



Utilising curriculum models to enhance classroom learning from infant to junior schools

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This academy trust shows how bringing school heads together is a vital step in developing leadership and management in their schools, and in the trust

The Cam Academy Trust (CAT), which has seven primary schools, four secondary schools and two sixth forms in South Cambridgeshire and Huntingdon, with one just over the border in central Bedfordshire, sees its role as ensuring excellence in all its academies. This means developing leadership in each school and between schools.

“That’s not an easy thing to do,” concedes the trust’s primary executive leader, Chris Jukes. “At first the only thing bringing them together was they are all part of CAT. They all had, and still have, different visions and viewpoints, particularly those coming from a local authority background, who felt they would lose the support of the LA, and the comfort blanket if things go wrong... We had to help the heads to look at a future without LA constraints – but still to ensure that they have appropriate support.”

“Together, we identify the professional development path they are going on. They have started to identify with a lot of that and used it in their development plans on how to move their schools forwards. We’ve had to work closely together.”

A common difficulty in getting a group of disparate headteachers to work together is the relative positions of primary and secondary schools in a partnership. There’s an implied sense of “if the secondary

and primary phases are going to work together, it’ll be the secondary subject expert who will be the person telling the primary about the way things could and should be done,” says Jukes. “For example, if we were to team up on science, a science lead from a secondary school may be seen as being the lead. I don’t think that’s a really big thing – in fact, I’ve got a really good primary science lead who’s undertaken a joint piece of work with local science secondary teachers and shown them some good practice.” He agrees that there are some areas, such as empathy and behaviour management, in which primary teachers and school leaders often have more expertise than their secondary colleagues.

With 14 years of headship behind him, “experience which includes going through various minefields and coming out the other side,” Jukes’ role in the trust is “not to boss people about, but as a facilitator, helping heads to identify what they need, and to support and guide them.” Similarly, the heads’ role should be providing an overview to their staff, not detailed management. “Staff have to own it. Not the headteachers,” he says firmly. “When we started on this project – leading outstanding teaching and learning – with the heads and senior leadership teams led by SSAT’s Andy Williams and Colin Logan in September 2018, they helped the heads to understand each other’s vision, beliefs, ethos and philosophy of education. It was very powerful: Andy and Colin in collaboration with their colleagues in the SSAT team suggested visits to other schools outside the MAT where this was already in place.”



In the case of Hartford Junior School, the opportunity to develop middle leaders and phase leaders has demonstrated “a strong sense of autonomy, empowerment and ownership for their area of work”, as its head Steve Davis explains. “My maths leader introduced a whole new maths curriculum throughout the school. And my reading/English lead has led the school’s approach to English. It’s been a real strength.”

By contrast with the traditional rivalry between infant and junior schools, Davis clarifies that unity rather than distance characterises the trust’s schools – and indeed, some schools outside the trust. “The collegiate approach to fellow primary school head-teachers is really important: we’ve got each other’s backs. We’re able to work together on specific projects, on one level, but also to be able to pick up the phone and say, ‘We’ve got this scenario, how are we going to be able to help each other out with it?’”

As Chris Jukes puts it: “I’ve got to strengthen the heads – indeed, all the decision makers who collaborate – to clearly understand the direction they want to take their school in. How do you identify a talent pool in each school? Identifying staff who could be part of a school improvement model for the trust. We want to internalise that.”

Training teachers to become effective leaders makes a significant contribution, as Steve Davis explains:

“We have developed an effective pathway where teaching assistants without a degree will study part-time at the University of Bedfordshire for a BA in Child Education Studies. We then offer them the assessment-only module of teacher training qualification. Two of them have been teaching as unqualified teachers for the final two years of their degree, gaining that experience you need in the assessment-only module for qualification. It’s been a really good route for the school, and they are solid, strong teachers.”

Interim senior leadership roles in other trust schools

At a more senior level, how do you develop colleagues’ talents? “A great opportunity arose from being in the trust,” says Davis. “My deputy head was able to take an interim headship at another school joining the trust. This which gave me an opportunity, rather than to replace her, to bring on some middle leaders to act as senior leaders in the school for the year she was on the interim post. It was a really good lesson for me.”

And for the interim head, it appears. “She had her own existing strengths and development areas – she was very strong on management and on detail. So for me it was a case of enabling her to build on those strengths when she came back. I shared with her some of the things I considered to be her development areas, and we agreed on developing a



strategic vision for our school. It was nice after the meetings we two have had, to share with other primary heads how important it is to build a strategic vision for our school as well as having an eye for the day-to-day detail.”

Ultimately, creating leaders effectively nurtures talent within the school, which has been reflected in students’ success.



“The great example is the peer review – that really gets us to think carefully about the strengths and development areas for each of our schools. To be able to recognise who’s doing what well, and who can we pick up the phone and ask about something that may or may not be working in each of our own schools.”

Steve Davis greatly values the trust’s encouragement to its schools to stay local and take part in clusters and collaborations.

“I’m aware that many trusts will say, ‘You’re in our trust, this is the way we do things and you need to talk to us about how to do things and how you can develop further’. But our trust leadership has not only enabled but encouraged me and other schools to work in our local partnerships. I work closely with a couple of schools in Huntingdon, particularly along the lines of the knowledge-rich curriculum which we’ve been building [see be-

low]. There are three schools in the town that are in the trust but another five or six that aren’t. In terms of knowledge-led curriculum, at the moment I’m working much more closely with another school in the town than I am with any of our other trust schools.”

A curriculum for life

“A year ago, in answer to our static results,” says Rae Lee, head of Hartford Infant School, “we felt that we needed to do something quite drastic. We have been developing an Early Excellence model of teaching based on enquiry across the school. It has links to Martin Robinson’s ideas re the grammar, dialect and rhetoric but will be underpinned through oracy. This last area is our next part of the journey with Oracy 21.”

This vision originated from a visit by Robinson, who worked with each school’s SLT for a day. The outcome of this visit was so fulfilling, says Chris Jukes, that staff wanted Robinson to return to work with them further. It also inspired the development of more collaborative opportunities between each of the schools.

Applying Robinson’s practice felt like the right choice for creating change, says Steve Davis, one of the champions of this work within the trust: “The idea is that the grammar of a subject, the knowledge of a subject is pretty fundamental. But then knowledge – so what? What are you going to do with that knowledge? It’s not a pop quiz scenario where we just want children to become these vessels filled with facts, we want them to be able to play with that knowledge, to work out what they think of it, what that means to them as individuals. There’s the dialectic phase when they’re playing about with the knowledge that they’ve accrued. And then the rhetoric phase, when they offer a hand-out to the rest of the world, they share what they’ve learned with other people, whether it’s to inform or to influence.”

“I like the idea of enabling children to lead a good life in its fullest sense, and the way to do that is to ensure they understand as much about the world as we are able to deliver in the four years that they’re with us.”

Davis has applied an approach that integrates each of the aspects touched upon in class and connects them to allow students to better understand the intricacies of our world. Beginning at, for example, ancient Egypt, his class analyses the role of slaves and the divine right of the Pharaoh. It then moves chronologically into the democratic disputes of ancient Greece, the shift of the Roman emperor era and on into Vikings, Saxons and the Danelaw. “By the time we get to beheading Charles I, my children have now got a body of knowledge that looks at moving from the divine rights of a Pharaoh with the power of life and death over slaves in ancient Egypt to cutting off the king’s head,” he explained.

“I think that tells the children something about the way that individuals can influence a society, and over time and with well-thought-out ideas and a body of knowledge they’re able to use to back up those ideas. I’m excited about the way that this curriculum can encourage my children to be thinking about who they are and where they sit in the world and in society, and almost their responsibility to do something with their views about how they think the world should be. I don’t mind too much what those views are, but if, for example, somebody comes knocking on their door and asking them what they think about a parliamentary democracy

in a country versus a parliamentary democracy in a continent and how they may want to vote, those sort of scenarios, I’d very much rather that they’ve got a whole history of a civilization to draw upon when making those decisions than just being swayed one way or the other by a particularly vocal or influential newspaper owner or politician. That’s where I see a knowledge-led curriculum offering real power to people making up their own minds.”

This is one example of the original thinking as well as collaboration that characterises the trust’s approach. Chris Jukes sums up: “We have not yet gone on to the next stages, such as SSAT accreditation. That’s for later. This is about our initial work over the last year. SSAT has helped us to build confidence, robustness and the ability of heads to be strong leaders engaged with the success of all the schools. For example, new schools that were in difficulties that joined the MAT recently are now fully engaged with this process, taking part in the collegiate meetings and both contributing and receiving advice and support to build a collaborative approach.”

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