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**Teacher leadership and knowledge building:  
the experience of the HertsCam Network**

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with  
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**Abstract**

This paper focuses on the HertsCam Network, a network of teachers and schools supported by a collaboration between a university faculty of education and a local education authority in the UK. It explores its potential for impact on the quality of teaching and learning in schools. It describes the development of the network, its aims, membership and structure and briefly outlines what has been learnt from an ongoing research project about the potential of the HertsCam Network to support teacher leadership within Hertfordshire schools.

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## **Teacher leadership and knowledge building: the experience of the HertsCam Network**

**David Frost *et al.***

The HertsCam Network has developed out of a collaborative venture in which the University of Cambridge Faculty of Education agreed to work with Hertfordshire LEA<sup>3</sup> in their attempt to raise standards in Hertfordshire schools. The original dialogue in 1998 between Prof. David Hargreaves at the Cambridge School of Education and Ray Shostak, then Director of Education for Hertfordshire, focussed on how practice could become more research informed. The assumption was that better knowledge of ‘what works’ would be transformative.

The collaboration began with two initiatives: a project designed to support struggling secondary schools and a bespoke part-time masters course for teachers – the ‘Herts. M.Ed in Teaching and Learning’. In both cases the emphasis was on the dissemination of research based knowledge; for example about Black and William’s research on formative assessment (Black and Wiliam, 1998). The major difference between these two initiatives was that the school improvement project addressed itself to Headteachers and their designated project coordinators whilst the M.Ed recruited teachers whether or not they had a strategic brief. There were inherent difficulties with this dual approach which are beyond the scope of this paper. However, we learnt a great deal about the possibility for impact where some of the schools involved in the school improvement project also put forward teachers as participants in the M.Ed. In these cases we saw the development of teacher leadership where teachers were using the masters course as a means to support their strategic intervention in schools in challenging circumstances. A crucial factor here was the involvement of the headteacher (principal) and other members of the senior leadership team.

### **The M.Ed course and the question of impact**

Within the first year or two of the masters course the issue of impact was raised. Continued funding would depend on the extent to which the course was seen to have an effect on the educational community in Hertfordshire as a whole. If the programme were to operate in the traditional form we might expect that it would enhance the understanding and skills of a single cohort of participants each year. However, with a teaching population of 7-8,000 in Hertfordshire, a cohort of 20 teachers with enhanced personal capacity would have relatively little impact on the professional community as a whole. As originally conceived,

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<sup>3</sup> LEA – the term ‘local education authority’ is no longer used because of the creation of integrated children’s services in the UK

the Herts. M.Ed was not unlike many other courses for teachers: it had a strong input from the university lecturers and the participants were required to carry out a research project focussing on an aspect of practice. This approach was likely to be focussed on the professional development of the individual participants; inevitably the commitment to action to bring about change would be weak. We resolved to address these issues but the development of effective strategies would take a number of years. The main strategies are explained below under five headings:

- Researching impact
- Community building
- Expanding the community
- Teacher leadership
- Knowledge building

These are discussed briefly in turn before returning to the question of researching impact.

### **Researching impact**

A first step was to examine what we mean by ‘impact’. A small scale research project was established to examine the ways in which teachers engaged in development activities could have impact on educational practice. A series of interviews led to a conceptual framework consisting of the factors that determine the likelihood of impact and categories of impact.

#### **Impact on teachers**

a) Classroom practice b) Personal capacity c) Interpersonal capacity

#### **Impact on the school as an organisation**

a) Structures and processes b) Culture and capacity

#### **Impact beyond the school**

a) Critique and debate b) Creation and transfer of professional knowledge c) Improvements in social capital in the community

#### **Impact on pupils’ learning**

a) Attainment b) Disposition c) Metacognition

These were subsequently used as the basis for tools to help teachers plan for greater impact (Frost and Durrant, 2002 and 2004). This work helped us to identify ways of enabling teachers to act more strategically to maximise the impact of their research-based development activity, but it would also be used subsequently as a research tool when the local authority decided to fund a more substantial investigation of the impact of the HertsCam programme. This is discussed in more detail later in this paper.

## **Community building**

In evaluations, participants in most masters programmes will draw attention to the benefits of developing a sense of belonging, sharing experience and providing mutual support through informal contact. However, in the case of the Herts. M.Ed we decided that this could be fostered more deliberately. Furthermore, we believed that it could be done in a way that would develop the capacity to build knowledge that can transform practice far beyond the boundaries of the programme.

Fortunately, the Cambridge tradition requires an element of residency to qualify for any degree. From the second year of the programme's existence we brought both Yr 2 and Yr 1 cohorts together at Wolfson College for a weekend conference at the beginning of each term. The experience of staying in college, dining and relaxing together generated a strong sense of solidarity and an identity coloured by the Cambridge scholarly tradition. In addition the mixing of the 2 year groups added considerable value and this led to the idea of retaining the involvement of participants even after they have graduated. College membership, we are told by the College President on the day of graduation, is for life and so is membership of the Herts. M.Ed.

The potential for mutual support in the form of mentorship was realised early on; members of this growing community were encouraged to get in touch with each other by email, to meet in special interest groups and so on. However, perhaps a more important benefit focussed on the possibility of the accumulation of the knowledge arising from course members' research and of the accumulation of the wisdom about methodology and strategies for intervention. New projects could learn from what had been done before, adapting research methods and tools as well as testing out the outcomes of previous projects conducted in Hertfordshire schools. Further we realised that, if we foster a dynamic community, we would be building the capacity for collaboration and innovation.

A key strategy has been the compilation of a comprehensive database which stores not only contact details of the 200 or so members of the community but also details of the projects they have carried out.

## **Expanding the community**

It became clear when we considered applications for places on the Herts. M.Ed that there were many more teachers willing and able to contribute to the development of professional knowledge than the 20 places the local authority fund. We needed other opportunities particularly for those who were not ready to take on the full challenge of a masters programme. So in 2001-2 we launched a shorter certificate level course to support teachers who wanted to carry out small scale enquiry work. It was envisaged that this certificate

programme could act as an access course for the M.Ed. and our experience is that approximately a third of those participating in the programme then proceed to the higher degree course. Each taught session featured inputs from participants in the M.Ed.

Subsequently we negotiated with individual schools to establish groups based on the model set out in 'Teacher Led Development Work: Guidance and Support' (Frost and Durrant, 2003). These groups meet at a school base and are jointly led by a tutor from the university team and a member of the school's senior leadership team. (Many of those leading these groups are graduates of the Herts. M.Ed.) Through a series of twilight seminars, teachers are provided with the support to undertake development work – strategic, collaborative interventions designed to improve teaching and learning in the school. The process is documented in a portfolio of evidence leading to academic certification up to masters level. The group sessions scaffold teacher leadership by helping them to design a range of improvement initiatives that will have impact in a variety of ways: perhaps on students' learning directly; perhaps on the professional culture of the school or on the attitudes of pupils to their schooling. The process is supported by occasional visits to the Faculty of Education library and participation in county-wide networking events. 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. At the time of writing there are 8 Teacher-Led Development Work Groups based in, and sponsored by, Hertfordshire schools. These groups support about a hundred teachers who are leading teaching and learning projects in 15 or more schools.

### **Teacher leadership**

The capacity of teachers to exercise leadership is seriously underestimated (Frost and Durrant, 2003; Frost and Harris, 2003). Even the discourse on distributed leadership (Bennett *et al.*, 2003) tends to assume that a starting point for teacher leadership is a post of responsibility or a formal position in the organisational hierarchy of the school. The HertsCam network draws on an alternative perspective that is rapidly gaining ground; that all human beings have a potential for leadership and that the necessary authority can be 'professional authority', 'technical rational authority' or 'moral authority' rather than the more traditional 'bureaucratic authority' (Sergiovanni, 1992).

The story presented in the vignette below is typical of the material used to help participating teachers to imagine how they might plan their interventions. It serves here to illustrate the approach fostered by our programme.

### **Enquiry for development purposes: a vignette**

In order to support the development of literacy in the school

Harminder wanted to help colleagues develop techniques for modelling writing in their subject areas. She wanted to know what teachers were currently doing, how effective this is and their understanding of the issues and techniques. She made a presentation in staff briefing about the value of teachers modelling writing tasks and then invited all staff to let her know if they would like to collaborate with her in a small scale project to share and develop ideas.

Several colleagues volunteered to participate so Harminder spoke to the Deputy Head about arranging for these teachers to be available for an hour and a half session during the day. This involved using some supply cover and asking a few teachers to give up a free period.

At the meeting Harminder presented a demonstration of how a writing task could be modelled by the teacher. This involved actually writing on the overhead projector and verbalising the decisions and thought processes involved. Colleagues were asked to share any good techniques they were already using and Harminder made notes. She proposed that they write brief descriptions of a range of techniques and then arrange to try out some of these. Members of the group would observe each other doing this in order to evaluate them in use.

After the meeting Harminder typed up her notes - she described 4 different techniques and then listed the issues that were mentioned in the meeting. She also suggested a pairing for the classroom observations and produced an observation schedule which indicated how colleagues would record what they saw. Again she consulted the Deputy Head to get his help in arranging the observations.

The group agreed to meet again after having carried out one observation. The observation records had been typed up and were copied for everyone in the group. There was a very animated discussion which led to more techniques being identified and the ones used already being refined. A range of 'dos and don'ts' were also agreed.

Following this second meeting, Harminder produced a guidance leaflet for the whole staff. It was called 'Techniques for modelling writing in your subject'. She sent a draft to members of her group and asked for critical comments. A corrected version was presented to the whole staff in the monthly 'Learning Forum'.

The story is based on the development work carried out by a teacher in the network. It illustrates the developmental nature of the activity rather than emphasising inquiry as an

individualistic process. In the Teacher Led Development Work groups and in M.Ed sessions we share such stories as part of the framework of support for teachers' leadership.

### **Knowledge building strategies**

In the early stages of the development of the M.Ed we assumed that practice in Hertfordshire schools could be improved if we disseminated what had been learnt from the teachers' research. In 2002 the DfES made some funding available under the Best Practice Research Scholarship scheme to support such dissemination. A team of M.Ed participants were brought together to create documents that outlined all the research projects completed during the life of the M.Ed course with an invitation to schools to request the help of members of the programme to support their own development work. These documents were distributed to every school in the county but subsequent enquiries indicated that the degree of impact was small. When the funding was withdrawn we searched for better strategies.

A radical rethink of our knowledge building strategy drew upon the capacity we had built over the first 5 years of our existence to create a dynamic network involving all current and veteran members of the M.Ed and the school based groups. An ad hoc strategy group drew from current and veteran members of the M.Ed, some of them now acting as tutors for the school-based TLDW groups, some of them working as teaching and learning consultants with the local authority. The group met about 4 times and agreed on a range of moves that rested on the employment of a small consultancy partnership staffed by ex-senior leadership people from Hertfordshire schools. The strategies we asked the consultants to work on included the management of:

- a comprehensive data base
- networking events
- a network newsletter
- teaching and learning conference for the county
- a teaching and learning journal
- special interest groups
- liaison with local authority advisers

### ***Network database***

The network database includes all current and past participants in the M.Ed programme and the school-based Teacher-Led Development Work groups. It provides details of members' research and development activity. The database supports networking through the provision of regularly updated information and contact details. It provides all Network members, together with local authority advisers and consultants, with information that will enable

them to draw on the knowledge generated.

#### ***Network newsletter***

All members of the Network are invited to contribute to a magazine style newsletter, 'HertsCam Voice', which is used to celebrate the achievements of Network members and to keep all members in touch with developments. The main function of the newsletter is to underpin the Network's sense of cohesion and community.

#### ***Network events***

These events take place each term at the local authority's professional development centre. All members of the Network and local authority advisers are invited to attend and contribute. Each event features a keynote lecture, a carousel of workshops led by members of the Network, and a gallery of posters / displays of materials that reflect the development activity in the schools.

#### ***Teaching and learning journal***

The Teaching and Learning journal to be launched in February 2006 provides detailed accounts of research and development work undertaken by network members. Short articles are written by network members and other articles are written by members of the editing team drawing on evidence from teachers' portfolios. It is also hoped that members of the network will be able to collaborate with local authority advisers and researchers from the Faculty of Education to publish papers that report on meta-analysis of members' research in particular areas. Schools across Hertfordshire and beyond are invited to subscribe to the journal.

#### ***Teaching and learning conferences***

The first annual teaching and learning conference is due to take place in July 2006 and will constitute the outward face of the network. The conference will feature a keynote speaker with an international profile and will showcase the work of network members through a series of parallel workshops and a gallery of posters / displays of materials. The main purpose of the conference is to disseminate what the network has to offer the wider educational community in Hertfordshire.

#### ***Special interest groups***

Network members are invited to join a group focusing on a particular area of research and development. Currently these areas include:

- Assessment for learning
- Independent learning
- Learning to learn
- Motivation
- Underachieving boys
- Use of ICT



The aim of these groups is to synthesise what has been learnt about a given aspect of teaching and learning and to produce occasional papers. We hope to draw local authority advisers into this process.

### ***Liaison with local authority advisers***

There is great potential for involving members of the advisory service in helping to shape the agendas pursued by members of this network and to provide support for the synthesis and dissemination of what has been gained. Currently the local authority provides a 'Research and Good Practice' website which we can work with in the future. This remains an area for joint development for 2006 and we are in a strong position in that there are many local authority staff who are also members of the network. There are ongoing discussions about ways in which the work of the local authority Teaching and Learning Consultants can be linked to school-based groups using the Pedagogy and Practice pack distributed by the DfES earlier last year (DfES, 2004).

### **The HertsCam network: potential for impact**

The HertsCam Network has been conceived as a framework to empower teachers to develop and share knowledge about teaching and learning. Its impact must be evaluated then not in terms of the value of an individual course, programme or event, but in terms of the degree to which the experience of being a Network member supports individual teachers in using their own development work as a basis for change to their own practice and to the practice of others. The question concerns the extent to which the Network is able to mobilise teachers to act as change agents. However, as is indicated above there is also enormous potential to create a knowledge engine which synthesises and disseminates knowledge about teaching and learning. We are now seeking systematic evidence of how this knowledge can be used by teachers who are beyond the network.

As referred to on page 2 of this paper, we have in place a funded research project aimed at examining the impact of this and similar enterprises. It has reached the stage of an interim report to the local authority which puts forward strong evidence of the benefits under these headings:

- Retention and recruitment
- Professional development
- Transformation for participants
- Transformation for schools
- Knowledge building engine

The researchers conducted a survey of members of the M.Ed in which they were asked to

rate aspects of impact.

### Impact on professional and personal development

What impact has the course had on the following aspects/	a lot or some %	a little %	none %
increase in theoretical knowledge	100	0	0
increase in pedagogical knowledge and skills	97	3	0
adoption of new classroom practices	81	19	0
improvement in existing practices	84	13	3
improved confidence in the classroom	75	19	6
improved confidence in abilities to lead others	84	16	0
improved ability to contribute to whole-school developments	88	13	0
new career opportunities	81	6	13

These figures are impressive but what is more interesting is what participants have said in interviews. A full analysis is beyond the scope of this paper but a few highlights indicate the sort of evidence the research is likely to provide. For example, teachers report how they elected to exercise their leadership skills in the course of their development work by collaborating with others, by leading change and by experimenting with classroom practice. One teacher reported as follows.

*I believe very strongly that .. the MEd gave me the knowledge, skills and confidence to deal with concepts of school development...the ability to relate this to my own practice and to motivate others to join in. (Participant interview)*

The process of enquiry-based development clearly challenges participants and the evidence shows us how we need to work with the teachers to cope with this. For example one teacher talked of being shocked when reporting the tensions that arose when dialogue in the staffroom shifted from discussions about teaching content to a focus on teaching and learning behaviours.

*I had worked with my team members for five years. I thought we meant the same thing when we talked about, for example, 'opportunities for children to collaborate'*

*and 'independent tasks.' Having observed each other teaching I'm really shocked to find that in practice these things look so very different. (Participant interview)*

We expect that this research will have a lot to tell us about the impact on schools. The survey provides an overview as the following table indicates. Respondents were asked to consider a number of statements concerning the impact of their work in school.

<b>To what extent do you agree with the following statements</b>	<b>fully or partly agree %</b>	<b>partly disagree %</b>	<b>disagree %</b>	<b>N/a %</b>
my research related closely to school/LEA priorities	88	9	3	
my immediate colleagues knew about my work	97	0	0	3
all colleagues knew about my work	97	0	0	3
the SLT were supportive of my work	94	3	0	3
colleagues were supportive of my work	91	6	0	3
School/workplace structures were supportive of me	81	13	3	3
my research has led to changes in practice in my immediate team	78	9	13	
my research has contributed to whole-school developments	78	9	13	
the course and its structures assisted with enhancing the impact of my work	78	16	6	
I have continued to develop my area of research	84	3	13	
my work had a positive effect on pupils' learning	97	3	0	

This sort of data needs enriching with qualitative accounts and at the time of writing there are case studies being undertaken to try to put flesh on the bones. For example Judy Durrant from Canterbury Christ Church University has been brought in to carry out a case study on a single school where there are upwards of 20 teachers who are network members.

It is also interesting to note that there are at least 5 or 6 projects being carried out by network members focusing on aspects of the programme. For example, Jo Mylles (Mylles and Frost, 2006) is an Assistant Headteacher and co-leader of Teacher Led Development Work groups in 2 secondary schools and she has recently completed a project in which she examined the working of TLDW groups in 2 contrasting schools. A brief report appears in

the next issue of 'Improving Schools' and a full account is available in the form of her final M.Ed thesis (Mylles, 2005).

This development suggests that the network is increasingly able to develop a critical self-knowledge in which the processes that we create and participate in are subject to scrutiny and debate. This is not to say that we do not face serious challenges but at least we are developing the capacity to know what those challenges are and to respond as a community.

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