

The Roots and Wings International Programme for School Leadership – Second Cycle in Tuscany, Italy

Background

This activity involved an international conference held in the Demidoff Hotel in Florence over 3 days engaged in professional development activities using materials prepared by a company called “Rezolv”. This was followed by 4 days of visits to an Italian school. 27 Headteachers from Wales, Denmark and Italy together with advisors from the partner regions in Carmarthenshire/Ceredigion, Veijle and Tuscany met at the conference over a weekend from March 7th. –10th. The Florence conference followed on from a similar 3 day conference held in Wales in October 2002 when participating Headteachers were divided up into “trios” of Heads one from each of the participating regions. These trios have been maintained and have kept in contact by computer since that initial meeting.

During the visit to Wales each trio left the 3 day conference to visit the Welsh partner’s school and to deepen understanding of a different educational system while focussing on a “leadership question”. This time after the 3 days in Florence the 3 partners visited the Italian Headteacher’s school in order to continue, develop and refine the process. In this case a Danish Headteacher and myself visited the B. Lotti School for 14-19 year olds in Massa Maritima near Grosseto in Southern Tuscany for 4 days.

Conference agenda and activities

The activities undertaken were extremely relevant to my role as a Headteacher because the focus of the programme is to develop and even “transform” the leadership and management qualities of the participating Headteachers in order to raise school effectiveness and the learning of pupils. It is also designed to foster international understanding by developing educational and management issues in a transnational context within the environment of real schools. The trios have attempted to adopt an action based, inquiry approach to developing management and leadership within a theoretical model that challenges existing assumptions and performance. That model is then applied within a school environment. The opportunities to develop deep relationships within the trios are strengthened by a commitment to leadership mentoring or coaching by the partner Headteachers. The activities are entirely appropriate to school leadership and management at the highest level. This conference also gave Headteachers the opportunity to discuss the experience in the Welsh school during the first visit.

Benefits to teaching and learning in the classroom

I do not teach and therefore there is no immediate benefit to pupils, through improving my own teaching in the classroom. However there are considerable benefits in terms of my own learning via the theoretical and practical models of leadership and management, which may impact on the school in my role as Headteacher. In this section I will therefore concentrate on the benefit this activity has given me as a school leader. During this second cycle we, i.e. the Danish Headteacher, the Italian Headteacher and myself, have agreed that our “leadership question” would be to ask ourselves how we could seek to engage, commit and motivate all staff in the task of meeting the shared values and aims of the school - thus raising standards through increased effectiveness. Many of our conversations for the rest of the week focussed on this basic issue. Initial discussions questioned whether anything had actually changed in our schools since the first meeting where we discussed the problems we had. These initial discussions revolved around workload issues, time and delegation. How do we as Heads find the time to deal with the really important questions in order to improve our schools and raise standards?

The professional development courses which we were engaged in during the weekend conference over the whole of Saturday and Sunday and up until 1.00 p.m. on Monday included the following. Firstly we were given a broad, sweeping survey of the Italian education system as a framework to use when visiting the Italian school after the conference. From then on the programme encouraged us to question our assumptions of what was of value in our systems and schools as a precursor to motivating us to seek to achieve change. During one exercise we were shown international comparisons or league tables of pupil surveys recording their satisfaction with:-

- a) how they felt their school had prepared them for later life and
- b) how satisfied they were with their school.

There were various exercises around the theme of “Whose school is it anyway?” looking at the perspectives of different stakeholders particularly pupils, staff and parents. During one exercise for example 3 heads from different countries took on the roles of a parent, pupil and member of staff in discussing what was of importance to them in a school. Obviously this raised all sorts of issues and disagreements related to culture and value systems. A significant statistic repeated after this was that the Pisa report 2000 stated that in most countries 25% of pupils said that school is not a place that they want to go to. This statistic was significant and was designed to jar us out of any complacency we felt about our own school. I have already begun to survey these stakeholders’ attitudes about our school as a result of this course

The whole purpose of the course is to question Headteachers’ assumptions about leadership and management and to encourage the school leaders of three different nations to re-examine their leadership style and raise school standards by acting more effectively as a school leader and manager. Thus the next exercise involved us in planning our vision for our school by 2005. This followed exercises which challenged our assumptions about what we might value. Each Headteacher presented his/her vision for the future on A4 sheets pinned around the walls. Obviously this was a valuable exercise where we were allowed time to reflect upon what we would really like to achieve within our schools while away from the normal “hurly burly” of school life. The vision is a precursor to whole school change and the raising of standards within the school. It is an issue, which I intend to re-visit with the staff. The Hay Mcber analysis of leadership styles shows that this visionary or “authoritative” leadership style is extremely effective in raising school standards.

We then explored what “dialogue” means in terms of “coaching” people. The theoretical model is that all people naturally collect data, add meanings to the data based on their own assumptions and proceed to draw conclusions based on their values and beliefs. These conclusions control their actions. “Coaching” involves a dialogue between the coach and the mentee where the coach uses non-confrontational methods to assist the mentee to question his/her own assumption, beliefs and actions. The coach asks questions designed to encourage the mentee to clarify and explain what he/she means or rephrases it so that the mentee naturally reflects about the conclusions he/she has drawn. The coaches’ role is to question and listen allowing the mentee time and space to think and consider. This dialogue looks to shared meanings by reflecting questions back about why you have arrived at certain conclusions and actions. We had a very interesting exercise where each one of the three took it in turns to expound on

“The role of the school in the local community is?”

“The school can improve the employability of young people by?” and

“More pupils will want to come to school if?”

while another Head took on the role of the coach and another observed and fed back to the duo. I found this to be extremely valuable in raising the issue of a Headteacher as a coach/facilitator in trying to achieve positive change within a school. This coaching style of leadership was also judged to be extremely effective by Hay Mcber. The question was asked whether we as Headteachers were behaving instinctively and intuitively avoiding our weaker areas, which we identified in ourselves during the first cycle via the “Hermann profile”. These “blind spots” can lead us to achieve the same results while using the same methods with which we feel most comfortable.

After the weekend conference, the Danish Headteacher and myself spent 3½ days at the Italian Headteacher’s school looking at a school and a system within a totally different culture and value system where the theoretical models outlined above could have a practical application – in time. This second half of the week was extremely busy and one where impressions were made to be followed up in an internet dialogue with my international colleagues. I observed lessons and management meetings and had numerous discussions with teachers in a 5-14 and a 14-19 school which all helped to foster my understanding of different school systems.

On reflection there were problems. I feel that some of the theoretical models presented by Resolve could have been better presented. Some of the activities were overcomplicated and lacked clarity. There was a clear commitment to product not process and the agenda as set by “Rezolv”. This can be a little inflexible leading to some frustration expressed by the participants. The overview of the Italian system was badly done and the Saturday was not fully appreciated by all participants. However “in toto” this was a marvellous week and an excellent opportunity for me to learn, develop and reflect on my own leadership and management skills.

We have already begun to survey stakeholders' views within the school since the first cycle and the course has hardened my resolve to encourage staff to look again at shared aims and our collective vision for the school with the pupils at the heart of everything. I feel that I have been privileged to have the opportunity to be taken out of my day to day environment to question my own assumptions about what is of value with other colleagues and practitioners within a Tuscan context. The opportunity to see parts of Florence and Sienna with its magnificent and classical history, art and architecture while observing and analysing practical aspects of the Italian education system was one that I will not easily forget. It is very humbling to experience the beautiful structures which people achieved hundreds of years ago. Even with all our technology we cannot come anywhere near matching such timeless, classical art. There were aspects of the Italian education system that I would wish to discuss further within the trio. However I was envious of the low pupil teacher ratios. I believe they were a significant factor in fostering the good staff/pupil relations which I observed first hand. These were particularly noticeable between the Head and her students and staff. They engendered a very calm and almost relaxed atmosphere in the schools I visited.

It is quite an experience to talk about education, schools and styles of leadership with colleagues from another country who understand the constraints, stresses and pressures of being a Headteacher especially ones who have visited your school and seen it first hand. Looking at your own school through a fresh pair of eyes has made me re-think about what I am doing and in itself this is no bad thing. I have certainly learned a great deal about Italian and Danish education with their very different emphases and ways of doing things. I was impressed with the exercises on "coaching" and "dialogue" as opposed to discussion although I still think that the issue of finding time to do this with staff is a matter of concern. It may well be a matter of priority to focus on the professional development of staff but many of the stakeholders have assumptions about what a Headteacher should be doing and this together with the educational culture within which we work in our different countries cannot be ignored. However I have already begun to place greater emphasis on "coaching" staff, especially younger staff, from within the school. On reflection I believe that after my first years within the school as a Head I have lately shied away from the "vision thing" far too much and that central to this vision must be the pupils' progress, achievements and wellbeing.

Action to be continued !

Peter Wynne Williams
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