Diagnosing school improvement priorities during the first year of a new Principal

1. Objectives or purposes

The purpose of the study is to ascertain and understand the ways in which new-in-post school Principals diagnose key issues for school improvement during their first year in post.

For some time, studies have indicated the importance of establishing a clear sense of priorities for school improvement (Hopkins et al 1994). The processes by which such priorities are determined, and the sequence in which they should be tackled have been less well studied.

2. Perspective(s) or theoretical framework

Day and Sammons (2014: 47) argue that schools in challenging contexts tend to devote "greater attention and effort" during the early phases of improvement cycles "to establish, maintain and sustain school wide policies for student behaviour, improvements to the physical environment and improvements in the quality of teaching and learning than in other schools."

In their study of the inspection reports of Dutch primary schools deemed to be under-performing van de Grift and Houtveen (2006, 2007) observed some important differences in the characteristics of these schools when compared to averagely performing and over performing schools. Underperforming schools were observed to have:

- weaker educational processes,
- weaker school organisations,
- less appropriate use of budget,
- weaker functioning school boards than average schools,
- smaller school sizes,
- more students from low socioeconomic backgrounds,
- greater teacher mobility.

They found that these factors were less useful for discriminating between averagely performing and over-performing schools with no significant differences between averagely and over performing schools on many of these factors.

For the current study we have selected schools with similarly challenging contexts. In almost all cases the schools were judged by the national school inspection service (Ofsted) to be in either of the lowest two categories of school performance (Requires Improvement or Inadequate) at the most recent inspection point. They therefore match the definition of under-performing schools adopted by van de Grift and Houtveen (2005). A number of the schools had been identified as under-performing across multiple inspections, so exhibiting potential patterns of under-performance.

Day, Gu and Sammons (2016) refer to the "the layering of leadership" in which Principals and other senior leaders would undertake a simultaneous mix of transformational and instructional strands of school improvement. They note that Principals made judgments regarding the timing and sequence of these school improvement activities based on their personal values in combination with "diagnoses of context about the timing, selection, relevance, application, and continuation of strategies". Day et al (2016) tracked these multi-stranded layers across a ten year period.

We have sought to capture this layering through a visualisation of the first year of headship.

3. Methods, techniques, or modes of inquiry

The study utilised a case study design. Ten schools were recruited using a purposive sampling approach described below.

Data were collected from the case study schools in the form of interviews with the new Principals as well as with other members of the school senior leadership teams (SLT). This included teachers in roles such as Vice Principals and Assistant Vice Principals. The number of interviews conducted in each school during the first phase of data generation ranged from 3-7, usually dependent on the school size and the number of leaders within the SLT.

A semi-structured approach to interviews was adopted using a framework developed in consultation with the research funders who provide training programmes for school leaders at various levels of the system. There were six core questions:

- What *evidence* was used during the initial diagnosis of core issues for school improvement?
- To what *sources* of advice and support did leaders turn to in order to obtain and make sense of the evidence?
- What were the main *priorities* established in the school improvement plan and how were these decided?
- What *strategies* were employed to secure improvement?
- What *barriers* were encountered during the year?
- What types of evidence were used to *monitor* improvement?

Each of these core questions was supplemented with additional probe questions to support elicitation of rich responses.

Copies of documents related to school improvement were also collected, such as school improvement plans and self-evaluation documents. Anonymised material from previous inspection reports also formed part of the data for the study.

Initial analysis of the data was used to produce school level summaries, including visualisations summarising key aspects of the data. These were in the form of:

- a summary timeline for each school mapping out school improvement activity across the year;
- an ego network sociogram of the advice and support seeking networks of the new-in-post Principal.

The improvement timelines summarised the strategies employed and barriers encountered across the first year of headship for each of the core stands of school improvement determined at the initial interview. An estimate of the relative weighting of each improvement strand was captured in the timeline as an approximate proportion of the Principal's energies invested in each issue during that part of the year. Thus something of the ebb and flow of the first year of school improvement activity was expressed in the timeline.

The ego network sociograms represent the Principal as the central actor of the network (*ego*) with those persons and organisations offering advice and support represented at nodes (*alters*) clustered around the ego. The advice and support ego networks captured the role of each alter and indicated whether these actors were internal or external to the school. They also positioned each alter based

on the perceived level of impact of the advice or support received. Finally negative relationships to alters were also identified where these were raised by the Principal during interview.

Follow-up interviews with the Principal were conducted in each of the ten case study schools in order to provide a member check for the improvement timelines and ego network visualisations. Principals were asked to check the timelines and ego network sociograms for accuracy and completeness of content.

4. Data sources, evidence, objects, or materials

The main criteria for selection of the case study schools were:

- the school Principal was working within the first year of headship (from September 2017 or later);
- the school should be facing challenging contexts similar to the underperforming schools described in van de Grift and Houtveen (2006, 2007). While no school exhibited all these characteristics, each of the case study schools exhibited multiple factors (three of more).

Subsidiary selection criteria were:

- the case study schools should be led by a mix of novice and experienced Principals new-in-post;
- the inclusion of a mix of elementary and high schools.

We also interviewed members of the senior leadership team (SLT) in each school. In smaller schools we asked to interview all the members of the team. In the larger schools, with 5 or more team members, school websites were visited to determine the role of each member of the senior leadership team and we asked to interview the next most senior member of the team, such as the Vice Principal(s), as well as those team members with responsibilities for the development of learning and teaching, staff development, safeguarding, behaviour and pastoral care of students.

5. Results

At the time of writing analysis of the data is still at an early stage.

It was clear that each of the new Principals had invested considerable time and effort into diagnosing priorities for school improvement. A wide range of secondary sources of evidence were used to inform the initial aspects of the diagnostic phase. Before arrival at the school those included inspection reports and headline performance data based on the attainment and progress of students in the final years at each school which are made publically available by the Department for Education for every school in England. Most Principals also conducted a thorough investigation of the school website and many conducted more wide ranging internet searches for information on their new school, including gleaning stakeholder perspectives where possible. All Principals indicated that they had chosen to apply for the position of Principal in schools situated in the type of challenging context that was a focus of this study.

A number of Principals were able to spend time in their new school during the end of the academic year prior to commencing in post. These periods provided crucial opportunities for gathering primary evidence for diagnosing school improvement priorities.

The key strands common to each the school in securing improvement were:

- student behaviour
- the quality of learning and the curriculum
- the quality of teaching and staff development
- the academic outcomes achieved by students

Other strands of school improvement identified in some of the schools were:

- securing a safe environment
- developing a leadership team
- supporting staff wellbeing
- establishing basic operational systems and policies
- relationships with parents and sometimes the wider community

Where there was a concern, securing a safe environment was the number one priority. This sometime meant addressing policies and procedures associated with safeguarding practice.

Addressing student behaviour in parallel with the twin imperatives of improving the quality of learning and teaching was a key priority in every school.

Where it was deemed necessary, the development of a leadership team was often considered to be next in terms of priorities, with other improvement strands then varying in perceived importance and prioritisation.

In terms of strategies employed within each stand of improvement activity, the Principals and school leaders rarely appealed to any evidence informed practice, relying instead on their own intuition and previous experience, coupled with consultation with key supporting sources in their network such as leaders of local school partnerships or previous Principals with whom they had worked.

The one exception to this was in the area of improving the quality of learning and teaching. In some, and only some of the schools, leaders referred to evidence informed interventions being employed for the development of learning and also the professional development of teachers. In some schools the strategies utilised even in these areas, were largely adopted due to past experience and consultation with trusted others in the support networks of the new Principals.

We found that in our case study schools some of the early phase activity that occurred across three years in the Day et al (2016) study were concentrated into the first year in post of the new Principal, such was the pace of the work to secure rapid school improvement. This was the case in schools led by novice Principals as well as those with new-in-post leaders with previous experience of Principalship.

Also like Day et al (2016), we found evidence of "layering of leadership" imperatives with multiple strands being worked on in parallel with responsibilities distributed across the leadership team, and a sense of ebb and flow across the year.

6. Significance of the study or work

It is necessary to move beyond a list of characteristics of effective schools and effective leaders to examine whether it is the sequencing of leadership and school practices, and the manner of implementation of the practices that makes a difference. Nevertheless, a more substantial body of

research is required before we can draw firm conclusions about the most effective sequence of leadership (at local and system level) and pedagogical strategies used within and across schools which improve from Requires Improvement/Inadequate from those that don't, in order to create a framework for effective school improvement in challenging contexts.

An example school improvement timeline
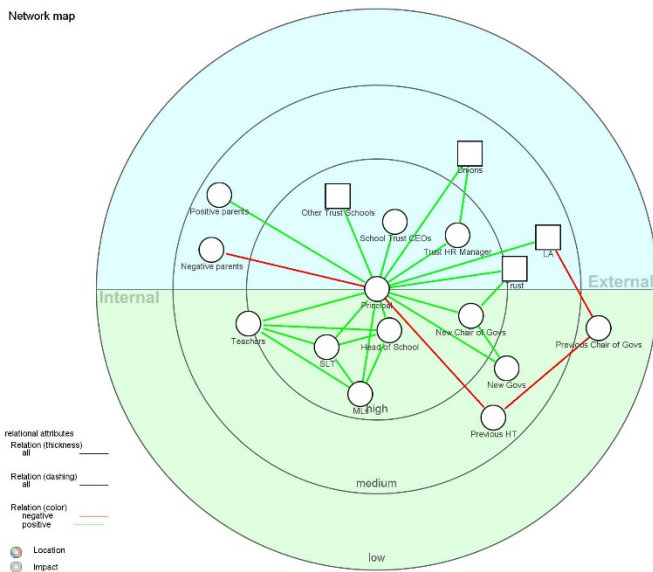
Example ego network for school Principal

References

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