Lincolnshire Peer Review 2015/16

Final Report
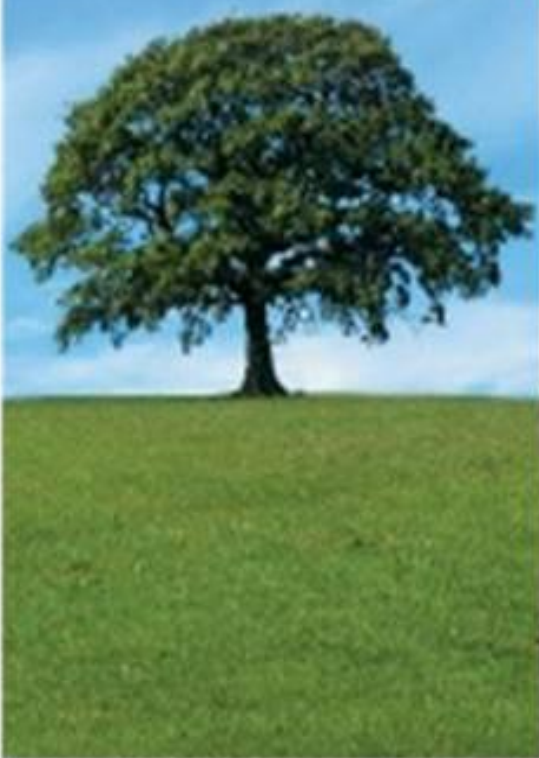
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Centre for the Use of Research and Evidence In Education

The Centre for the use of Research and Evidence in Education

Led by Philippa Cordingley, CUREE are internationally recognised experts in CPD, teaching and learning and the curriculum. We systematically mine the evidence from around the world on teaching and learning approaches which really impact on pupil outcomes.

Our CPD programmes, Coaching and Mentoring packs and Route maps make this research evidence practical and accessible for school leaders, practitioners and policy makers thus supporting high quality, sustained professional learning throughout schools. In addition the SKEIN evaluation service for schools uses research tools for an in-depth evaluation to identify the effectiveness of school approaches to improving staff and student learning processes.

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Introduction

CUREE has been delighted to be involved in this Peer Review programme with the Lincolnshire schools and very impressed with the quality of the reports which have been submitted. The training for 46 Heads from across Lincolnshire, which began in September 2015, was facilitated by an experienced team throughout and included a series of workshops for the Heads who were arranged into three cohorts, firstly to ensure a high level of engagement with facilitators and secondly to ensure that the workshops were geographically accessible to all. The Peer Review Programme will culminate in a celebration event in October 2016, which will give the opportunity for all three cohorts to explore their learning. This final report presents the very interesting patterns which have emerged from the Peer Review process, our findings and recommendations.

Background context

Lincolnshire Local Authority has responsibility for a total of 362 schools, of which 241 are maintained schools serving 42,632 learners, and 121 are academies serving 60,079 learners. Lincolnshire LA offered their schools a choice of Peer Review focused CPDL models to pursue for the 2015/16 academic year, and 46 of these schools chose the CUREE training programme.

CUREE's programme was based on the "no school left behind" sector-led support model for school improvement, with peer reviews designed to identify and acknowledge areas of best practice and excellence, and also areas for improvement. The intended outcome was that headteachers would be better able to evaluate their own schools with precision and accuracy, using an evidence-based model, and would thus be in a position to consider how best to take forward recommendations to support continuous improvement.

Further information about the profile of schools who chose CUREE's peer review programme:
- Phases:
    - 41 of the schools were primary, and of those 1 was a special school, 2 were infant schools and 3 junior schools
    - 1 was a secondary special school
    - 4 were Early Years nurseries
- Most of the schools were either good or outstanding, with only two being deemed 'requires improvement' or 'inadequate' by Ofsted
- The size of the schools varied from 33 to 630 pupils (3 form entry)

Of this group, the overwhelming majority (41) have completed the peer review and 30 have completed the reporting process with the remaining 11 due to submit their reports before the autumn term. Three schools withdrew completely from the process, and a further two have been deemed unlikely to submit a report to CUREE because of significant in-school and engagement issues.

CUREE's contribution to the programme

CUREE facilitators and support staff:

- Designed and delivered a series of training sessions for colleagues participating in the programme which, taken as a whole, were based on research review findings about what makes CPDL effective. This involved designing a rhythmic structure to CPDL sessions, and ensuring that sessions provided scaffolded support for carrying out peer review work within the sessions
- Designed extensive tools for participating colleagues which assisted them in the processes of mapping, selecting and drawing attention to specific forms of evidence to use in the peer review process, and in analysis, to ensure that the reviews were evidence-based
- Scaffolded peer review relationships with learning agreements and metaphor-based activities to explore relationships. Several schools extended this approach to their senior leadership colleagues
- Created a micro peer review cycle to ensure colleagues had worked through all the tools and issues prior to starting on the full Peer Review – and for many colleagues the micro review also served as a tool for exploring what the focus of the full review would be
- Created tools for both "zooming in" (i.e. gathering data on what was happening at the classroom-teacher level in their school in the context of the peer review focus) and "zooming out" (i.e. interrogating how whole-school approaches were and were not supporting and enhancing practices observed at a zoomed in level)
- Created a reporting framework for colleagues to use in writing up their experiences of and learning from the peer review process

CUREE's design for the peer review programme was based on five key building blocks of school improvement identified through reviews of the school improvement literature (Robinson et al., 2009; Cordingley & Bell, 2016):
1. Leadership of teaching, learning and the curriculum
2. The setting of aspirational goals and expectations for all learners and educators
3. Use of relationships, networks and parternships
4. The selection and use of systems, tools and resources
5. Promotion and modelling of CPD.

All colleagues made extensive use of CUREE tools during their micro reviews, and many continued to use them, or derivations of them, during the full review process – though in the latter case it was common for adaptations to be made, particularly during the reporting stage. Specific cross-moderation and feedback from CUREE was used to ensure that these adaptations did not result in important aspects of the process being omitted or neglected, and thus to generate a consistent set of accounts of what participants learned and how they intended to put this learning to use.

The structure of the review process can be seen in Figure 1 on the following page:

Review Process
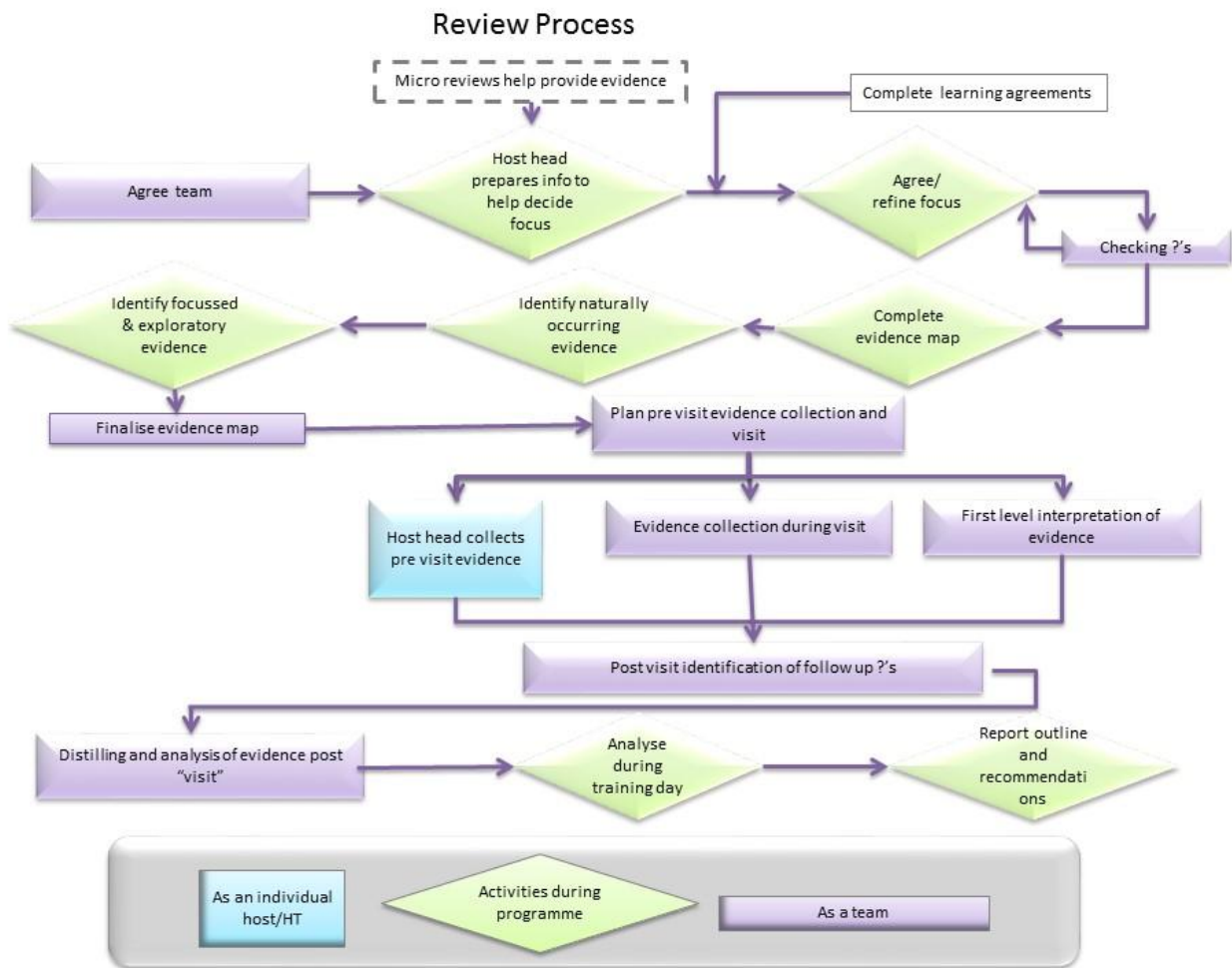
Key patterns emerging from the peer reviews

The foci of the peer reviews were tailored to specific school contexts and were varied but also revealed a number of patterns in terms of areas of school improvement which head teachers were keen to explore:

- 10 Reviews focused on the progress in maths of low achievers / disadvantaged pupils
- 5 Reviews focused on promoting learner independence / engagement across maths or literacy
- 4 Reviews focused on the quality / impact of learning environments
- 3 Reviews focused on the progress in Literacy of low achievers / disadvantaged pupils
- 3 Reviews focused on evaluating the implementation of new practices, such as 'Life after Levels'

A majority of peer review trios shared similar foci across the group. Where trios identified the same review across schools (for example the group of Early Years heads, or the very diverse group of schools who chose to focus on learning behaviours as something new and important for all three schools), they were generally more specific in their identification of areas of strengths and recommendations by comparison to groups with more variable foci. More specific foci also led to more specific findings, and vice versa with groups/schools which had broader foci.

There were also a number of patterns (sometimes overlapping ones) which emerged from the rationale and evidence behind the selection of the peer review trios' foci:

- 14 reviews were based on pupil attainment and progress data which projected pupils to be below expected standards
- 12 reviews used tracking data / book scrutinies of target pupils as evidence
- 8 reviews were based on recent changes in practice and a desire to evaluate their impact
- 6 reviews were based on a change in maths curriculum requirements
- 5 reviews' rationale included reference to frequent loss of staff / high proportion of inexperienced staff
- 5 reviews were based on a perceived lack of consistency in practice

Similarly, some patterns are also discernible in the reported strong and exceptional areas of practice:

- In terms of strong practice:
- 12 reviews identified the consistency / depth of school's processes and tools as a strength. This included approaches to marking, structured planning and data collection
- 9 reviews identified colleagues' enthusiasm for / commitment to practice as a strength
- 8 reviews identified leadership commitment to improvement / peer review as a strength
- 8 reviews identified pupils' attainment or commitment to learning as a strength
- 6 reviews identified colleagues' awareness of pupil needs as a strength
- 3 review identified pupils achieving expected Age Related Standards as a strength
- In terms of areas of practice which constituted excellence:
  - 4 reviews identified practice in quality of teaching and learning as excellent
  - 4 reviews explicitly stated the practice identified as strong was not exceptional
  - 2 reviews stated the practice had already been deemed exceptional by OFSTED

Not everyone identified areas of exceptional practice, much more frequently the peer review process was identified as a step to being exceptional – 6 reviews identified continuation / development of the strong practice identified in their review as a step towards exceptional practice. In terms of recommendations / areas for development, the following featured in a substantial number of participating schools' peer review reports:

- 11 reports recommended the incorporation of specialist expertise / training opportunities
- 8 reports recommended developing pupils' independent learning / engagement
- 7 reports recommended improving the dissemination of information to parents / governors
- 6 reports recommended revisiting school / subject curriculum to emphasise learner's specific practices
- 5 reports recommended developing staff confidence in their practice
- 3 reports recommended use of targeted coaching

For each peer review report, after the cross-moderation process, CUREE provided feedback on the quality of the report and suggested further action which could make them even stronger. These recommendations were specific and often included providing links to research based resources. But there too there were patterns; comments generally fell into one of four broad categories:

- The first category was that many schools' reports would be strengthened by including concrete indicators of success in development actions. CUREE cross-moderators frequently suggested that determining and acting on next steps as a result of the peer review would be made easier if schools gave themselves some clear ideas about what success would look like in acting on their report's recommendations.
- The second category was similar to the above, but was broader – CUREE colleagues engaged in cross-moderation frequently suggested that describing the routes of improvement schools were aiming to follow more specifically and with milestones would be helpful, on the grounds that it would allow all colleagues at the school concerned to understand the

underpinning rationale behind the school improvement plan which emerged from the peer review process and thus contribute more directly to achieving it.

- The third category was that many schools would benefit from making the links between the evidence they had gathered and the recommendations they made as a result more explicit – this would be helpful both in making the recommendations stronger, and in setting a strong vision of success, as mentioned above, easier to achieve.
- Finally, the fourth category of recommendation CUREE colleagues made was that schools would benefit from giving more explicit thought to taking time to reflect on both the findings from their peer review reports, and the next steps emerging as a result. This feeds into the other categories of recommendation articulated above, but also touches on the need to build a shared understanding of the school's plan for improvement across all members of the Peer review team.

The reports

Beyond the overall trends emerging from across the reports which are outlined above, there are also some interesting things to note from a closer examination of the reports on an individual basis. Several of the peer review reports submitted to CUREE were excellent. Four in particular stood out for their overall quality, the depth and specificity of the recommendations they made for increasing the momentum of school improvement, and the clear links between the evidence gathered during the peer review and their recommendations.

Other reports were more mixed and, as outlined in the previous section, this was frequently a result of recommendations which were not as clear as they could be or which did not articulate concrete next steps to be taken to act on those recommendations

Inter-school partnerships, and the peer review trios

Finally, CUREE's experience of the peer review programme generated a number of key points about how and why inter-school co-operation, both through the peer review trios and more broadly, worked well and could be improved further.

One area which (perhaps obviously) helped support effective co-operation between schools was the presence of strong relationships which had already been established. Several peer review trios were based on or sought to make use of existing relationships and patterns of collaboration between schools in close proximity to each other, and these often seemed to help smooth the way.

The trios themselves also proved very important and helpful – some schools sought to expand their peer review groups into larger blocs, but there was little evidence that this brought any substantial benefit, and during the final training day some participants reported that they might have been overly ambitious and optimistic about their capacity to work together in a bigger group of schools. Note however that the early years group consisted of four schools and, for the most part, worked extremely smoothly together – though, as outlined above, much of this can be explained by the fact that they already had strong relationships with each other.

The importance of planning together was also reinforced during the peer review programme. This was true both in terms of the general approach to peer review, but was also made obvious when it came to specific tasks. For example, setting dates for conducting school visits was much easier and much more likely to result in successful visits taking place where schools were able to do so together

during one of the training days. Note that this was not a sine qua non of planning successful school visits however – sometimes circumstances dictated that schools plan in detail after a training day, and in many cases they were able to do so effectively.

The peer review programme provided a number of demonstrations of the importance of and sensitivities around trust between colleagues; where relationships were more strained, it was often because the underpinning relationships had not been able to generate sufficient trust for leaders from different schools to fully engage in a process of making themselves vulnerable to each other.

Lastly and importantly, the value of support from other leaders was demonstrated strongly during the peer review process, and provided some powerful demonstrations of the nature and value of leadership, in particular the way it can benefit from and add value to collaboration and co-operation.

References

Cordingley, C. Bell, M (2016) Gaining and Sustaining Momentum: Accelerating progress in schools project. London: Teach First [Online] Available at: http://www.curee.co.uk/files/shared/GSM_report_public_version.pdf (accessed 27/07/2016)

Robinson, V., Hohepa, M., & Lloyd, C. (2009). School Leadership and Student Outcomes: identifying what works and why. Best evidence synthesis iteration (BES). Wellington: Ministry of Education