

A-Restructuring We Shall Go

By Geoff Barton

Harry Potter must take some of the blame.

There's JK Rowling on her now almost mythical train journey from Manchester to London when the concept of Harry Potter pings to life in her imagination. By the time she's reached King's Cross Station, so the folklore has it, the entire 7-book sequence of books has virtually written itself.

So why – given that fantasy writing allows authors to make everything up from scratch – does Hogwarts School turn out to be quite so conventional? Why the wise if eccentric headmaster, Dumbledore at the pinnacle of a strictly hierarchical management structure of deputy headteacher and Heads of House? Why the prefects? Why the once-a-year hurdle of examinations, the culmination of wholly didactic teaching styles?

Why, in other words, with a literal blank sheet of paper to work from, does former teacher JK come up with something quite so recognisable and familiar?

It's the same, I suspect, for all of us, deep in the throes of the TLR Experience. By the time you're reading this any opportunity for, er, blue sky out-of-the-box blank-sheet-of-paper thinking (which if you're like me will have consisted of occasional snatched moments in the car or at the side of a summer holiday swimming pool) will probably have evaporated. In its place may be the rather more unseemly sight of people wanting an intellectual (or even actual) punch-up about their own roles and responsibilities.

So this certainly isn't the time for me to dish out advice on the management of change, or even to lament the naively optimistic timescale given for the most momentous change to school staffing in twenty years. I wouldn't dare.

Instead, I'll simply pose five questions that seem to me relevant. Feel free to dismiss them as trivial, provocative, unhelpful or just plain foolish.

Question 1:

Is your proposed structure driven by pupil rather than teacher need ... genuinely?

Schools, like many large organisations, sometimes appear to exist for the self-preservation of their employees, rather than the needs of their customers. If we're serious about restructuring around learning, then we'll make sure that start with what is required to ensure the best outcomes for pupils. For example: is a continuing narrow emphasis on subjects appropriate?

Some of us feel increasingly that the ongoing compartmentalisation of learning is actually a source of much wasted energy in schools. Pupils will travel from a lesson about graphs in Geography, Maths and then Physics, claiming in each one that "they can't do graphs". Pupils probably need more opportunities than we give them for joined-up learning opportunities – longer stretches of time in which the focus is on learning about an issue or developing a range of skills, rather than thinking "This is English", then "This is History".

If that's the case, then it may be that the faculty or subject-based structure that secondary schools have traditionally adopted is unhelpful because of the way it encourages staff to think protectively about their own subject, rather than the generic skills

pupils need to develop across subject boundaries. It may be that our structures need roles which are much more focused on coordination and linking, rather than carving learning up into subjects.

If, for example, you think that pupils would benefit from more problem-solved team-based activities, conferences, ‘flexi-days’ and suchlike, or if you’ve managed to fathom the personalised learning concept, then should your structure reflect that, defining roles to develop new approaches to learning?

Question 2:

Are you using the opportunity to rethink certain traditional school roles?

Rumour suggests that the biggest casualties of the new structure in many schools may be the roles of Heads of Year and Heads of House. Teachers’ roles should be focused on learning – goes the logic – and therefore responsibilities related to behaviour, following up issues with parents, links with other agencies – these can all be done just as well by support staff.

Tread with care. My own view is that it is naïve to assume that ‘learning’ can somehow be divorced from ‘behaviour’. Indeed the two are inextricably linked. I would also argue that one of the most important roles our pastoral staff can provide in schools is a role-model for pupils. Being able to comment on classroom issues, on how we learn, and linking them to behaviour, seem to me an essential part of the job.

A role which oversees the progress of pupils across a key stage and actively leads on creating an ethos of high achievement is certainly an appropriate role for a teacher. But perhaps it needs much sharper definition to show how it impacts on pupil self-esteem, motivation and progress.

More innovatively, I’m persuaded by something I read by David Hargreaves for the NCSL New Visions programme. He made a prediction that in the future school leadership teams would be made up of project managers – people who turn their hand to whatever the main project is for the year, rather than being locked into the compartmentalised responsibilities of, say, Head of Science or Head of Maths. Just as Charles Handy predicts a future of portfolio careers, so our leadership teams should positively

crave the fact that from one year to the next they will take on different responsibilities. The uniting feature ought to be that it's to do with real performance management (a weak-point in many schools), either of staff or pupils. Senior staff would be expected to lead different teams, irrespective of their own subject specialism, and to take on and manage a variety of fixed-term projects – all relating to school improvement issues.

3 Does your structure give serious attention to a changing national context for schools?

We have all sensed how the ground is trembling beneath our feet. Schools are changing. I don't just mean that we're finally starting to gain the confidence to do things on our own, deciding that the annual league-table hoopla shouldn't be allowed to drive decisions about the courses we offer and our policy on admissions. It's more than a long-overdue radicalisation of the curriculum. The Every Child Matters and Extended Schools agendas challenge the idea that schools can only focus on learning in some narrow, airtight way. Schools are about welfare, social care and health, with a

range of professionals needing to work properly together and, potentially, professionals based together in school.

Even if your first instinct is to be sceptical of this, there's little doubt that the coordination of services is now unstoppably here.

The Victoria Climbié scandal – a child betrayed by a lack of coordination between professionals – has changed the landscape for all of us in the state sector.

So who in your new structure will take main responsibility for liaison with other agencies and ensure a more coordinated approach that breaks down the traditional demarcation between schools, social services, and other professionals?

Question 4:

Does your structure create promotion opportunities for your emerging stars?

In the past, promotion opportunities for teachers almost always drew good people away of the classroom. Indeed, in some ways we actively encouraged that approach ourselves by insisting that our

most senior staff no longer took responsibility for a tutor group.

There's a pretty dodgy message in that when you think about it: we see the role of the tutor as central, blah blah, but once you're important we take the responsibility away.

Now with the upper pay spine, Fast Track, Advanced Skills Teacher and the Excellent Teacher programmes, it's possible for someone to be rewarded for being a good teacher without having to significantly reduce their classroom contact. Indeed, placed in a coaching or mentoring role their influence on good practice can be extended.

Except ... for some of us the teaching part of the job wasn't – ultimately – our only source of interest. Some of us actively sought management roles because we wanted to use other skills. That's certainly the case for those people who enjoy working as part of a leadership team: we use skills and approaches that challenge us in a way that a pure teaching career never could.

My point is this: we owe it to our like-minded younger colleagues to create a staffing structure that will similarly enable them to gain

wider experience and to develop their own leadership responsibilities. A good school grows its future leaders.

Question 5:

Have you paid sufficient attention to the pragmatics – the winners and losers?

Some people – notably consultants and advisers who don't have to live with the daily implications of their advice – will urge radicalism. They'll remind you of the 'schools of the future' agenda, telling you this is a chance to start creating educational structures that suit a twenty-first century learning environment.

All of which is fine, but if you're feeling robust and gung-ho and come up with a structure of startling radicalism, be aware that neat structures on paper don't necessarily translate into neat structures in life. Indeed we can expend huge amounts of energy on paper models that don't impact on student learning. Therefore keep coming back to practical realities. Make a list of the staff who will be winners and losers under your proposals. Think of the long-term consequences.

This doesn't mean shying away from difficult decisions, but it does mean being true to your own instincts. Some battles are worth fighting; others are better postponed for more appropriate times. Positive morale and staff goodwill are very important to school life. If your structure creates a neat, attractive flattened structure, but is likely to create staffroom mayhem, then handle with care.

In my (limited) experience, macho leadership rarely pays off and, after all, this isn't quite the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity that people have been saying. It has opened the door for restructuring to become a part of school management in the way that it's always been available to the leaders in business. It may be therefore that the structure you put in place for the next five years is actually an interim one, a stepping stone towards the ultimate structure the school would benefit from in the longer term.

So no solutions, I'm afraid, just a few questions. And certainly no magic wands.

Geoff Barton is headteacher at King Edward VI School.

www.geoffbarton.co.uk

