

How can I actively engage parents through innovative change?

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Objectives:

- To read current literature on innovative change
- To present an overview of the innovation of KS3 Review Day, and its impact on parent participation
- To review the extent to which the literature applies to the context I have analysed

'Everything must change at one time or another or else a static society will evolve' - Anonymous first-year university student on an English language proficiency test. (Fullan,2001: p.3)

The Organisation

Castledown School is a mixed comprehensive situated in a rural location on the edge of Salisbury Plain, with 380 children on roll. The school PANDA report for 1999 shows that 9% of pupils are eligible for free school meals, compared with a national average of 16.9%. However, 29.2% of pupils have special educational needs, including statements, compared with a national average of 18.7%. However, only 3.6% of pupils have statements. In Ludgershall, 10.4% of children live in overcrowded houses, compared with a national average of 10.5%, and 12.7% are in high social class households. The national average for this is 31%. The number of adults with higher education is 6.9% compared with a national average of 13.5%. In Tidworth, the figure is even lower, at 4.1%. This suggests that the parents have little or no ambition for themselves or their offspring, and this would clearly have a major impact on the effectiveness of education or any support mechanisms the school might put into place. In November 2003 the school was placed in 'special measures' by OFSTED.

Children are placed in two key stages - years 7 - 9 in KS3 and years 10 and 11 in KS4. There are two KS managers, one for each key stage – within KS3 tutor groups are arranged vertically, and within KS4 they are arranged horizontally.

The Educational Innovation that I am going to evaluate is the introduction of KS3 Review Day, which will replace the traditional parent's evenings, of which there are 3 in KS3. The reason for implementing this change, was that the attendance at the parents evenings had declined over a number of years, to the point where subject teachers felt that their time was not being best used. Equally, parents who have limited contact with school might indeed find the whole concept of education quite bewildering. As Fullan (2001:p197) claims -

' If teachers and administrators.... have trouble comprehending the meaning of educational change, imagine what it is like for the parent.'

IEP, PDP, CATS, SATS and strategies, to name but few, are just some of the challenges facing today's parents. Not only understanding the meaning of these terms, but also more importantly, understanding how they affect their child, and maybe, how they, as parents can support these 'modern' approaches! Also, for the parent whose child is a model student, and reports are always favourable, the traditional parent's evening is a pleasant affair - but for the parent whose child is challenging, and not progressing well, the experience can be totally unpleasant. There were two main reasons for moving to the Review Day model.

Firstly, and most importantly, to engage more parents, and secondly, to show the children that their education is a triangular process -pupil, parent and school, and that in order to be productive, the process of reporting to parents must engage all three participants. In order that Castledown School could progress, parental involvement had to improve. It is well -known that children should receive the same messages from all those who have any responsibility for them, if their behaviour is to be stable and if they are to feel secure. At the same time, there is often a correlation between deviant behaviour in youngsters and un - harmonious parents.

In my capacity as KS3 Manager, responsible for the welfare and progress of the pupils, I wanted to actively engage the parents in more active involvement in the child's education.

The Innovation

In this assignment I am going to set out the educational innovation that I managed at Castledown School, in 2002, which attempted to actively engage parents in a way that would encourage them to actively participate in their child's progress in a positive manner.

I am going to analyse the implementation of KS3 Review Day, which replaced the traditional parents' evenings for all years in KS3. There were a number of reasons for doing this:

- Attendance at traditional parents evenings was on the decline
- Parental involvement in children's education was minimal
- End of KS3 SATS results were poor

KS3 Review Day

The idea of the KS3 Review Day was that it would replace the traditional parents' evening, normally taking place between 6pm and 8pm. Parents and students would, instead, have a 15minute appointment sometime between 9am and 7pm, with their form tutor, when they would discuss achievements of the past year, show their parents some selected pieces of excellent work, and between the three, they would discuss and agree targets for the following year. It was to be a positive experience for all three.

I first presented a paper outlining my proposal to change the way we reported to parents, during the spring term. I had previously attended a training day, where this idea had been mentioned, and, having given the idea some serious thought, I came to the conclusion that it could work very well for the students at Castle down. After some detailed discussions about format and intended outcomes, it was agreed that I could proceed, and 'sell' the idea to my KS3 colleagues.

School was to be closed for the day, and KS4 students would be given some private study work. KS3 students would also be allowed a non – contact day, provided they came into school with their parents for a 15minute interview with their tutor. This was a very powerful 'carrot', since most students preferred the option of the short appointment time, as opposed to a whole day in school, which was the alternative to not attending. The 'rule' also persuaded students to 'persuade' their parents to attend, even if it meant taking time off work.

There were also advantages for the staff – rather than give up three evenings – one for each of the year groups in KS3 for traditional parents' evenings, they would only be required to give up one, under the new proposal.

Letters were sent home explaining the new idea, and the format of the day was explained to the students. Parents were invited to make appointments with their child's form tutor, and those who did not respond were sent a letter of reminder. For those who still did not respond, a telephone call from the school office persuaded them that they really were expected to attend!

During tutor time, students highlighted their strengths and weaknesses, and decided which three pieces of work they were going to share with their parents. Tutors gathered a range of data – attendance, recent reports, and as well as positive and negative award summaries.

On the day, students were expected to wear full school uniform and were welcomed at reception by a volunteer student. On arrival at the form room, parents were able to sit at a table and peruse their child's work, discussing the success that he/ she had achieved. At the interview the students were encouraged to talk about their achievements and to set their targets for the following year, with the support and encouragement of their parents. Any concerns that the parents had were also discussed and shared between the three key people – parent, student and tutor. At the end of the interview, parents were asked to complete a questionnaire, which was returned to reception; contacting parents dealt with any specific concerns by telephone, the following day. The attendance at parent's evenings was usually about 52%; the attendance at Review Day was 92%. We achieved our aim, which was to engage parents in their child's education.

Literature Review

I considered a range of literature about innovative change, and also about the impact of parental participation on children's education. In particular I considered:

- A framework for innovative change, as suggested by Fullan 2001.
- A model for change, as suggested by Everard and Morris 1996

- Peters and Waterman 1982

The framework for innovative change, suggested by Fullan (2001) is, in simplistic terms, a series of 'sequential but also overlapping phases or stages' (Fullan 2001:52)

- 1) Adaptation/initiation
 - 2) Implementation
 - 3) Institutionalisation/continuation
- Or
- 4) Rejection/postponement

'...innovative companies are especially adroit at continually responding to change of any sort in their environments.' (Peters & Waterman,1982:p12)

This process suggests that there will be outcomes, and certainly, in my specific situation, there was a definite, positive outcome.

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'...If their (the parents) attitudes influence children's in-school motivation and attainment, then presumably it is the professional duty of the teachers to harness the home forces.' (Lang & Marland, 1985: p119)

Progress and Outcome

I consider the introduction and implementation of KS3 Review Day to be a single innovation, and definitely not complex. I gave little consideration to what else was going on in school at the time of initiation and having consulted with staff involved, proceeded to do the necessary work to facilitate implementation and continuation.

My process of change was not dissimilar to the Change Model endorsed by Everard and Morris, (1990), where I interpret the process as being in four stages:

- 1) Making the decision to undertake a change programme
- 2) Assessing where we are now
- 3) Deciding where we want to be in the future
- 4) Evaluate the process to identify the gaps, which need to be addressed before the process can be institutionalised.

The decision was taken to change the process of reporting to parents, based on my own personal values and beliefs – that children perform better if they know their parents are aware of what is happening in school, and that parents can only support the school if they have the information informing them of where their child is now, and what he/she has to do in order to progress. All colleagues involved in the initiation stage accepted these values.

In order to assess 'where we are now,' I discussed attendance figures from previous parents' evenings with the Senior Management Team, which showed that the average

attendance at traditional parents' evenings was on the decline. The advantage of my proposal was that there was very limited cost implication, reduced time commitment required from staff, and the notion of more supportive parents could only serve to improve the tutors role in supporting their tutees.

In deciding where we wanted to be in the future, I shared my vision with the team. The notion of the triangulation between home, school and pupils which would improve progress, and that in order to improve our KS3 results we needed to make some changes. I also shared with my colleagues the idea that they should not have to do more work – hopefully slightly less, but that the long-term benefits would justify the initial input of effort. I explained the new process as I envisaged it would happen, I prepared and shared the proforma to show how the process would work, and I took comments from colleagues and amended the proforma before the final documents were produced – pupil strengths and opportunities form and parental questionnaire.(Appendix 1)

Fullan (2001: p69) claims that:
'Educational change is technically simple...'

The KS3 Review Day was technically simple, in my view, in terms of initiation and implementation. This was probably due to the fact that the innovation was shared and discussed within the team, and there was a majority agreement on the process before and after implementation. Consequently, when it came to identifying and closing the gaps (Everard and Morris, 1990) the sharing process continued, thus making the process less onerous than if one person had been left the responsibility.

Wallace (2003: p9) claims:

'Educational change is undoubtedly becoming more complex to manage.

For large scale multiple educational change, this would be true. It would involve multiplicity of task, and there would be a need for the whole staff to embrace improvement over a long period of time. This would require monitoring and adjustment within a longer time scale. However, for a single innovation, it need not be complex to manage; indeed, Wallace (2003: p12) does claim:

'Change implies new experiences and new learning',

This, in my opinion, is very true, and certainly our team did learn a lot from the Review Day experience.

Critical Assessment

From the vast array of literature available which refers to innovative Change, I especially considered the writings of Peters and Waterman, and Lessons from America's best-Run Companies. Whilst I am considering innovation in the context of education, in today's society the two are not that dissimilar.

Education in the UK, in the comprehensive education system, there are constant changes – the introduction of AS level, the introduction of GNVQ which

subsequently changed almost immediately to vocational GCSE, the 14 – 19 curriculum, the KS3 strategy and the literacy and numeracy strategies are just a few examples of changes which have occurred during the last decade.

There emerged from findings, eight attributes that characterised excellent, innovative companies, which could easily be applied to education, and equally to innovation at Castledown.

Those were:

1. A bias for action

Certainly at Castledown, we do fit into this category. We do have a Senior Management Team (SMT) who are willing to listen to, and take on board, new initiatives and ideas, and are willing to work towards implementing them into the school. In the context of my innovation, to introduce KS3 Review Day, SMT were totally supportive, and actively encouraged the initiative because research strongly suggested that this process would increase parental participation. The research was correct, and in my situation, the innovation was a success.

2. Close to the customer

At Castledown, we do listen to the customers, but only to a degree. I would identify our customers as the parents and the students. Each has the opportunity to voice their opinion, especially at the KS3 Review Day, but I would have to admit that not all ideas and concerns are taken on board. Only those parents who score 3 or less on a 5-point scale, regarding their satisfaction with any aspect of the process, are contacted after the event, to arrange a follow-up meeting. This is done in order to manage the situation. This might well be an area that should be considered in the School Development Plan.

3. Autonomy and entrepreneurship

All staff are given the opportunity to be innovative, and will be supported in their creativity. We do 'encourage risk taking, and support good tries.' (Peters & Waterman, 1982: p14) At the same time, colleagues are supported very well if the innovation needs modification in order to be implemented. In my opinion, we too follow Fletcher Byrom's ninth commandment 'Make sure you generate a reasonable number of mistakes.' (Peters & Waterman, 1982: p14) There is a certain line of thought in our culture, which suggests that unless you make mistakes you are not an entrepreneur. In education, we do not have sufficient time or resources, to be able to afford to make too many mistakes, without it having a detrimental effect on the pupils' education. There were no major mistakes when Review Day was first implemented, but for the second year, minor adjustments were made, following the evaluations, e.g. modifications to the SWOT analysis forms used by the students.

4. Productivity through people

'The excellent companies treat the rank and file as the root source of quality and productivity gain.' (Peters & Waterman, 1982: p14).

This is most definitely not my opinion of the way all staff is viewed at Castledown. This could be explained by the fact that some have proven success with previous innovations, whilst others may not have made any proposals for innovations that have

been implemented. In my view, the outcome of this is that some staff is afraid of making any proposals, for fear of them being rejected, which, in turn, might be construed as a questioning of their professional competence. For me, as the KS3 pastoral manager, I would like to think that all staff in my team feel that I have 'respect for the individual.' (Peters & Waterman, 1982: p15) because that is certainly my philosophy, and something about which I feel very strongly. Each member of the team should be respected for what and who he/she is, even though there may be times when we do not always agree, when a majority decision would take preference. In the context of the KS3 Review Day, I know that all staff involved contributed to its success, so each has every right to feel valued and highly respected.

5. Hands-on, value driven

This is a key area for improvement of overall management at Castledown, although in the context of my innovation, it was very much a hands-on activity. The entire KS3 team was involved in the planning and implementation, they all shared in its success, and in the evaluation process.

6. Stick to the knitting

This attribute is totally applicable to the innovation of Review Day. It is what most teachers know how to do best – talk to parents and children about their studies, their progress and targets for the future. In cases where this is not fully relevant, staff were supported with a checklist of what points to make, what questions to ask and what data to share. This also served to give confidence to younger colleagues.

7. Simple form, lean staff

The process of Review Day was kept as simple as possible. It was done in this way to keep it manageable within the time frame for induction, and the time frame for delivery. With only 15 minutes for each appointment, the process needed to be precise, succinct and informative. Whilst I reported to SMT, no other senior member of staff was directly involved in the planning, implementation or evaluation. I suspect that if the outcome had been less than successful, other senior staff would have become involved – an example of 'autonomy and entrepreneurship – encouraging practical risk taking, and supporting good tries.'

8. Simultaneous loose-tight properties

This relates very well to the Review Day innovation at Castledown. Whilst giving form tutors the freedom to operate their own system within the framework, all team members were expected to uphold the key principles of the innovation; that the education of the children is a triangular process between parents, school and pupils, and that in order to be entirely successful each participant has an important part to play.

For the school, our part is to provide the teaching, the results and the opportunity for valuable feedback to both parents and pupils in a non-confrontational manner. I believe we succeeded in doing this. I believe we succeeded in this, because the attendance at the second event a year later was as good as the first year. Parents clearly felt the activity was worthwhile.

Conclusion

My research focused on three key pieces of literature:

- The Change Model – Everard and Morris
- The New Meaning of Educational Change – Fullan
- In Search of Excellence – Peters and Waterman

I selected Everard and Morris, modified their plan to suit my own situation, and found it clarified my thinking, and forced me to focus on the task.

Alongside this, I used Fullan's model, of initiation, implementation, institutionalisation or rejection/postponement because this identified the stages I needed to go through in order that my innovation could be implemented and institutionalised – I believed in what I wanted to do, and wanted colleagues to work with me.

Thirdly, I used the work of Peters and Waterman as a model for supporting innovative change; an alternative way of approaching the task, using their 'Lessons from America's Best – Run Companies'. I was able to relate their eight attributes that characterised the distinction of the excellent, well – supported, innovative companies, and relate those to the Castledown situation, identifying, as I went along areas where Castledown did not match the criteria.

The innovation of KS3 Review Day was definitely a planned and controlled change. In understanding some of the key concepts of change, it became clear that my innovation required a significant shift in the practice that staff had become very familiar with – they would need to completely change their current practice.

As the change agent, I was the person who not only valued the innovation itself, believing that it would benefit parents students and teachers, but I too implemented it. My colleagues needed some persuasion, as users, to change their practices, to accept my vision, and in general there was little resistance. Only individuals, made a few minor adaptations, to the general proposal, before it was finally implemented.

The change process was carefully planned, but will evolve over a period of time, as users become more familiar with the process, or new colleagues come on board, with new ideas and alternative experiences. One difficulty was the need to unlearn old ways and learn new ones, making sense of what the innovation entailed, and understanding how the process was actually meant to work.

The innovation was generally adopted with very little resistance, and colleagues willingly implemented the idea. There was mutual adaptation between myself as the change agent, and colleagues as the users, to the point where each was comfortable with the process they were expected to implement. Having now completed the programme for a second year, with the same degree of success – 90% attendance by parents, the innovation is now becoming institutionalised.

In managing the innovation, I carefully planned the process and identified a number of benefits to colleagues – not least that they would benefit by not having to be in

school on as many evenings, plus the advantage of meeting the majority of parents. These benefits, in turn, would surely help to support the students learning.

In using Everard and Morris (1990) Change model, I was able to clarify my thinking into 5 key stages of a change process, which no doubt saved time and energy and made the change process much more succinct. Based on the Everard and Morris model, my modified version took the following form:

1. Define where we want to be
2. Define where we are now
3. Identify the gaps
4. Close the gaps
5. Manage the transition

This formed my plan of what I needed to do in order to implement the change.

With Fullan's model, he suggests that the change process involved in innovation is widely interpreted in terms of sequential but also overlapping stages, thus:

- Adoption/initiation – leading up to and including the decision to proceed – this decision was taken at an SMT meeting
- Implementation – an attempt to put the change into practise – this stage took Castledown nearly 4 months
- Institutionalisation – with the first effort being a great success, colleagues agreed that the same process should be repeated the following year – which was also a great success
- Rejection /postponement – this did not apply to my innovation because it was a success.

The innovation was a great success. Previously, attendance at traditional parents' evenings had been about 52%, and the attendance at the first Review Day was 92%, and at the second 90%. Staff were expected to work for one late evening rather than three, and tutors did meet the vast majority of parents. Pupils were fully aware of what progress they had made over the previous year, and set targets for the following term.

The literature that I used did identify many of the factors that influenced the change effort, and does apply in many cases to the context I have analysed.

If I participate in any educational change process in the future, I would read additional literature, specifically about the topic in question. However, the 3 key pieces of literature to which I have referred, do apply to a great extent by:

- Considering changes in industry as opposed to education, offering effective solutions
- Giving me a very clear action plan as to how I manage the change process
- Identifying situations which may have not been foreseen, and which might put the innovation in jeopardy if not considered early on in the process.

In the last two decades there have been vast changes in education across the world. If the reception of these ideas and their implementation are to be enthusiastically

received by parents, teachers and students, the change process must be clear for all to see, and the potential benefits and outcomes clearly identified.