

Learning to be an effective HOD

This is a real example of Accent Learning helping a school to implement planned changes to bring about sustainable improvements. It is taken from the report [The Work of the Accent Advisers A “success case” evaluation](#), by the New Zealand Council for Educational Research.

Seaview Girls¹ is a large urban secondary school for girls in the mid- to high-decile range. The school has a special needs unit attended by a number of girls and young women who need very high levels of educational and personal support. The HOD was appointed to lead the unit in mid-2009. Although she was already a very experienced special needs educator this was her first middle management role in a school.

Seaview Girls has a strong professional learning culture. Every teacher is expected to undertake professional inquiry relevant to their own teaching and related to the school’s strategic curriculum goals. There are processes in place to support this, including release time for whole-school professional learning in the first time block of one day of the week. Congruent with this professional learning culture, the principal invited and encouraged the new HOD to attend the leadership workshops run by the Accent Advisory service for secondary school middle leaders. The process of personalised learning that unfolded from the first workshop onwards helped her to develop concrete plans for addressing some challenges she could see would need to be addressed, and then to put these plans into action.

In 2009 this HOD felt sufficiently confident in her new role to also apply for and take on leadership of the school’s Learning Support department. She saw that there were overlaps in the work of the two units and hence efficiency gains to be achieved in managing both of them alongside each other.

Planning and enacting change leadership

The HOD came into a special needs unit with a culture of strong and appropriate practice but little in the way of documentation by which the team could be held accountable for that practice. As the holder of their own Group Special Education funding, and the funding for another school nearby, the new HOD was very aware that the unit will be audited at some point, and that currently she would have difficulty demonstrating their financial prudence and best practice processes. The unit needed policy and procedures documentation to complement those of the school overall, with their own specific details added. They need to show how they constructed and then worked to Individual Education Plans (IEPs) for each student in the unit. However the actual day to day work was so busy that the thought of needing to do this job from scratch was simply overwhelming. Working with the Accent advisers helped the HOD get “a sense of perspective” on these challenges and to come to see herself as a person who really did have the professional autonomy, knowledge and leadership potential to make the changes needed.

¹ A pseudonym

At the outset of her professional learning journey, the HOD attended four workshops run the Accent Advisory secondary team. The focus was on being an effective leader in a middle management role. In between workshops she was supported by the Accent team via a Moodle site set up for the participants to interact electronically with each other and with the advisers. Most of the workshop attendees were HODs of traditional subject teams. One participant worked in an Activity Centre in a role that had some similarities with - but overall more differences to - this HOD's role leading a high dependency special needs unit. In one sense she was "on her own" in the learning group and hence unsure whether the learning experiences would be relevant for her unique situation and needs. In the event the programme offered quickly dispelled any concerns she initially held about relevance. The advisers ensured that the learning could be effectively yet manageably personalized to meet the needs each participant perceived for themselves. They did this by:

- Using structured frameworks and processes for focusing and clarifying personal learning needs and goals. These were refined in small group discussion and documented as the first step in a portfolio process to record the learning journey;
- Clarifying the scope of actions that could help address personal goals and then developing a plan of action and change based on these;
- Supporting participants to see how they could use this change and reflection model with their own teams;
- Regularly remixing small groups so that multiple perspectives could be elicited and debated;
- Matching each person to an adviser whose personal teaching background and expertise might offer the richest support to achieve the plan. (In 2010 the HOD received two school visits from the adviser to whom she had been "matched" and she was anticipating an imminent 2011 visit at the time of our interview);
- Matching each participant to a peer to be a "critical friend" with goals and challenges as similar as possible to their own. (This aspect was less successful for this HOD than for others because there was no really suitable match to be had);
- Coaching participants in skills all of them would need regardless of their individual plans. One example this HOD particularly valued was how to have difficult conversations with members of the team, especially where members of the team had different cultural backgrounds, with associated challenges for using appropriate communication processes. Another useful skill set was learning about time management and how to work out priorities when time was pressing.

Measures of success

In the working context outlined above, an important measure of success was completion of the relevant documentation to support any future audit of the special needs unit, but also to be used for staff induction, and to access guidance in building and maintaining IEPS and in non-routine situations. The workshops had sparked the HOD's thinking about possibilities for building a handbook of practice for the unit and helped her to see how to break up this overwhelming task into small manageable steps and carry them out. The

HOD said that the advisers “gave us permission to slow down: change is always a work in progress”. The handbook is now nearing completion and the shared understanding of best practice that it communicates will be well used within the unit as well as communicating how the unit works to those beyond it.

For an HOD sitting outside the prevailing timetable structure of subject areas, but also trying to work within them, perceiving personal relevance in the programme is an important measure of success. The processes outlined above for personalizing the learning ensured that the HOD did find relevance in the workshops, if not in her interactions with her assigned critical friend. The process of matching ensured that her Accent mentor was able to support her by prompting her own learning and by making judicious decisions about when to provide new input based on her (the adviser’s) own deep experience in special needs education.

Arguably, another measure of success is that the professional learning offered within a structured external programme resonates with, or at least does not “get in the way” of, the school’s internal professional inquiry programme. As the HOD showed us around the unit she discussed some pedagogical innovations the teaching team had been trying out with severely autistic girls. She also demonstrated how they knew these changes had successfully supported these learners to make progress with addressing highly specific learning goals. It was clear that this curriculum inquiry and the strengthened IEP processes were working to successfully reinforce each other.

Finally, confidence to *be* a leader is an important measure of success for those new to the role. The HOD described the powerful moment when it dawned on her that “you are the boss, you have to decide providing you can justify your actions to the principal”. The structured goal setting and problem-solving in the workshops had supported this realisation and given her the confidence to take on a second leadership role just three school terms after taking up the first.