the Caravan of Values' to provoke a general consideration of this vital question and to use education as a means of making a difference.

Incidentally, the consensus from the Conference we attended was to adopt the following value and to write it on the runic stick:

'Aim at the stars'.

### **3. Coaching**

This has the potential to be a powerful tool for school leaders to use in improving staff efficiency and effectiveness. During the week in Denmark, I worked in my trio to hone my own coaching skills.

In doing so, I came to the conclusion that coaching does not involve:

- Providing answers;
- Making someone comfortable;
- Personalities;
- Problem-solving, per se.

The characteristics of effective coaching are:

- Problem identification and exploration;
- Questioning and challenging;
- Dealing with issues;
- Empowering others;
- Doing differently.

Finally, the prerequisites for effective coaching I found to be:

- Flexibility;
- Suspension of assumptions;
- Challenging of convictions;
- Confidence in each other;
- Rational and dispassionate approaches;
- Time;
- Empathy, having true understanding and interest;
- Simplifying complexity.

These approaches enabled us to work effectively as a trio to assist our Danish partner in examining the following major issues facing his school:

- The revision of school values;
- The division of the school into 4 sections;
- A 'problem' member of staff;
- Smoking amongst older pupils.

We frequently used coaching techniques in this dialogue, though were not always coaching. It was agreed that it was a most valuable tool as it helped the questioner and the questioned to focus on the issues being considered. It is about unlocking potential and thereby increasing achievement, about helping people to learn instead of teaching them (see Timothy Gallway). In this way, it is a model which can be used to improve pedagogy as well as school leadership.

## **Conclusion**

Over the course of each of the three cycles of the 'Roots and Wings' programme, I have been able to develop my leadership competence at three interrelated levels, with the following results:

### **1. Personal dimension**

#### ***What I have learnt:***

- How little I truly knew about myself. This became apparent as I analysed my Hermann Profile. It revealed my blind spots in relation to task-awareness, organisation and control.

#### ***What has changed:***

- I have made an effort to work at my blind spots, assisted by my partner heads. This has been a challenge when I have become so involved in the 'busy-ness' of school life, yet it has taught me to be honest and clear about my own shortcomings and about the need to have support from others in tackling them.

### **2. Professional dimension**

#### ***What I have learnt:***

- How little I truly understood about the nature of transformational leadership. Having the unique opportunity to work alongside two experienced and very able colleagues in different educational contexts has deepened my understanding in this respect;
- The importance of considering educational values in school improvement;
- The value of coaching in managing staff.

#### ***What has changed:***

- My leadership style has become more focused and less 'woolly'. When faced with strategic decisions, I have developed a tendency to think, 'What would Paola and Karsten do?'. An example of this would be our recent appointment of an additional Assistant Headteacher. The selection process for the appointment was strengthened by a deeper professional understanding which I gained from the Programme.
- In the period from March 2004 onwards, we will be reconsidering our own school's values and aims. I will seek to use 'The Caravan of Values' model to engage members of staff, pupils, parents and governors in this process;

- We will seek to develop staff coaching skills in the next cycle of staff development. This will be a useful adjunct to the Performance Management framework.

### **3. Organisational dimension**

#### ***What I have learnt:***

- The importance of genuine dialogue involving all members of a school community in improving a school's effectiveness. This also raises the question of 'Whose school is it?'
- The value of international links in enhancing the educational experiences and opportunities for young people.

#### ***What has changed:***

- We have introduced a more collegiate approach to leading our school. This has seen the introduction of a representative group of 8 members of staff (4 teachers, 1 learning support assistant, 1 technician, 1 deputy head, 1 head) whose task is to consider organisational change issues. It has only met once (to agree terms of reference and some issues relating to work-life balance); eventually, its remit will be widened to include pedagogy. We have also introduced Year Councils for students. Members are elected from each tutor group and meet once per month to raise issues of concern and questions on behalf of students. Year Councils elect delegates to form our School Council, which in turn considers whole school issues. This, in turn, elects student delegates to join the school's Governing Body, the local Town Council, and the County Youth Council.
- Regarding the international dimension, so far we have:
  - ✓ appointed an international links co-ordinator with additional non-contact time to improve our links with other countries (she is a Breton who teaches Welsh and French to our students). She has attended a 'Roots and Wings' Conference in Olomouc, establishing valuable curriculum links with European partners;
  - ✓ continued to build links with Vejle and Tuscany, involving exchanges of correspondence between pupils. One important development in this will be the visit of Jeulsminde Folkeskole's administrative officer to our school in February 2004;
  - ✓ marked the European Day of Languages with a whole series of exciting events involving members of staff and students communicating in 10 different languages;
  - ✓ established a link with a school in New South Wales, Australia.

## How far have the initial aims of the 'Roots and Wings' Programme been met?

Many of the aims have been, and are continuing to be, fulfilled. However, there have been some barriers:

- Over-ambition in the timescale – there was too long a period between each of the three cycles and too short a time in each other's schools. Overall, there has been too short a period to detect a real, lasting impact on each other's schools;
- Communication has been hampered by technological and linguistic problems.

However, the successes have been many, as we have been enabled to:

- Share the 'little things', the daily practice, experiences and values of school leadership;
- Face the challenges of interaction and dialogue in contrasting linguistic and cultural contexts;
- See oneself through the eyes of others.

Above all else, our trio has developed a relationship with a momentum beyond the formal Programme itself. In this respect, we are continuing to send each other questions, advice and guidance which relate to current issues in our schools. This is an unique privilege to continue to be able to share with colleagues in other countries and it has been made possible by the substantial and invaluable financial support received from the General Teaching Council for Wales.

Tim Day – 30<sup>th</sup> December 2003