# Page Proof Instructions and Queries

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Leading change for survival: The rural flexi-school approach

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Abstract

This article seeks to present the perspectives of three school leaders in one rural primary school in the English East Midlands, who, when faced with closure due to a falling student numbers, decided to offer and operate a flexi-schooling model of educational provision. We aim to find out, through a theoretical model of systems school leadership, how the school leadership team addressed this issue. Findings suggest that the principles of systems leadership, operating through an open systems model, have facilitated the journey towards flexi-schooling and ensured the survival and growth of the school. The learning community created with parents and the personalisation of the curriculum for learners reflects an innovative curriculum design and in part solves the problems which led to the initial decision taken by parents to home-educate. Focusing on ways to secure healthy student numbers, school leaders developed a partnership with a multi-academy trust, yet they still face challenges in formally recording student numbers when their attendance is only part of the week.

Keywords

attendance monitoring, flexi-schooling, home education, multi-academy trust, rural schools, systems leadership

Introduction to flexi-schooling

Flexi-schooling in the United Kingdom is a widely accepted arrangement whereby children attend school on some specific agreed weekdays and are educated elsewhere on the rest, giving them full-time school provision (Educational Freedom, 2013). Flexi-schooling is not a right but a formal arrangement which exists locally between the Head Teacher of the school and the families concerned (Carnie, 2017). The decision to flexi-school ultimately rests with the Head Teacher of the school where the child is registered. Carnie (2017) indicates that flexi-schooling is conceptualised by an agreed contract and partnership whereby the school and family agree responsibilities for the education of the children concerned. It is characterised in part by there being no unique location for education. Parents, according to Neuman and Guterman (2019), are important and active participants in the education of their children. They have a clear educational role working in close collaboration and partnership with the school, where the home environment is central to the teaching process. Furthermore, Ploughman et al. (2008) indicate that much learning in informal settings, for example, with families, is the outcome of participation in socially situated practices.

Falling pupil rolls have gathered momentum in recent years. Sutcliffe (2011) cited funding disparities as a primary consideration for county councils when closing small rural schools, though the government's current position on acting to close rural schools insists on the need to consider a range of factors and engage in consultation with stakeholders (House of Commons, 2017[AQ3]). Millar (2016), too, reports that hundreds of small schools face closure as they could be considered unviable or unattractive to trust boards seeking to form multi-academy trusts (MATs) under the government white paper 'Every School an Academy' which set out proposals that by 2020 all schools would be academies or in the process of converting (Long and Bolton, 2016). Such threats to viability pose challenges to leaders of rural schools and creative solutions are demanded for rural primary schools to continue serving their immediate and distant communities.

Literature review

Reasons why parents home-educate

Parents have a duty to ensure that their children attend school regularly (Department for Education (DfE), 2016). Neuman and Guterman (2019) argue that disaffection with the school system and parents' perception that their children's experiences at school are unsatisfactory will lead to

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the decision to home-educate. Home educators fall into three groups: first, those who home-educate because it fits with lifestyle, and because they hold a dislike for the structures of the education system; second, those who perceive social development to be at the heart of education and thus believe the home environment to be the best place for their values to be fostered – for this group there are concerns about the way individual teachers influence children and for social relationships with peer groups too; and third, those who home-educate out of necessity where it is seen to be a last resort to counteract the effects of bullying or the inadequate responses of schools to address special educational needs or health issues (Badman, 2009; Guterman and Neuman, 2017). The Special Educational Needs Code of Practice (DfE, 2014) makes it clear that parents are partners in the education of children with special educational needs across all school sectors and are key stakeholders in designing provision to meet their children's needs (Plimley et al. cited in Kendall and Taylor, 2016). Section 7 of the Education Act (1996) gives parents the right to educate at home, yet for schools, protocols for registering flexi-school pupils are far from straightforward.

Attendance and safeguarding

The Education Act (1996) approves and respects the rights of parents to educate their children away from a school, yet guidance for marking registers and safeguarding appears unable to cope with this in the context of flexi-schooling where home education is only for part of the week. From a census point of view, there is no difference for those who flexi-school for 2 days a week and regularly attend school for the other 3 days, or those who regularly attend school for 3 days a week and are persistently absent for 2 days a week.

Safeguarding and promoting the welfare of young children is the responsibility of everyone who comes into contact with children and their families (DfE, 2018). Children can be registered as taking part in an approved educational activity away from school provided all of the necessary measures in relation to safeguarding have taken place. With regard to flexi-schooling, Elizabeth Truss made it clear that children must be marked absent on the days they are educated at home (Truss, 2013). This provision lacks congruency since the school and families are key stakeholders in negotiating the arrangements to flexi-school. Indeed, the Head Teacher makes regular home visits and is in regular contact with parents. It is unlikely the request to flexi-school would be approved if there were any safeguarding concerns.

For school leaders, these uncertainties about how attendance should be monitored in the flexi-school context provide one example of inflexible protocols where pupils are not absent and not uninvolved in education, in fact they are actively seeking to develop their education. In this school system where flexibility of provision is to be encouraged, government policy has some way to go in recognising this conundrum. The model of curriculum design does not neatly fit into 5 days of schooling, nor can it be categorised in this way (O'Leary, 2018).

Becoming part of a MAT

With the falling enrolment a central issue for the school leadership team, it was important that leaders acted to save the school from closure. Parents were choosing to home-educate for several reasons related to school culture and ethos, safety, support and well-being of their child (McCarthy, 2016). Becoming part of a MAT might comprise these values yet at the same time offer potential to extend the flexi-school philosophy. Snell (2000[AQ4]) argues that students enrolling in schools with a range of characteristics provides greater choice, and it was an opportunity for school leaders to forge new school networks and extend their educational philosophy to a wider group of parents.

This approach is reminiscent of Boylan (2016) who argues that system leaders are those in senior positions who exercise or evidence leadership beyond their own school and in doing so create an enabling space for teachers to be leaders beyond their own organisation. This interaction between the school and its component parts with the external environment is a form of systems leadership (Bush, 2009) which Coffey (2010) espouses as a methodology which seeks to overcome problems inherent in reductionist approaches to work at a whole system level to tackle issues of organisation development[AQ5]. According to Coffey (2010), central to systems leadership is goal achievement, or emergent goal achievement. This may be achieved using emergent cycles to progressively converge on a desired goal. With each cycle there are opportunities to deepen understanding and reduce uncertainties which helps to drive creative action towards achieving the desired goal. In the case of this rural school, the flexi-schooling offer across the MAT and the development of the partnership to support it was an integral feature of the leadership landscape.

The creative action taken by the senior leadership team to work as part of the MAT is defined by Coffey (2010) as the cognition-systems method, which aims to maximise effective action in conditions of high complexity and uncertainty. This is designed for practical application and is used to develop whole systems comprising the individual and their organisation. These two components are inextricably linked, with the former focusing on an individual's knowledge, learning and skill development whereas the latter focuses on developing all forms of the organisation and provides a context for the individual's work. Clarifying the position between open systems leadership and closed systems leadership, Bush (2009) indicates that open systems pursue interchanges with the environment, responding to external influences and seeking support for the objectives of the organisation, in doing so, relationships between the school and its stakeholders have increasingly permeable boundaries. Higman et al. (2009) argue that system leaders are a powerful force for change and improvement, they take risks, innovate, demonstrate a deep understanding of

pedagogy and deploy resources creatively. Leaders of this school have used strategic experimentation to counter the falling enrolment problems, working towards goal achievement as evidenced in recently rising pupil numbers.

Research methods

The research context

The research setting is a small, rural primary school in the English East Midlands. The current Head Teacher took up post in 2010, with a school population of five children, serving as Head and class teacher. Faced with closure as a result of falling enrolment, the Head, together with the School Business Manager (who joined the school in 2011), embarked on a journey to offer flexi-schooling to the surrounding communities. In the last school inspection report, the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) noted that prior to joining the school many of the children had:

- only been home-educated;
- low school attendance; and
- no formal schooling.

The current offer comprises three core days of schooling on Tuesday through to Thursday and for those parents wishing to home-educate, Mondays and Fridays are spent either at home or in the locality engaging in other educational pursuits. For those parents who wish their children to attend school for the full week, then it is business as usual on Monday through to Friday. The school has seen its population increase from 5 children to 50 over the last 8 years, with around two-thirds of the children opting for the combined approach of the three core days supplemented by home education.

Very recently, the school joined a MAT consisting of two other primary schools, one in a rural and the other in an urban setting. The Chair of Governors, who has been in post for 12 months, is also a trust member. Their insight and perspective are of value to this research in terms of the wider trust's ethos and the sustainability and growth of flexi-schooling as a concern of the trust. The school has a positive profile in terms of attainment and progress and in the last inspection Ofsted rated the school as good, commending its growth in terms of pupil numbers, citing it as being flourishing and at capacity. The school is described in the inspection report as being a leading exponent of flexi-schooling.

Study design

The research employed a qualitative, phenomenological methodology which focused on the leadership team, encouraging them to talk about their reality of flexi-schooling and analysing their perspectives and experiences (Cohen et al., 2017). The data were collected through semi-structured interviews first, to ascertain the historical context of the rural school and its journey to its current flexi-school offer and second, how school leaders had worked to achieve this offer, and how they had used a systems leadership model to strengthen partnership working across the MAT.

Three interviews were conducted with the Head Teacher (HT), School Business Manager (SBM) and Chair of Governors (CoG), respectively. Interviews lasted approximately 40 minutes and data were recorded and transcribed and returned to each participant to verify the content of the interview. Data were thematically coded to represent key ideas presented in the data. Ethical approval for the study was compliant with the British Educational Research Association's (BERA) ethical guidelines, namely voluntary informed consent, openness and the right to withdraw (BERA, 2018).

Findings

The analysis of data revealed three main areas of concern to the school leadership team:

1. their own ontological positions;
2. issues related to policy and parental relationships; and
3. working as part of the MAT.

Ontological positions of school leaders

The concept of flexi-schooling was previously unknown to the leadership team. Ultimately, it became the 'golden ticket' in safeguarding the school's survival as a viable educational option in this rural community:

> Flexi-schooling occurred here really purely by accident . . . it came into being following an approach by a parent . . . who asked, 'would you consider doing flexi-schooling?' Neither (of us) had heard of it before, it was only through that conversation which took place, and the ensuing research we both carried out, that it was decided that this was something that we could try. It has grown from there. (SBM)
>
> I . . . found out there was such a thing called flexi-schooling that people don't really talk about very much. So, we started flexi-schooling. (HT)
>
> I hadn't actually come across flexi-schooling before funnily enough, so, the last 12 months has been a learning curve for me as well really in terms of the way that it operates. (CoG)

This 'golden ticket' however was not assumed to secure a long-term success. It took a recognition of stakeholders' beliefs and philosophies to develop the concept of flexi-schooling further.

> . . . we have another set of parents who, for philosophical reasons, want to home-educate their children . . . the philosophy is that we want children to enjoy their learning, that is the main thing and we want an holistic education . . . (HT)

The Head Teacher's perspective tells a positive story not only with considerations wider than the school but for the family too:

...the children always tell people we are the best school in the world. We've had so many letters from parents...that say we've been life-savers for them because the children are actually going to school happily, the parents can get jobs, they can do their own thing on those days as well so, it's a win-win situation for them. Good reasons politically as well because there may be worries about home education in relation to parents being unable to work. (HT)

Issues related to policy and working with parents

Data revealed a focus on the bureaucracy of attendance codes in relation to safeguarding which raises a challenge for school leaders but not significant enough to sway their resolve to offer a flexi-schooling model:

Most of the challenges have been from the local authority, safeguarding was a big hurdle because we were challenged to say how we made sure the children were safe on the Monday and Friday, which again we thought was ridiculous, because how do we know they are safe on a Saturday and a Sunday? How we do know they are safe during the 6 weeks? (HT)

There is a big stumbling block...and that is the code we put in the register because...we put a B code in...or you put the C code in which...is an absenteeism. Now 75% of our school is flexi-schooled, we would have a big absenteeism problem if we used code C. (HT)

And yet the Head has developed good parental relationships:

I suspect that most of the parents visit the school at least once a day, if not twice a day and because of the nature of the staff...she's very good at engaging those people and bringing them in through the door. (CoG)

Leaders were very aware of the role of parents in the education of their children:

...parents often want a specific school for their children. I think the location is central in that it is a perception from parents about what it is their children are getting by being in that one school. (CoG)

I think one thing they (parents) have in common is that they are extremely sensitive to the needs of their children and they have really put themselves out, because of their child's needs. (HT)

When you've got parents who are actually giving up work, or one parent out of two, willing to give up work to bring their child to this school, then, you know...these parents are dedicated to the education of their children. (SBM)

The strategic focus on staffing has been an important part of establishing the right environment:

I have had teachers that it (flexi-schooling) hasn't suited. A lot of teachers can't cope with the fact they are not in charge of the children's learning totally...Now I've got a new teacher who came as an EYFS teaching assistant and she is doing the Assessment Only route into teaching so all these teachers are home grown in a way. (HT)

Working with the MAT

The recent venture in joining a MAT presents exciting opportunities for the school leadership in terms of sharing expertise and developing policies around flexi-schooling:

We are having conversations within the trust at the moment about what flexi-schooling looks like in terms of our approach and our strategy towards it, one of the other schools in the trust...has started to flexi-school with a couple of children so, what we are trying to do is make sure we have a fairly consistent approach to the way it is dealt with...the trust recognises the value of the flexi-schooling and is supportive of it. (CoG)

...one of the things that we've got a group of trustees looking at is our strategy for growth and also what our value proposition is to other schools, who might want to join and I think we've got a good deal of expertise there, which could be used, not just within our own MAT, but more widely. (CoG)

Discussion

While we only present a flavour of the leadership data in this article, it was clear from the many discussions with the leadership team that they were undertaking a form of experimentation or risk in involving themselves and the school with flexi-schooling provision. The many cycles described by Coffey (2010) has led the team from uncertainty to a desired goal where pupil numbers have risen to provide a local rural school which offers a mixed provision to cater for parents who wish to home-educate their children. Since these children generally remain in the setting throughout Key Stage 2 as flexi-schooled partners, it is possible to deduce that the model of flexi-schooling has the potential to harness and reshape the philosophical stances which parents hold about education. Parents of children who have been home-educated and enter flexi-schooling at Key Stage 2 often opt to flexi-school their younger children too. These children would, perhaps, have remained in full-time home education until they were older. The decision to flexi-school a second child at an earlier stage based on their experiences of flexi-schooling an older child first would suggest a shift in parents' ideological and philosophical views. For the leadership team, these shifts in values will impact on education provision offered by the school in relation to parent–school partnerships as a tool for reframing these partnerships. As part of the process the school community will create new knowledge around these innovative approaches by adopting a flexi-schooling approach which provides better ways for parents and teachers to interact. This recasting of the parent–school partnership can help to dispel the disillusion parents have previously experienced with the education system in relation to managing the needs of their children (Shaked and Schechter, 2013).

Power of policy over practice

The adoption of a flexi-schooling approach has not been without challenge for the leadership group, especially around areas of safeguarding and the use of codes for attendance monitoring. In the case of flexi-schooled pupils

(which is choice to request for parents), the option of using code C when they are home-educated is difficult to reconcile when a legal right is regarded as an exceptional circumstance. Despite praise from Ofsted for this activity in this school, the Secretary of State for Education and other senior officials, this issue remains a live issue for the school leadership team. This situation is reminiscent of the work of Lacombe (1996) and more recently O'Leary (2018), where education controls and objectifies individuals, the school likewise controls their pupils and the system has overall control over schools and teachers. The exercise of control driven by a desire to create homogenous groups fails to provide the flexibility to accommodate this group of learners.

Lacombe (1996), building on the original constructs of power and knowledge by Foucault, indicates that education, as an institution, may superficially appear to facilitate everyday life, though actually incorporating a disciplinary function. She concludes that education controls and objectifies individuals: schools control their pupils and the system controls its schools and teachers. Making attendance problematic for schools offering a flexi-schooling model seems to suggest a conception of schooling around the characteristic of homogeneity. O'Leary (2018) indicates that the exercise of control can often be motivated by a desire to create homogenous groups. In this case, groups who do not fit into a model of 5-day schooling or cannot be categorised in this way. This reflects the fact that to regulate the school system, national policy creates tensions with one of its own approved structures of education. O'Leary's (2018) term 'outliers' is highly relevant in this research setting as the children involved are already outliers in relation to education. Barriers have prevented an engagement with the system and now, where a school has reintegrated them into a system, they become outliers for a different reason. Bush (2009) reflects on bureaucratic models of leadership as being hierarchical with centralised systems and it seems apparent here that such bureaucratic leadership from the DfE presents challenges for system leaders to operate effectively a form of social regulation (Simon, 2015). School leadership is currently lobbying Parliament for a change in the register codes that are used. This highlights a current and ongoing conflict between the DfE, flexi-schools and Ofsted, who have yet to comment publicly on this issue (Nicholson, 2018).

Becoming part of a MAT

The expansion into the MAT offers potential for relocation into a bigger school, though all interview participants suggested that a larger location may cause apprehension for children who are already readjusting to a return to school and doing very well in part to a small, nurturing environment. School leaders still feel Collins and Snell's (2000) argument that the introduction of open enrolment provided greater choice in relation to enrolling in schools with a range of characteristics, but distance and access considerations remain key characteristics of parental choice. McCarthy (2016) cites ideas of school ethos and culture, safety, support and well-being as being intrinsic to parental

choice of school. This is relevant in that parents are choosing to travel to a specific location because of what it offers, there is a correlation between values and expectations between home and school.

In this same way, the teaching staff also offer a committed and empathetic view of the provision. There is a clear perspective from leaders that certain types of teachers who align with the philosophy can shape the provision effectively, the leadership team preferring a flatter management style over a more traditional hierarchical management structure often found in larger schools. Morgan et al. (2014) note that identities are co-constructed as people engage in discourses. By extension, these identities and perspectives may be said to interact with each other to define the values and function of roles in a flexi-schooling model. This is borne out of the comments from the Head Teacher about staffing. The most successful teachers in this context appear to have travelled the journey of flexi-schooling or have only worked in this context. Leaders' perceptions are that the offer has been constructed jointly, then shaped and refined to reflect what it is today.

The MAT is keen to support the flexi-school offer but wish to formalise it at local policy level. In return, the flexi-school leadership team are seeking to extend their expertise to other schools in the MAT (Boylan, 2016). As part of the Trust, they seek to engage with the wider community to share their experience of leading a flagship flexi-school. They have already set up a federation for flexi-schooling and are ready to advise parents and other schools on the subject[AQ6]. Additionally, they have a large presence through various social media platforms.

Conclusion

The positives of a flexi-schooling context can be seen in relation to a personalised, shared responsibility between home and school for teaching and learning. The rapid growth of the school community is down to the application of a model of system leadership in education, where each challenge has been strategically overcome, journeying to a position of long-term viability, where an accumulated expertise has led to meaningful exchanges with a range of partners including the DfE, Parliament and parents of distant communities through the introduction of the flexi-schooling federation. The pragmatist approach of school leaders in researching, developing and becoming experts in the field of flexi-schooling reflects a care for the families and children in restoring faith in the education system but also a resistance to the powerful sweep of the closure of small, rural primary schools. The bureaucratic influences of government policy continue to create tensions for school leaders, both within and beyond the school gates. Government attitude of 'one size fits all' conflicts with innovative alternative school provision particularly for rural schools fighting to remain open to educate their local communities. The leadership team described in this article 'dared to be different' (Pritchard, 2014) and through experimentation gained valuable leadership expertise that is now being shared on a much wider scale.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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