The management of development planning in international schools

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Due to increasing interest in school development planning, improvement and effectiveness, more schools are gaining greater control over their own school management. Argues that school development plans should provide an operational structure with a clearly identified direction and priorities. Focuses on the problem of planning within the international school context and investigates specific objectives via a survey. Results confirmed that long-term planning is valued by heads of international schools and that staff development is integral to planning and implementing strategies.

Development planning in schools

The growth of interest in school improvement and school effectiveness over recent years has brought with it an increase in the volume of literature and debate relating to the value of development planning in schools, and its relevance to a wide range of contexts. With the move to decentralization of systems of education worldwide, and the deployment of centrally prescribed curricular frameworks managed and interpreted regionally and locally, there has become evident a growing need for the design and adoption of clear plans for action at the individual school level. Increasingly in the schools of the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand and Denmark, for example, there is evidence of a more substantial emphasis on school development planning. Although the terms used to describe the planning process may vary, as Hargreaves and Hopkins (1994, p. 1) point out: Development planning is a response to the management of multiple innovations and change, and the perceived need for a systematic and whole-school approach to planning, especially where schools are expected to be more self-managing.

The consequence is that gradually more schools in the Western world are gaining a greater control over their own school management. In many countries the move to decentralization is accompanied by the provision of a defined educational framework in the form of designated curricula along with specified assessment and accreditation procedures, which do, in fact, provide greater opportunities for increased management autonomy. In bringing an international perspective on school development Dempster et al. (1994) note:

...the concept of self-managed schools is vital to political and bureaucratic strategies for the devolution of authority and responsibility to the point of educational service delivery (p. 25).

In many countries both state and independent schools are discovering that the determination of the future of the institution lies within the control of members of their school boards, composed of elected, or selected, governors working with the head and teaching staff, each with a responsibility for a particular role in the process. In such a situation the need for an overall school development plan, or the school’s equivalent to the corporate strategic plan, becomes even more pressing. For in a negotiated plan there exists a vehicle for the translation of the shared vision of the school community into some form of coherent reality, through prioritized strategies and action plans within an agreed time schedule.

Although the rationale for having a plan may be obvious, in that it should provide an operational structure together with a clearly identified direction involving priorities to meet the needs of the organization at any particular time, determining the appropriate approach to the design and implementation of such a plan raises a number of important questions which need to be addressed by the school. For the group of schools known collectively as “international schools” their peculiar characteristics give rise to a particular need for such development planning.

The international school context

With the increasing global mobility of the commercial, professional and diplomatic communities has come the consequent growth in the number of families based for varying periods of time in locations which are far away from their home environment. Parents of such families are faced with a dilemma in respect of arrangements for the education of their school-age children. Do they leave their children in a boarding school in the home country involving absence from the parental domicile, or do they take the children with them and arrange schooling in whatever location they happen to be, for short periods of time? The network of international schools has evolved principally as a response to such a challenge and has done so with increasing magnitude. From the first international schools which were established in the 1920s, the major expansion occurred between the 1960s, when an estimated 50 or so such schools existed (Bereday and Lauwerys, 1964) to the situation in the 1990s where it would be reasonable to consider the number...
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Hawley (1994) identified a research study with over 300 heads in international schools, which comprised the network of overall development of the school. In a study of heads themselves, this highlights the need for careful planning to ensure continuity and consistency in the overall development of the school. In a study of heads themselves, this highlights the need for careful planning to ensure continuity and consistency in the overall development of the school. (Hawley, 1994).

Alongside the increase in the number of international schools, so arguably has the degree of diversity of organizational type of schools which comprise the network increased. While the schools generally cater for a multi-national group of students, the curriculum, and indeed the individual philosophy, in any one of the schools may vary considerably from that in any other. Attempts to categorize such schools (Gellat, 1981; Hayden and Thompson, 1995; Leach, 1969; Matthews, 1989; Pönisch, 1987; Terwilliger, 1972) have so far failed to produce a singular taxonomy which accounts for the range of institutional variations involved.

Notwithstanding the considerable variety amongst the international schools, there exist a number of characteristics which many, if not all such schools, share in common. Many employ common approaches to curricular provision, made possible by the development of the so-called international curricula at all ages throughout the elementary and secondary age range. Included in such provision are the International Baccalaureate for the upper secondary phase (International Baccalaureate Organization, 1994a), the International Baccalaureate Middle Years Programme (International Baccalaureate Organization, 1994b) and the International Schools Curriculum Project for the elementary phase (Bartlett, 1993), recently brought into the overall umbrella of the International Baccalaureate Organization. Some national examinations have also been extended into the international school network; these include the International General Certificate of Secondary Education from the UK (UCLES, 1993) and an international version of the Advanced Placement programme from North America (Lewis, 1994).

Most of the schools are independent institutions governed by boards with considerable autonomy, albeit subject to considerations of local need and international recognition or accreditation. While this offers great flexibility and opportunity for innovation, it also presents a situation in which the school may experience a variety of approaches to development over what can be a very short period of time. This relative lack of stability, in large measure, arises from the nature of the rapid turnover in students and staff that many of the schools experience, including that of heads themselves. This in turn highlights the even greater need for careful planning to ensure continuity and consistency in the overall development of the school. In a research study with over 300 heads in international schools, Hawley (1994) identified a range of school characteristics which correlate with longevity in post. Pertinent to the present debate was the finding that heads remain longer in those schools where the school board policy is defined by a written policy manual. The median school head duration was found to be 4.7 years for those who work in schools with a written board policy manual but only 2.7 years in schools with no written policy. The reality of this kind of international mobility, with changes in the administration, board membership, heads, teaching staff, students and parental body, is that development has often been spasmodic. In such circumstances the link between the planning process and the nature of the leadership of the institution becomes important.

Leadership and planning

A crucial issue, therefore, for the future development of an international school is the problem of defining and maintaining a consistent vision in the face of frequent changes in the leadership within the school. The role of the leader in such circumstances has been described as one of conducting and guiding which in turn implies the need for a destination, or at least a direction. In the case of many international schools, such direction will be pursued not only by an individual (say the head) but possibly by a group (the senior management team, for example) over a period of time. The need for this direction to be clearly identified and stated within a defined plan or policy document is of critical importance.

Given the diversity within the international school population, it may well be that such plans will themselves vary enormously as will, therefore, the specific roles of the leaders in implementing them. As Hodgson et al. (1994, p. 118) found within the UK context: headteachers would have key, although not necessarily identical roles.

How much more true this is likely to be for international schools, where staff bring forward previous experience from a wide range of national and cultural backgrounds. Certainly expectations will differ.

Again, the point is stressed by Hargreaves and Hopkins (1991, p. viii): every school has to find its own unique approach to development planning; this is essential if there is to be real progress in making the school a more effective and rewarding place for teachers and students.

Further, Caldwell and Spinks (1992) point out: schools in the 1990s will require a high level capacity for strategic planning, that is to see the larger picture and on a continuing basis set and reset priorities in a simple school...
development plan, which will provide the framework for the annual operational plan (p. 10).

Although the development plan may be simple in essence it should also be: realistic, neither too ambitious nor insufficiently demanding...there should be no more than three or four major priorities, though each priority may contain a number of elements (Hargreaves and Hopkins, 1991, p. 40).

The dynamics of who should become actively involved in the process is additionally an important dimension in the exercise. If the strategic planning exercise can involve a broad-based representation from the entire school community in a consultative process then there is likely to be a sense of drawing together to common goals. As noted in this connection by Hawkes (1991):

• in this sense the Strategic Plan can increase the synergy of a school, particularly if the community has a real sense of ownership of the plan (p. 1).

A number of different models have been proposed as ways forward in respect of the process of development planning, and they arise from different parts of the world. All incorporate common aspects which essentially require a school to gather a clear understanding of its context, to identify the goals and priorities which should be addressed, to decide how such goals should be reached, to determine the means for implementing the chosen priorities and to provide a means of evaluating the level of success. The variables in these models are determined to a large extent by the level of participation and the nature of involvement in the decision-making process within the school community. It is important for schools to espouse a model which will not only look to short-term solutions to current problems but which will provide a framework for an evolutionary approach to development.

In order to discover how such issues are addressed in the context of the international schools network, an arena which has been relatively under-researched in the past, it was decided to undertake an initial study of current practice in a range of international schools.

**Design of the study**

Within the preliminary context of the study it was decided to identify the specific objectives to be investigated so that an appropriate research strategy could be identified. The objectives were as follows:

• to determine the extent to which development planning currently exists in international schools, and the status which it is perceived to enjoy;
• to ascertain the expectations of heads for the extent of participation of other agents in the process of long-term planning; and
• to survey the perceptions of the nature of leadership roles within international schools.

Given the extent of the diversity among the group of international schools worldwide, the problems associated with assembling a representative sample of such schools are formidable, especially in the absence, already noted, of an agreed classification of the institutions. Since a major intention of the study was to gather information on the range of issues perceived by international schools in development planning, heterogeneity within the sample was a greater requirement than homogeneity with respect to representation; generalizability was unlikely to be an outcome of such a study.

Because of the desirability for heterogeneity it was decided that this study should be conducted through a survey. The instrument should be a postal questionnaire, which would facilitate access to a reasonable number of the geographically widely dispersed schools. A more personalized approach through standardized interviews would have enabled an additional set of issues to be explored which would not be feasible using the questionnaire, but considerations of cost and researcher time made such an approach impracticable.

By drawing on current literature in the field of school development planning it was possible to assemble a list of issues from which to explore perceptions of the role and rationale for long-term planning and strategic development in these schools. Such a list would strictly only have validity in terms of usage within the educational systems from which they were drawn; part of the broader intention of the current study was to find out to what extent that validity could be maintained in the different context of the international schools. Questionnaire items were generated, paying due attention to those aspects of questionnaire design identified by inter alios Oppenheim (1992) as optimizing reliability and validity for the instrument.

There were four principal sections to the instrument: fixed-response items relating to the current status of development planning in the respondent’s own school; fixed-response and open-response items concerning school background information; eight statements with a Likert-type scale response (five categories) relating to the role of long-term planning; and open-response items exploring the
planning process and implementation of development planning. The selection of closed items combined with opportunity for free responses was considered to be an appropriate combination, bearing in mind the desirability to keep the instrument as concise as possible for completion by busy professionals. Coding and analysis of the responses was also facilitated by such a design.

This survey targeted those within the international schools who were clearly involved in any development planning which would take place - the heads or superintendents. Identifying others who may be involved for the purposes of answering the questionnaire itself was thought to be too problematic, and unnecessary for this small-scale study. Information concerning the extent to which others were involved would, however, be sought from the heads. (In what follows, the term "heads" will be used collectively for those responding to the survey.)

The piloting of the questionnaire was conducted in an international school within which it was known that development planning took place, with members of the senior management team. Results from the pilot school responses were not included in the main study and, after adjustments arising from comments relating to ambiguity of expression and general clarity of layout, the questionnaire was formally adopted as the research instrument.

The questionnaire was sent to 70 schools worldwide, selected to reflect the heterogeneous group targeted. School size, type, age range, location and institutional history were considered in consulting a number of different international schools directories as a basis for selection. Completed questionnaires were received from the heads of 40 different international schools, a response rate of 57 per cent. The range of schools responding reflected a similar degree of heterogeneity as that constructed in the original selection.

Findings

Following a description of the nature and magnitude of the response to the questionnaire the outcomes of the research with respect to the three objectives already defined, together with the inferences which can be drawn for each of them, are identified and a general set of conclusions from the research as a whole, as it applies within the context of the particular sample drawn, are offered.

Nature of the response

The responding schools were located in 30 countries spread around the major regions of the world including Europe, North America, South America, Africa, Asia, Australasia and the Middle East. No single country had more than three schools represented and the vast majority had only one. Over 75 per cent of the schools offered international curricula, the most widely quoted of which was the International Baccalaureate. Even those schools which formally offered programmes leading to national qualifications emphasized the international perspective which they sought to bring to the education process within the school.

It was interesting to note the nationality representation reported among the administrative staff of the school, where US nationals (34 per cent) and UK nationals (27 per cent) predominated. Equivalent figures for the teaching staff (27 per cent US, 29 per cent UK) and for the membership of the board (22 per cent US, and 17 per cent UK) reflect the widely recognized presence of US and UK nationals throughout the international school constituency. The relatively lower proportions of US and UK nationals among board members may represent a sensitivity to the need to include host country nationals or even a legal requirement to do so. All but one of the schools represented in the survey had a governing body and 63 per cent had an elected board.

These data are similar to those reported elsewhere for the range of international schools worldwide (Hayden and Thompson, 1995). From an analysis of the results some interesting patterns can be discerned.

Current status of development planning

Even with such a diversity of schools, it was evident from the responses to the questionnaire that there was an overwhelming awareness of and support for, the importance of long-term planning, even within institutions for which short-term engagements of staff are the norm. Of the responding heads, 68 per cent regarded it as completely essential with the remainder rating it of prime importance. Three-quarters of the schools surveyed had already introduced a development plan in which short-, medium- and long-term goals had been identified and prioritized. The implication that up to a quarter of the schools involved had not got such a plan in place, despite support expressed elsewhere by the same schools for the notion, and a 78 per cent rejection of the idea that annual priorities were sufficiently to offer a sense of direction, would seem to indicate that there exist factors which impede the implementation. A conclusion which may be drawn from the level of support for long-term planning in schools which are characterized by diversity and short-term issues is that it is just the very
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The degree of independence and autonomy enjoyed by the schools often bring with them fewer external or government controls, greater openness to change, the potential to implement change rapidly and the opportunity to provide effectively for individual student needs within the school.

Participation in development planning

There was almost total agreement with the statement that the production of an effective development plan depends on a process of wide consultation and involvement from members of staff and the school community (95 per cent, with 46 per cent strongly agreed), although the idea that the process necessarily involves reaching consensus among such a constituency was not quite so strongly held (88 per cent, with 23 per cent strongly agreed).

A divergence of opinion occurred between groups of respondents with respect to the extent to which the wishes of the wider community should be taken into account. There was a clear indication from 66 per cent of the respondents that long-term planning should reflect the needs of the local community, although 29 per cent of the heads stressed the importance of maintaining a balance between specific school and community interests, with leadership definitely coming from the school. This clearly has implications for the nature of decision making at board level, especially in those cases where significant representation from the local community is present.

Leadership and planning

There was rather less agreement with respect to the authority which the head might command in the determination of the direction and future plans for the school. While all schools acknowledged the importance of strong leadership qualities in this respect, there was a divergence of views between those (27 per cent) respondents who would regard only the head as having the responsibility of identifying the future direction and plans for the school, and the remainder (over 70 per cent) who did not share that view. The latter respondents further indicated that it was essential that the head worked with a management team, as its chief executive officer.

Conclusions

The data gathered through the questionnaire survey included a range of free response comments which provided insights into a number of additional issues relating to the development planning process. They did, however, confirm that, in the views of the heads, there is a high regard for the value of the long-term planning process in international schools. There is also a strong sense of commitment to the concept of school development plans in these institutions. That this is in keeping with current trends in the USA and in Britain is unsurprising in view of the indication in this survey that nationals from those countries form a significant part of the mobile staffing population in such schools, especially at senior management levels.

The difficulties experienced in the implementation of school development planning cannot, however, be underestimated. The provision of an effective framework to identify the elements of the procedures involved is a major priority, which a great majority (80 per cent) of the schools have attempted to address. The need to ensure that such a vehicle is consistent with the school’s philosophy, and mission statement, was stressed in the free response comments provided by the heads. This has also been expressed elsewhere as the need to ensure that the style of the management system in an international school is compatible with its espoused value system (Hayden and Thompson, 1996). The importance of the full support of the school board in the implementation of the change was also mentioned frequently by respondents.

The importance of ongoing communication with the different agencies involved with the process was seen to be crucial, especially in a situation where there is a high turnover of teaching staff and parents. The provision of appropriate documentation, at regular intervals, by the leadership was considered essential.

Given the mobile staffing structure in many of the schools, the role of staff development
should be seen as integral to the planning and implementation strategies. This will have consequences for organizational and financial provision as part of the overall scheme.

Although it was anticipated at the outset that the major factors in the process of development planning in international schools would have centred on the disadvantages of short-term considerations arising from the transient staff, student and parental bodies, it is clear that the belief is widely held, by heads at least, that the creation of a rational framework for planning and implementation, matched to carefully prioritized goals for future development, making the best possible use of available resources, is a positive contribution to meeting the needs of international schools.

References


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