

Engaging staff in change— Experiences in Schools in England



Changes in teachers' work and the challenges facing teacher unions

Howard Stevenson, Guest Editor

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Linda Hammersley-Fletcher

ABSTRACT: Workforce remodeling in England has been presented as a means to empower school staff through a restructuring process which has possibilities to dramatically shift the ways in which they operate. This initiative has also included a number of legislative requirements intended to help embed the more technocratic aspects of the remodeling process. Data collected from 14 schools and 2 Local Authorities in England provides an evidence base for this article. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 100 staff including Headteachers, Chairs of Governors, teachers, teaching assistants, and administrators. Further, 666 questionnaire returns were collected from a range of schools and staff across these Authorities. This article explores the extent to which the remodeling initiative has resulted in a change of understandings rather than simply adopting the legislative elements of change and examines whether remodeling has enabled or enhanced schools in their ability to engage in change that is self-directed and rooted in an agreed educational ethos.

Workforce remodeling in England is an initiative that has been promoted as an attempt to address issues of work-life balance for teachers, a reassignment of some tasks from teachers to support staff and teaching assistants and is about giving teachers discrete time for planning, preparation, and assessment (DfES, 2001, 2003). It can be seen as an opportunity for a variety of staff to consider the model of education that they wish to deliver to children and the aspects of their educational practice that makes their school distinct from schools elsewhere. Going through such a process involves change which is challenging and can also be highly complex. This article begins with a consideration of the development of workforce remodeling in England and of the issues that may influence the ways in which change takes place. It also outlines the methods used to collect the data presented and begins to investigate the data considering the changing roles in schools and in particular evidence about the way Teaching Assistants (TAs) are being employed to teach whole classes. It also looks at the data related to the ways in which schools manage change and the question of change teams. And finally concludes by looking at the sustainability of the changes associated with workforce remodeling and the complexity of the change process.

Workforce Remodeling and Managing Change

In England the 'New Labour' government has been engaged upon a modernization agenda which is argued to be designed to improve the efficiency, economy, and effectiveness of public services (Ozga, 2002). As Vulliamy (2006) states the reforms of the 1980s and 1990s increased the control of government over teaching and had "exerted pressure for the remodelling, reskilling and reculturing of the teaching profession" (p. 2). In addition, Webb (2006) states that this is happening within a context where New Labour reforms have shifted responsibility for failure in education from the state to schools themselves. This shift in accountability and assessment has led to teachers suffering from increased levels of stress together with facing a conflict in what they saw as the value of teaching and reduced job satisfaction which led to under retention of new teachers (Vulliamy, 2006). In addition, faced with studies presented by the School Teachers' Review Body (DfES, 2000) and the PricewaterhouseCoopers' Teacher Workload Study (2001), it became apparent to the Labour administration that there were factors which threatened a crisis in teacher recruitment and retention. As a consequence a National Agreement between government, employers, and school workforce unions was reached in January 2003 (with the notable exception of the National Union of Teachers). The agreement (introduced in three phases) implemented changes to teachers' conditions of service. In phase one (September, 2003) administrative and clerical tasks were removed from teachers with the intention of improving their work-life balance. In addition a time allowance was introduced for all teachers with management responsibilities. Phase two (September, 2004) limited the time any teacher could be asked to cover classes for absent colleagues. Phase three (September, 2005) brought in Planning and Preparation and Assessment Time (PPA) for all teaching staff to be taken during the school day. In addition invigilation of exams was removed as a responsibility for teachers and dedicated headship time was introduced. In this way it was intended that the education of pupils could be improved through enhancing teacher professional development and providing opportunities for thinking about the way the school approaches education.

Collarbone (2003) also recommended that representatives of the whole school community become involved and participate in change through representative membership on a school 'change team.'

... in return for greater professional autonomy, more flexibility and a re-evaluation of what teachers can be asked to do, the Government requires more accountability and a step-change in standards. We believe these exist within the knowledge capacity of the school itself. The purpose of the School Change Team we propose is to access that capacity ... The importance of school change teams cannot be overestimated. These change teams are a cross-section of all staff, do not need to be led by members of the leadership group, including the headteacher, and may include parents, governors and pupils ...

Whilst her recommendations contain references to greater accountability and standards that raise some concerns, the notion of a team that is inclusive and draws upon the expertise of all, is an attractive one and to be effective the change team should be willing to consider the political, emotional, and practical factors associated with all prospective change. This aligns with Barber's (2001) view that successful reform is dependent upon both bottom-up and top-down change. However, it should be remembered that where teachers have not themselves been involved in developing mandates for which they are held accountable, this can mean that they lack confidence in challenging such systems (Taylor Webb, 2002).

Garrett (2005) states that whether change is desired, imposed, unwanted, planned, unplanned, evolutionary, or systematic it will involve disruption to the systems in place. In addition the cultures and structures already existing in the organization will influence the ways that change is mediated as well as the outcomes of it. Newman (2001) 'highlights new institutional theory' as a mechanism for explaining the ways in which organizations face change. New institutional theory emphasizes the informal and formal rules and conventions that shape social action which once embedded as 'norms' are difficult to shift, attempts to restructure being destabilized by attempts to make new structures fit within former approaches and ways of working. This means that governments cannot be wholly in control of change processes and outcomes. Newman goes on to argue that over time change can impose restrictions on action resulting in shifts in patterns of decision making. Isomorphism describes a situation where an organization adapts to its environment incorporating ideas about appropriate ways to do things, thus organizations are influenced by the conventions of wider society about best ways of working and the goals that are important to achieve. Here new ideas are taken on board to win external legitimacy. For DiMaggio and Powell (1991) isomorphism can be divided into

three forms. The first, coercive isomorphism is where the state obliges organizations to adopt particular practices. This can be seen in the legislative elements of the workforce reform agenda. The second, mimetic isomorphism is when organizations copy other organizations to ensure that they are identified as operating best practice. Schools are encouraged to look at and consider practices in other schools, particularly at those whose practice conforms to the criteria for success agreed by government bodies (i.e. beacon schools). The third, normative isomorphism reflects a set of occupational or professional norms. There are a lot of norms around what it is to be a teacher. Here, however, these norms may be perceived to be under threat as a consequence of remodeling as teaching assistants develop their roles to encompass some class teaching. This was a particular issue for the teacher unions especially the National Union of Teachers.

For Gunter and Rayner (2007) workforce remodeling is about a fundamental attempt to break habits and instigate cultural change in schools. They argue that "it masks a serious erosion of teacher professionalism and deeper conceptualizations of learning, teaching pedagogy" (p. 48). Further they believe that the basis of remodeling is founded on a definition of teachers as the problem in education which has led to an initiative based on shifting work from teachers onto other individuals. This strategy does not take into account a recognition of teachers' identities, the purposes of teaching or the moral dimensions involved with both (Gunter & Rayner, 2007). Moreover, they argue that learners themselves are not considered. In addition there has been little by way of a challenge to the vertical lines of control and command, and mechanisms of accountability reinforce limitations to the degree of risk-taking that schools can engage in (Currie, Boyett, & Suhomlinova, 2005). Reform therefore needs to give all those involved with the school the space to re-think what is possible and for the reform to influence (albeit in an unpredictable way) the future development of the school. Bottery (2007) states that his research demonstrates that Headteachers in England vary in the ways in which they respond to legislation and government initiatives which can range from those who simply implement such dictates to those who act to manage such incursions into their practice in a principled way. He goes on to argue that Heads still believe that they play a key role in deciding upon the educational goals of their schools and that their focus is on meeting the needs of pupils. Finally Bottery points out that both advice and legislation have an impact on the structures around what they as schools are enabled to think of as possible and that where Headteachers wish to resist such pressures they need to gather support and evidence.

Fullan (2003a) argued that "the principal of the future must lead a complex learning organization by helping to establish new cultures in schools that have deep capacities to engage in continuous problem solving and improvement" (p. 28). Seeing particular types of leader as saviors is a current trend according to Collinson (2005). He further argues that leaders are presented as the hero or alternatively as the villain. As a consequence the burgeoning literature advising leaders to become 'excellent' tends to exaggerate what leaders themselves can achieve. More recently there has been a movement to encourage, flatter a more inclusive models of leadership resulting in an emphasis on "distributed leadership" with more reciprocal relations built into it. Leadership can thus be viewed as relational, fluid, multi-directional and that this empowers workers, a perspective described by Collinson as dialectical. Rayner and Gunter (2005) agree that it is beneficial for decision-making to be shared giving staff parity of esteem and thus "the potential exists here for a more educative leadership where practice is integrated with learning, and through practice we learn" (p. 154).

The dual pressure or tension between centralization through an emphasis on standards and accountability and decentralization allowing flexibility and innovation is noted as a characteristic of New Labour modernization agendas by Currie et al. (2005). Further they argue that schools are also subject to tensions between pressures to be efficient and meet targets whilst at the same time are expected to tackle wider agendas. Current examples include the Every Child Matters agenda. For Currie et al. (2005) this pressure to build relationships with multiple-stakeholders and share decision making with users and citizens further challenges the role and power base of schools. Fullan (2003b) has argued that, "people are always looking for shortcuts and quick fixes to complexity" (p. 104). Therefore reform needs to give teachers the space to re-think what is possible and for the reform to influence (albeit in an unpredictable way) the future development of the school.

Method

The research commissioned by Staffordshire Local Authority (LA) was conducted in two stages covering the years 2004 to 2006. The first stage of the research involved forty-eight in-depth interviews in eight schools from within the LA. Four schools represented the secondary phase and four schools represented the primary phase. The schools varied in relation to size, geographical location, and faith and include schools typical of those within the LA. In each school visited, interviews were conducted with a member of the leadership group (Headteachers, deputy Headteachers, subject managers, year leaders etc), members of the teaching staff and members of the support staff (teaching assistants, learning support assistants, administrative, and pastoral staff). For the second stage of the research return interviews were planned in the same schools. One primary and one secondary school were unhappy about further involvement, both schools facing difficulties related to change management. Interview data once collected were transcribed and analyzed using content analysis.

In addition to the semi-structured interview data questionnaires were administered to a 25% representative sample across all Staffordshire Local Authority schools (4690 staff) targeted at all staff from the caretaker to the Headteacher. The response rate was 12%, 545 questionnaires being returned. When broken down to demonstrate the particular percentage returns from particular staff groupings responses included 31% of senior leaders (including Headteachers); 16% of teachers (including middle leaders); 10% of teaching assistants (including cover supervisors); 11% of administrators and 1% of support staff (including caretakers and lunch-time supervisors). Of these returns 36% were from the primary phase of education (including primary, infant and junior schools); 58% were from the secondary phase of education (including secondary and middle schools deemed secondary); and 6% were from the special needs sector. Questionnaires were based on information collected for the first report. These data were analyzed using SPSS.

The research commissioned by Warwickshire Local Authority involved twenty-eight semi-structured interviews in six schools from within the LA, five of which were primary schools and the sixth a secondary school. The schools were selected at random and approached by the Local Authority in the first instance. The original intent was to look at a similar number of primary and secondary schools but it proved problematic to gain permission to conduct the research in the secondary sector. These schools were currently making a number of structural changes as a result of remodeling and recent government initiatives and therefore considered themselves too busy to be involved in this research. In each school visited, interviews were conducted with the Headteacher, a governor involved with remodeling, the teacher governor, a teaching assistant, and an administrator. Interviews were conducted over the autumn term, 2006. Questionnaire data were also collected by the Local Authority. Analysis followed the same formula utilized in the Staffordshire work.

A selection from these data is presented in the following sections.

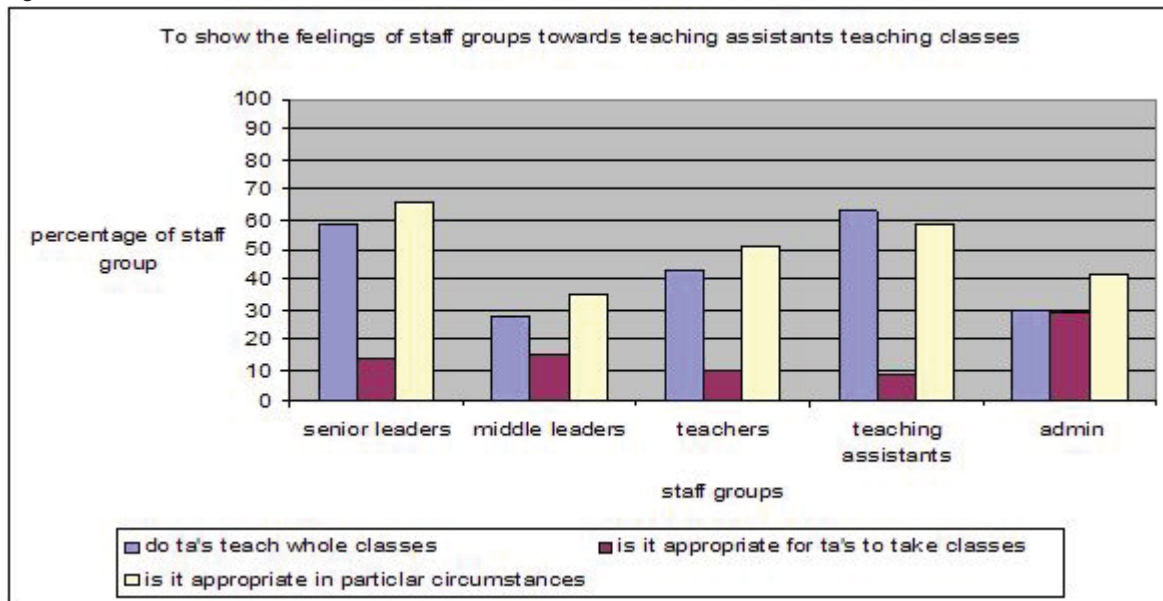
Changing Roles

There were a number of findings from the data; it is worth outlining in order to provide a general perspective from which to view the more detailed data. Firstly all schools had implemented changes associated with the legislative aspects of remodeling (with the exception of dedicated Headship time allowance). As a consequence of the introduction of PPA time a number of roles had shifted in nature. Firstly the role of administrators had grown as the 24 tasks had fallen largely to them. This meant that more administrative staff had been appointed in many cases and in some schools administrative staff were indicating serious concerns about their workloads. Secondly teachers having gained 10% PPA time were viewed by other staff as more refreshed leading to beneficial effects for teaching and learning in the school. The teachers themselves reported benefits in terms of feeling that this time represented some recognition by government of the good work that they were doing. They also reported using the time gained to develop teaching resources and engage more creatively in the curriculum. Thus they were quickly filling any time gained with other school related activities. Finally the teaching assistants (TAs) had a greater level of responsibility in the classroom and it is this changing role that will be discussed in more detail.

Figure A demonstrates how different staff groups in Staffordshire thought TAs were being used to teach whole classes, how appropriate they thought this was, and whether they agreed it was appropriate but added an additional

clause to justify this position. The support staff did not complete this section in enough numbers to warrant representing these views. Additional clauses included the need to be supported (i.e. by a supply teacher or another TA), only if they are paid more, only if they have the necessary subject expertise, only if it is limited to the occasional use of TAs, only if the teacher has set the work etc. As the graph clearly demonstrates almost 60% of senior leaders were utilizing TAs but also strongly indicated that this was not seen as appropriate and that they would want to qualify that use of the TA in some way. (Interview responses from Warwickshire indicated that additional qualifying criteria were even more important in these schools). As senior leaders were in positions of responsibility around the teaching and learning of pupils it is perhaps understandable that they felt additional conditions were important. Other staff also agreed. The only group that appears more supportive is the administrator's category. This may be because they do not generally deal with concerns about the curriculum and teaching and learning in a direct way.

Figure A



It seems odd that a greater percentage of TAs feel that they currently take more whole classes than the senior leaders report. This may demonstrate some differences in the ways these two groups categorize teaching whole classes.

Whilst in general the TAs reported very much enjoying this work 3 of the Warwickshire interviews revealed some worrying concerns relating to this change of role.

... well I find it okay... we wouldn't say we were ecstatic about it...other people [TAs] don't like it at all although they do it because it's expected of them ... I think that if there is any bad behavior, they don't feel in control because they don't get the respect that possibly they should ... (Warwickshire Teaching Assistant Primary School C)

This is a significant issue and raises questions about the ways in which adults work with pupils and the importance attached to the adults enjoying this work. In addition it raises important points about pedagogy and the aspects of educating pupils that we deem important as a society.

... I thought that I was encroaching on somebody else's [work]... because bearing in mind they've been to university, they're a qualified teacher but it seems to be the norm if you like ... (Warwickshire Teaching Assistant Primary School E)

Thus there is a concern about the TA overstepping their role and encroaching on teaching colleagues who have had

specific training for classroom teaching.

... there have been times when supply teachers have come in and been perfectly happy for me to be running around organizing everything, and I think, well yeah, but you're getting more money than I am... we're still exploited, it's cheaper to stick us in there than it is a teaching staff, but then it's always been that way and it will be for a while to come ... (Warwickshire Teaching Assistant Secondary School F)

This notion about the use of TAs as a cheap solution for educating pupils is a very real one and again raises issues of pedagogy. Consequently despite some fairly significant changes in roles and responsibilities there remains a concern about the appropriateness of these changes and possibly for its long term effects on learning and teaching.

Managing Change

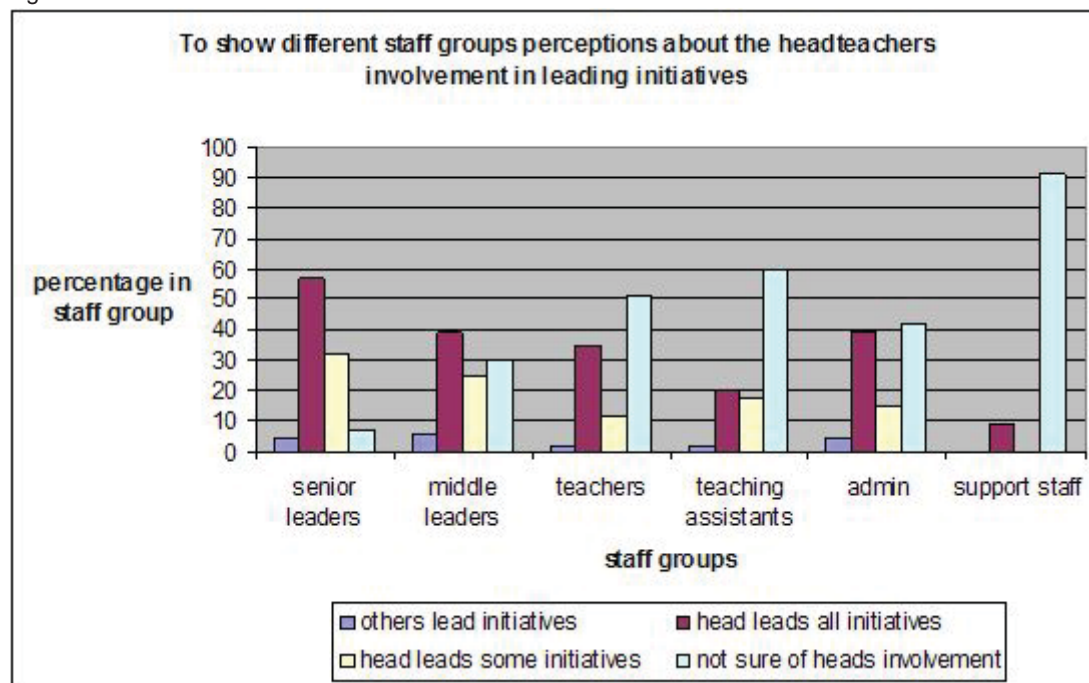
The other element of the change highlighted in this article is the approach schools were taking to change management. Interviews investigated the ways in which schools approached change and it quickly became apparent that the power of the Headteacher was significant. The predominant model of change operating within the schools interviewed in Warwickshire was one where the Head took a lead in the change and then consulted with various layers of staff within the school.

... setting the agenda I think comes from ... the top from the Headteacher. A lot of discussion was done, I've worked very closely with [Head] ... and I think one of the strengths of this school is that she had done a lot of making sure the teachers, you know, were on board and ... the TAs that were existing, their views on how things should go... (Warwickshire Governor Primary School B)

... the Head is very, very adamant that all staff have an input, the staffing structures have all been put to staff before they went to governors, before they went to senior managers, so that everybody knew what was going on ... (Warwickshire Teacher Governor Primary School E)

These responses indicate the power vested in the Headteacher in terms of leading the agenda and controlling the extent to which other staff are able to become involved. This is a model of consultation rather than shared power. In Staffordshire the questionnaires asked staff to indicate how they thought change was managed (see Figure B).

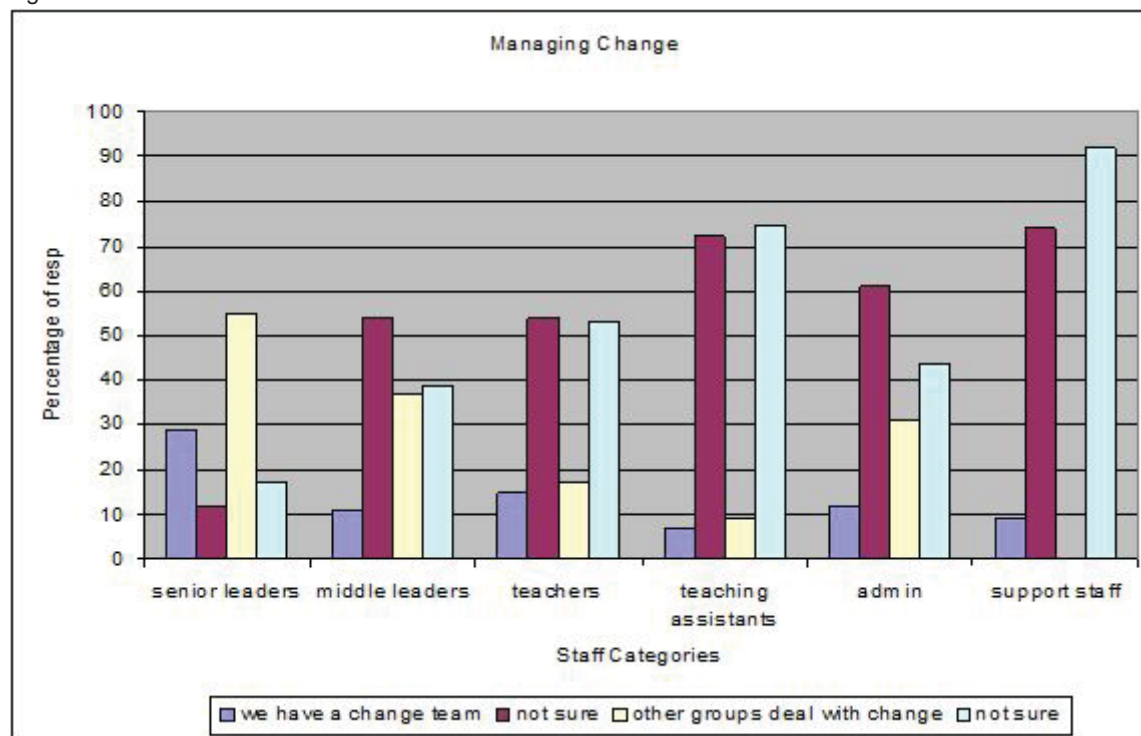
Figure B



The response from senior leaders (which encompasses Headteachers) is interesting from the perspective that they placed Headteachers in control of initiatives more clearly than any of the other groups. It is also surprising to note that a few answered that they were not sure of the Heads' involvement. Clearly these responses were from senior leaders rather than Heads but it might be expected that all senior leadership representatives would be clear on this issue. What is even more surprising is the number of "not sure" responses from the other groups of staff with support staff being very unsure about the Heads' role. For example it might be assumed that staff working as lunch-time supervisors and caretakers would assume that the Headteacher led all school initiatives but this is clearly not the case. It is equally interesting that over half the responses from teachers and teaching assistants were unsure. This may indicate a very clever level of management and leadership by the Head who operates without seeming to be running things, or alternatively may reflect a sense of initiatives happening elsewhere but not involving these staff. The other interesting aspect of this graph is the very small response to notions of others leading initiatives. Thus if others aren't leading them one might expect that the Head was.

Over both LA's only a very small proportion claimed to have a change management team ranging from 12% to 15% of schools. This is a very small proportion of schools which is a significant problem if indeed change team activity is key to enabling and mediating initiatives proposed by government. Staffordshire data illustrated that senior leaders indicate that there are other groups that deal with change but there is a surprising percentage of senior leaders who are not sure (Figure C). This circumstance may be occurring where a Head is particularly unwilling to share information with their senior leaders and is likely to indicate an autocratic leadership style.

Figure C



Once more with the exception of the administrators, knowledge and surety decrease moving down the hierarchy. Administrators may be better informed because of their close working relations with the Headteacher which could mean they are more likely to be party to information about such meetings. There is some suggestion that these change groups are more likely to involve senior leaders given the lack of knowledge about them displayed by teachers and teaching assistants. The Warwickshire interviews indicated that some schools had experimented with a change team but abandoned this either as there was "no time" to convene or because they felt workforce remodeling was now complete and therefore the team was unnecessary. Thus it would seem that this remit was either not understood by schools or not seen as an appropriate response by them. The idea of a change team was that this would be a grouping that could enable schools to deal with on-going changes and challenges giving the school a strong remit and focus for deciding how to mediate and engage with any new initiatives. What is more the change team should enable the school to become pro-active rather than reactive and develop their own initiatives based on the needs of their local community.

Conclusions

The evidence collected from the schools visited within this study has suggested that they are complying with the requirements of workforce remodeling and that this has led to an increased workload for administrators and a change in responsibility for teaching assistants. It is, however, much less clear that these changes have led to what Fullan (2003a) advocates as a cultural shift in the ways in which schools tackle and mediate change. The legislative aspect of remodeling can be seen as operating as coercive isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell, 1991). Schools need to be seen to be engaging in these change processes to please government and Local Authorities. Moreover in terms of time provided for teachers to think, plan, and structure their teaching and the perceived value that this has for pupils learning, may persuade schools to embrace aspects such as PPA time as a long term change, despite the financial risks to the budget involved and before fully examining the evidence base for such assumptions. The shifting role of the teaching assistant challenges teachers, governors and Headteachers to consider what norms define the role of teacher and teaching assistant, thus the normative isomorphic qualities of these roles are being challenged. If teachers and Headteachers are not motivated to make changes that go beyond those imposed by government and in addition they do not see positive benefits from change then it seems unlikely that schools will radically alter their

underlying practices and may therefore suffer some of the restrictions to their thinking outlined by Newman (2001).

Whilst schools did appear to employ participative change models, these did not appear to go much beyond a consultative framework where everyone was invited to express thoughts and ideas which informed but did not lead change. Inclusive approaches take longer in reaching a decision and the greater the depth of involvement of all, the longer this can become. These schools appeared to believe that they had achieved a reasonably efficient balance between consultation, involvement, and change operating to ensure that changes were taking place. Undoubtedly schools and their staff and governors work closely together and they would have difficulty in instigating change without thinking through how the people involved in the organization might react and feel. Thus change is a complex process. Faced with this complexity the Headteacher has a difficult job in leading the staff (Collinson, 2005). They also play a key role in mediating and leading change (Bottery, 2007). It could, however, be argued that the Headteacher needs to step back and allow staff the space to reach solutions that the Headteacher may not have come up with or indeed wanted. This for some Headteachers could be seen as a "step too far" for understandable reasons. The Headteacher is the person with ultimate responsibility for the school and as Currie et al. (2005) point out a lot is expected of them in terms of the leadership they provide. The demands made of Headteachers through the literature advocates developing into a super-hero. This unrealistic set of demands leaves Headteachers constantly vulnerable to criticism, whatever solutions they adopt.

Gunter and Rayner (2007) express concerns about the remodeling agenda operating to erode teacher professionalism, concepts of learning and teacher pedagogy. From the evidence collected in this research teacher professionalism could be argued to have improved in the eyes of the school staff themselves and teachers were now being enabled to concentrate on teaching and learning. Moreover, divides between the role of teaching assistant and teacher were being maintained, albeit with some re-negotiation. This may, however, underestimate underlying political maneuverings. Concerns were being raised about not overloading TAs with responsibilities for which they are not properly remunerated or prepared for and the notion of them teaching classes with no formal training have, as Gunter and Rayner (2007) warn, important implications in terms of concepts about learning and pedagogy. Of those schools who had tried operating with a change team few were inclusive of all staff groupings or reported flexibility in its leadership. What is clear is the need for schools to provide themselves with a forum for deep and clear discussions around change in a way that enables all staff to clearly see the rationale and benefits of each change undertaken for pupils learning and for their own roles. In this way the changes that take place can be adopted successfully.

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