School planning has developed significantly over the last ten years with the universal acceptance of school development planning formats and approaches. However, the move to school-based management and greater autonomy has increased the need for schools to take on a wider planning role and responsibility. This paper considers three models of planning. It briefly outlines the original model of school development planning that the authors articulated in 1992 but then examines the need for schools to extend their planning from short-term school development planning to longer-term strategic planning and, most significantly, to incorporate “futures thinking”. It then develops a new model which the authors believe should be more responsive to the needs of school planning in the future.

Introduction

Our first book on school development planning (Davies and Ellison, 1992) was based on development work that we had undertaken with several hundred headteachers. These headteachers were responding to the challenge of designing appropriate planning structures and processes to meet the demands of self-management following the 1988 Education Reform Act. This early work argued for a change in practice and put forward a new framework for school planning. The early 1990s saw a number of publications in the field with Planning for School Development (DES, 1989) being supported by Development Planning – A Practical Guide (DES, 1991) and the work of a number of writers such as Skelton et al. (1991), Hargreaves and Hopkins (1991), West and Ainscow (1991) and Puffit et al. (1992) picking up the theme. Some more recent works such as Giles (1997) have merely repeated the early “how to” advice, but retrospective research by MacGilchrist et al. (1995) and Broadhead et al. (1996) has provided some insights into this early experience.

Self-managing schools are taking on greater responsibility for planning in a wider context. To do this they have engaged in various approaches to planning. This article summarises our thinking on current and potential approaches by examining three models of planning. It briefly outlines the original model that was articulated in 1992 but then examines the need for schools to extend their planning from short-term school development planning to longer-term strategic planning and, most significantly, to incorporate “futures thinking”. It then develops a new model which the authors believe should be more responsive to the needs of school planning in the future.

1992: the original model

Our original work considered that planning should take a mainly operational perspective with a one-year plan being extended up to two or three years. We considered that:

- The school development plan should provide the mechanism for defining a school’s aims and translating these into effective education. Activities can be sub-divided into core elements which represent the main purpose of the school and support elements which facilitate the effective operation of the core elements (Davies and Ellison, 1992, p. 9).

Following extensive work with schools and local education authorities (LEAs), we created a model to show our view of the way in which the elements built up into the school development plan (Figure 1).

The model which we proposed brought all the separate activities together into one coherent document in order to “provide a strategic picture of where the school is, where it is going and how it intends to get there” (Davies and Ellison, 1992, p. 9). At the time, many schools considered that only certain major activities such as curriculum and staffing needed planning and compartmentalised planning had led to overlaps and omissions. While we also proposed separate, more detailed plans for each of the areas shown in Figure 1, their integration ensured that the separate plans would be complementary.

This earlier work by schools on development planning has been successful in establishing benchmarks of good planning practice for the environment in which they found themselves in the early 1990s but the rate of economic, technological and educational change has gathered pace during the 1990s. The need to be flexible and responsive to this change is highlighted by Drucker (1993):

- What will be taught and learned; how it will be taught and learned; who will make use of schooling; and the position of the school in society - all of this will change greatly during the ensuing decades. Indeed, no other institution faces challenges as radical as those that will transform the school (p. 209).

Children who have recently started school and who go on to higher education will complete their education between the years 2013 and 2015. What is more, they could be working with technologies that have not yet been invented in an organisation that has yet to be created. What sort of educational experience will they have over the next ten years and beyond? How will schools plan to operate in this environment? The continued and increasingly rapid changes in both the
educational and the global environment require that schools should think ahead about the types of institutions which they wish to be in ten years’ time.

It is important to take a longer-term holistic perspective which considers what the nature of learning and the learning technology will be like in the twenty-first century and to avoid an incremental approach whereby a school would gradually alter its current provision. It is also wise to avoid some of the mistakes of industry and commerce where a rigid approach to strategic planning (as discussed by Mintzberg, 1994) has produced inflexibility and an inability to grasp opportunities which would ensure the long-term effectiveness of the organisation.

Our conclusion was that the original planning model we had articulated was appropriate for the one- or two-year operational planning cycle but it needed to be set alongside a reconceptualised, wider-reaching context.

1995: the three-stage model

It appeared that a more appropriate model to incremental planning would be to use futures thinking in order to develop a vision about a desired future state, creating scenarios which might represent the school’s future. Senior managers in schools could then use the process of strategic planning to complement and extend the existing development planning process. The link between these three activities can be seen in Figure 2. Our project aimed to investigate the extent to which schools were moving to this form of thinking. The first phase used a survey methodology with a sample consisting of 40 schools from across England which cater for secondary age pupils. These were schools that had previously worked with us on establishing development planning processes and had an initial capacity in this area. Following analysis of the responses, the second phase was expected to identify ten of the schools for follow-up research to build up a case study of each one. This would facilitate a detailed investigation of their approach in relation to our model. The following sections will outline the key characteristics of each of the stages of the model and report on the findings of the survey which related to each stage.

Futures thinking

When attempting to build a vision of the school and of the process of learning in the next century, it is useful to consider some of the trends and thinking that will impact on schools over the next five to 15 years. An articulation of some of these trends and thinking can be seen in the work of Beare and Slaughter (1993), Handy (1994), Hargreaves

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**Figure 1**
The original School Development Planning model

**Figure 2**
The three-stage model

- **1. Futures Thinking** 5-15 years
- **2. Strategic Planning** 3-5 years
- **3. Development Planning** 1-3 years
The development of state and national curriculum and testing frameworks is providing measures of output and value-added, thus increasing information for parental choice.

- Relating value-added educational gains to resource levels allows schools to be compared in terms of “value for money”. How can they achieve increased performance with the same resource level?
- Increased differentiation between schools encourages more specialised provision.
- Significantly enhanced levels of parental choice.
- Considerable changes in staffing patterns and arrangements, more para-professionals, core and periphery staff, fixed-term performance-led contracts, school-site pay bargaining.
- Radical changes in the nature of teaching and learning as the impact of the new teaching and learning technologies gathers pace.
- Greater varieties of finance with blurring between state-only and private-only funding of schools.
- Contracting out of educational as well as service elements of schooling.
- Re-examination of the boundaries between different stages of education and between education and the community.
- Redefinition of the leadership and management functions in schools.

Each school needs to develop a vision of the type of provision which will be offered into the next century. The senior managers of the school should lead the various stakeholders (such as governors, community, staff, parents and pupils) in the building of a picture which will help to make a reality of the vision. The technique of scenario building is a useful approach to utilise.

Scenario building is a method of envisaging the future which involves building an outline or sketch of the major developments which might take place. It is especially appropriate when the major trends affecting the provision will be the result of non-quantifiable factors. Many headteachers are sceptical of trying to look too far ahead. Scenario building recognises the unpredictability of the future. The outlines created are not to be seen as predictions but as possible scenarios. This should prove helpful to school leaders because it is important to recognise that decisions taken now will have long-term implications and that current decision making should allow for the uncertainties as exemplified in the scenarios.

The scenarios created need to be credible, useful and understandable if they are to be believed. When building the scenarios, it is important to involve people who have intuition, are creative and who have good judgement. This will help to ensure sufficient foresight but also to generate scenarios which are credible. At this creative stage, the benefits can be seen of not having a senior management team who are all alike; a range of views and some tensions and disagreements should result in better scenarios. A range of stakeholders, both internal and external, need to be involved at the scenario building and selecting stage, although much of the work will be carried out by the senior management team and the governors.

The evidence of futures thinking in schools

Only seven (17 per cent) of the sample of 40 schools acknowledged that they were involved in any type of futures thinking. Of those which had considered futures thinking, this had been at the instigation of heads or deputies who had been on innovative courses which had involved major sections on scenario building and futures thinking. In the remainder of the schools there was no evidence of planning or futures thinking beyond five years. This is despite the fact that the pupils had a five- to seven-year career in many of the schools and many of the staff had a 20-year career there. Of the seven schools that had involved themselves in futures thinking:

- four schools had spent time writing scenarios describing what the school might be like at some point in the twenty-first century;
- two had constructed lists of the key features which they expected to be apparent in the early stages of the century;
- one head described her vision of educational provision for a particular group of children in a large centre of population.

Of the remaining 33 schools, there was little or no evidence of this type of thinking taking place although five of these schools responded that they recognised the importance of futures thinking and hoped to “get round to it soon”. With the explosion of interest in the new technologies that will dominate much of the education and learning practice in the next century, this is a disturbing finding.

Strategic planning

Strategic planning is the process of matching the school’s activities to the current and emerging environment, bearing in mind what
can feasibly be achieved with the resource base which can be generated. The process of strategic planning can be seen to encompass three stages (as articulated by Johnson and Scholes, 1997) and thus to link into development planning:

1. Strategic analysis. This is where the aim is to form a view of the strategic position of the school and the key factors which will influence it in both the short and longer term. These factors will affect the choice of strategy. To appreciate fully the strategic position of the school it is necessary to understand how a wide range of stakeholders, such as pupils, staff, employers, governors and the community, view the situation which the school faces and its possible direction. The information will usually be assembled by the senior management team.

2. Strategic choice. This involves the identification or generation of options, the evaluation of those options and the selection of an appropriate strategy. At this stage, three groups of questions should be asked in order to evaluate the appropriateness of each option which has been generated. These three groups of questions relate to the suitability, acceptability and feasibility of each option:
   - Suitability. Does the proposal overcome difficulties identified in strategic analysis, exploit the school’s strengths and opportunities and integrate with the school’s aims and objectives?
   - Acceptability. This involves the school’s value system and considers whether the proposal is in accord with the school’s values.
   - Feasibility. Can the option be funded? Can the school perform at the required level? Can the necessary market position be achieved?

The final decision on choices would normally be made by the governors, in consultation with the headteacher or with the whole senior management team.

3. Strategic implementation. This is achieved through development planning and is covered in a later section. It involves planning how the choice of strategy can be put into effect and managing the necessary changes.

The evidence of strategic planning in schools

Only five of the schools had considered a longer-term (five-year) formal planning process. The remainder still focused on shorter-term incremental plans. More significantly, three of these five schools had for med five-year plans as a result of a specific external demand (either increasing the pupil intake or technology college status) and not as part of the standard planning process.

Very significantly, only one school had considered the financial future over a five-year time scale using projected activities and their costs set against likely pupil roll and, hence, estimated income trends. This was a curious finding, in that while most schools have some knowledge of pupil numbers over a three- to five-year period, these numbers have not been incorporated into a financial and planning model.

In most cases it was evident that reactive and incremental thinking predominated with schools making standard comments about the difficulty of planning outside the annual budgeting cycle. This is in the context of many of the pupils having three to five years remaining in the school but their need only being analysed on an annual basis.

Strategic implementation – school development planning

This would be seen as the critical stage at which those within the school develop a plan for achieving the options which have been chosen. At this stage, there should be realism about the balance between new developments and the maintenance of the existing activities, otherwise there will be work overload and a lack of resources. If the plans are to come to fruition, it is important to consider both the process of creating the development plan and the nature of the document itself.

In too many cases, the document has become so detailed and unwieldy that it cannot be used as a working document. A useful phrase to remember is “the thicker the plan the less it affects classroom practice”. It should, therefore, be set out in an easily read format and would cover the following areas:

1. Core areas:
   - Curriculum and curriculum management.
   - Human resources.
   - Pupil welfare and pastoral care.
   - Community links.

2. Support areas:
   - Management structures and approaches.
   - Financial resources.
   - Pupil roll and marketing.
   - Physical resources.
   - Monitoring and evaluation.

Included in the documentation would be costings for each activity and named responsibility for the achievement of the target. Review arrangements should be clear so that problems or additional resource needs can be detected and success can be recognised.
It is important to consider the role of the various partners in formulating and implementing development plans. While governors and senior managers are extensively involved in the more strategic aspects of planning, the staff and pupils will need to be more deeply involved in development planning. Normally, a development planning group or senior team will be overseeing the process which turns the strategic decisions into action and which ensures the maintenance of the school’s ongoing activities. There will need to be frequent communications between school groups such as curricular areas, key stage teams, school council and support staff, so that the activities and targets which are written into the plan are realistic and appropriate as well as contributing to the achievement of the strategic aims and the strategic options chosen.

The evidence of development planning in schools

All 40 schools reported that they had development plans, with several quoting the OFSTED (Office for Standards in Education) process as a catalyst for bringing together curriculum and other plans into a more coherent whole school planning process. Thirteen schools had a three-year plan while the remaining 27 schools had extended their one-year plan into a second year.

Some schools indicated that a cross-school planning group (often including governors) had been responsible for putting the document together. In others the construction of the plan had fallen to the head or a deputy. There were separate plans for each subject area and for other aspects of the school’s work although the format of these sub-unit plans did not always follow that of the main plan so that it was difficult to track the priorities through. In others, there was a clear link between whole school objectives and those in sub-plans. In quantitative terms, 24 of the schools showed clear links where in the remaining 16 there seemed to be an ad hoc collection of sub-plans and total plans which had very little interrelationship.

Most schools had found the headings of core and support areas and the grid layout (which we had proposed in our earlier work) useful. As we had originally hoped, they had adapted the system to suit their own situation with extra sections added, for example “parents and the community”.

There is a need for a system of monitoring in order to check progress towards the targets. This aspect has often been neglected in schools. We found that only 18 had detailed systems for monitoring the progress towards various targets. This usually involved a member of the senior management team or the governors. When questioned, the schools revealed a range of approaches such as:

- reporting (verbally or in writing) to a meeting of SMT or governors on progress;
- discussion with line manager on a fortnightly basis;
- reporting termly to nominated member of SMT;
- governor or line manager attending team meetings to make a judgement about progress.

One school had used a database to enter targets, dates, responsible person and name of person who would monitor progress. This seemed complex but enabled the information to be printed out according to name, target or due date for ease of use.

Reflections

In general we have witnessed a significant change in development planning in schools since our early work in 1992. We were interested to see that our earlier model for school planning which we had developed through partnerships with schools had led to much useful work. All schools in our survey had plans which extended over two years with several being extended over three. We found, however, that most schools had not, in the intervening time, moved forwards themselves to consider more long-term approaches to direction setting or sharpened their target-setting processes in the development planning stage. The approaches which we found were, on the whole, incremental. With the rapid changes in the economy and society, together with the revolution in teaching and learning offered by the new learning technologies, it would seem very desirable that more fundamental long-term planning should take place.

The three-stage model has proved useful in identifying the concepts of futures thinking, strategic planning and shorter-term school development planning. However, even if schools do take on a more strategic planning function, there is still a problem of applying this process in an era of rapid change. This was recognised by Porter who found:

- a growing recognition that the processes for strategic planning were not promoting strategic thinking … meaningless long-term projections obscured strategic insight … (Porter, 1997, p. 22).

A reliance on strategic planning assumes a rational and predictable process which, in practical terms, may not be possible in the current turbulent environment. It may also tend to be very incremental, despite what its proponents say. We have, therefore, sought an
Brent Davies and Linda Ellison
Futures and strategic perspectives in school planning

A revised model for school planning

In one of the most outstanding pieces which we have read on the topic of coping with a turbulent environment, Boisot (1995) provides two key areas of analysis in his chapter “Preparing for turbulence: the changing relationship between strategy and management development in the learning organisation”. He suggests that control, which is inherent in the concepts of strategy, is rendered ineffective because of the turbulence caused by rapidly increasing rates of change. As a result he suggests that “from the literature, we can identify four basic types of response: (1) strategic planning, (2) emergent strategy, (3) intrapreneurship, (4) strategic intent” (Boisot, 1995, p. 32). In Figure 3, one axis relates to the degree of turbulence, and hence change, in the environment and the second to the level of understanding that an organisation has of the turbulence and change in which it exists. Boisot then links each of the four responses with these conditions of turbulence and understanding.

Strategic planning is based on there being a predictable environment which can be identified so that appropriate strategies can be implemented in a rational, steady way. The rate of change is assumed to be less than the organisation’s ability to understand and adapt to those changes. In the educational context, rapid change over the last ten years, and the future impact of technology on learning, has cast doubt as to whether strategic planning over a three- to five-year period is possible. Boisot (1995, pp. 33-5) suggests that alternative approaches should be considered.

Emergent strategy assumes incremental change with adjustment to the strategy as new information becomes available. Thus, in a context of low rate of turbulence and low levels of understanding, a series of changes take place which planners characterise as a process of “disjointed incrementalism”. It could be seen in many schools in the 1970s but is inappropriate in the current environment of rapid change.

Intrapreneurship assumes that the degree of turbulence in the system is so great, and understanding by the centre so low, that the centre cannot plan in an integrated way. As a result, decentralised units are encouraged to react to their specific circumstances and relate to the centre in a loosely coupled way. Thus, localised successes and failures build a direction for the organisation. This fragmented approach is inappropriate and unnecessary in a relatively small and localised organisation such as a school although elements of it can be seen within the education sector as a whole.

Strategic intent, the final approach, is one which has a great deal of value for the educationalist, as an alternative to strategic planning. Boisot (p. 37) believes that an organisation “operating in a regime of strategic intent can use a common vision to keep the behaviour of its employees aligned with a common purpose”. This is a very powerful way of linking futures thinking and strategy as a way of providing direction and purpose for an organisation as it combines high levels of turbulence but maintains high levels of understanding of the core direction in this environment.

We have adapted Boisot’s model and focused on two of the four domains that he outlines, those of strategic intent and strategic planning. We believe that schools operate partly in a highly turbulent environment and, in such circumstances, the appropriate strategy is to create a strategic intent for the school. Part of a school’s environment is more predictable and less turbulent and, in those circumstances, techniques and approaches that are available from the traditional business school approach to strategic planning can be useful. Figure 4 highlights these two domains.

With strategic intent, the school can be seen in Figure 4 to move upward and to the right as it establishes “a process of coping with turbulence through a direct, intuitive understanding, emanating from the top of the firm and guiding its efforts” (Boisot, 1995, p. 36). We would suggest that a school which is dealing with either a longer-term time frame or a less predictable environment needs to build in all of its staff a common strategic intent based on...
the values, aims and ambitions of the school which all staff can articulate and to which they can align themselves. Thus, faced with new and untried situations they can draw on that common understanding as a frame of reference.

With strategic planning the school is trying to capture the turbulence and understand it. As it does this and increases its level of understanding it moves down from left to right in Figure 4 and is able to plan more and more of its activities. In such a case, the fact that activities can be planned, implemented and the results evaluated in a reasonably consistent and proactive manner is due to one of two factors. Either the environment is one which is related to the shorter term and is more predictable or, alternatively, the nature of the activity is traditional or incremental and not subject to significant turbulence or change. Thus, a school in such a situation can have a clear strategic plan for the definable part of its activities.

Our reconceptualisation of the planning process (Figure 5) suggests that schools should engage in three types of planning activities which occur concurrently and interact and reinforce each other. First, futures thinking identifies longer-term fundamental shifts in the educational environment. Second, a strategic intent is created for the less predictable areas of medium-term planning and traditional strategic planning is utilised for the definable and predictable areas. Increased government emphasis on value-added performance indicators and general outcome measures has given extra importance to the concept of target setting and measuring the outcomes achieved so the school development plan will be overtaken rapidly by a new format, that of the operational target-setting plan. The third type of planning in our model is, therefore, a one- or two-year operational target-setting process in which the school sets measurable targets for the whole school, sub-areas, staff and pupils.

Conclusion

We believe that the reform and restructuring of the education system and especially the focus on self-managing schools can be considered to encompass two phases. The first phase is delegation to schools, where power and responsibility has been passed to the site level. The second phase involves schools in responding and taking the initiative to seek their own management solutions rather than just responding to external accountability demands. In this context, moving to take responsibility for the whole planning process rather than the requirements to complete a short-term development plan is a measure of organisational maturity. How far schools should move in this direction will be the focus of the next stage of our research which will be an in-depth analysis of ten schools to

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**Figure 4**

Strategic intent and strategic planning

**Figure 5**

The reconceptualised model
ascertain the validity of the new model as an effective tool for schools.

References


