

CAFÉ CONVERSATION 3

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Getting Ahead Flexibly

The Flexible Routes to Headship pilot programme has now been operational for 18 months involving 30 participants across 5 local authorities. A unique feature of the programme is the support provided for each participant by a Professional Development Coach. This support is currently focussed on each participant's Professional Learning Plan constructed following self evaluation against the Standard for Headship and in consultation with the participant's headteacher. The plan also requires approval by the

Local Authority. Participants are currently taking forward their plan and related development activities which, in conversation with their Coach, are identified as addressing the participant's professional development needs.

Assessment criteria and performance examples have been used to assess the first submissions from participants. The Coach assumes a formative role by using the guidelines to assess the submission and to feedback to the participant. The process has involved a moderation exercise involving all 3 coaches and the Project Leader, with agreement reached on each submission. 15 of the 30 participants have made a submission at this stage with the others in November 2008 reflecting the flexibility of the programme to suit individual needs. All participants will complete a reflective commentary and portfolio of evidence which will be assessed by their Coach and an external Coach and which will be externally moderated. A field visit by the external Coach will be followed by a report to the participant's own Coach allowing again formative assessment feedback from the Coach. The final submission precedes a professional interview on the participant's learning journey relating to the Standard for Headship 4.3 Personal Qualities and Interpersonal Skills. On successful completion, participants are recognised as having achieved the Standard for Headship.

Each cohort of 10 participants network through regular formal meetings on agreed themes relating to leadership development. Formal and informal networking is considered by the participants to be a strength of the programme allowing an opportunity for support and the sharing of good practice. Network meetings continue to be arranged and facilitated by the cohort Coach. The Coach also continues the practice of individual 1:1 coaching support for each participant on a regular basis and on other occasions determined by individual need. Evaluation indicates that participants view this coaching support to be of significant value as they progress towards achieving the Standard for Headship.

Evaluation, both internal and external, is an essential component of the Flexible Routes pilot. Regular internal evaluation strategies have been implemented during the course of the pilot. We are pleased now to be involved in the final stages of an external evaluation conducted by a team involving the Universities of Cambridge and Glasgow. The research team is led by Professor John MacBeath (Cambridge), Professor Peter Gronn (Glasgow) and Professor Christine Forde (Glasgow). All stakeholders in the pilot will have an opportunity to contribute to the evaluation.

Leadership development training programmes involving all participants respond to the reflections of participants who have expressed a common professional development need around leadership and coaching skills. An interesting connection can be made here between Flexible Routes and developments at Local Authority and school level on the process of creating a coaching culture to develop leadership at all levels and facilitate school improvement. Aspiring headteachers on the Flexible Routes programme can be considered as a group

adding capacity to a coaching culture within their authority and in a position of responsibility to further develop this coaching culture as headteachers in school. A further connection can be made as participants, through their Professional Learning Plan, reflect on how to best create an environment designed to improve learning and teaching and promote a Curriculum for Excellence in their schools.

As we engage with the next stage of the pilot we are continually reflecting on the programme this far and considering how we could improve on the practice of the pilot. One initiative focuses on the role of the Coach in context in the school on themes agreed with the participant. Some early development has taken place around Richard Elmore's model of evidence-based observation with further work on the "Learning Rounds Model" of which the Flexible Routes pilot will be one element.

The emphasis in the Flexible Routes pilot relates to recognising individual choice and individual professional development needs. Aspiring headteachers determine their own professional learning plan in dialogue with the headteacher and Coach. Coaches assume responsibility to respond flexibly in supporting these individual needs within the context of an evolving role for the Coach.

Jim Keegans

Project Leader Flexible Routes to Headship

1 The 'external coach' is a second coach not involved in supporting the participant.