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INNOVATION

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1. SMITHY GETS UPSET

A term ago Peter Jones had been appointed head of a science department in a secondary school. This involved a transfer from the school at which he had previously been teaching. He was 25 years old, a graduate and he had recently completed his teachers' training programme. The department had four science laboratories and five other teachers of science consisting of four younger, non-graduates and Mr Smith.

Mr Smith was 52 years old and was an experienced non-graduate teacher who had been at the school for 16 years. He had been teaching science when the school only had one small room that doubled as a science room. He had been the first teacher of biology at the school and over the years his students had obtained a steady trickle of O Level passes in Biology under conditions in which very little practical work was possible. This same room, which had eventually been converted into a full laboratory, was used by Mr Smith as his home base. Hardly anybody taught there except in an emergency. He kept the lab and its contents in immaculate condition, although this was in part due to his philosophy which was one typified by a comment of his, "There's no point in allowing children to handle practical equipment until they have passed O Level. They can't understand how to use it." Thus it was with the greatest reluctance that students were allowed to look through a microscope or do the basic things that would be expected of them in the practical examination. Consequently, the lab never had a chance for its usually immaculate appearance to become dishevelled.

Peter felt that this approach was not the best for students of O Level Biology so he had asked the headteacher to arrange the timetable in order that Mr Smith taught general science to the middle forms of the school, while he himself took the O Level Biology class. In order to clear the air, he had convened a meeting of all the science department teachers to inform them of this.

Peter knew that Mr Smith might not be too familiar with the new general science course being used so he made an effort to help him. Since Peter was teaching parallel forms he made a point of telling Mr Smith of everything that he had been doing and making available every worksheet and set of equipment that he had constructed. On occasions he even took the trouble to carry the equipment into Mr Smith's lab and set it up after he had finished with it. But to his surprise, Mr Smith hardly ever used any of the equipment that he took in. He would not even acknowledge Peter's actions and he would give the impression of being hostile to what Peter was doing. Peter felt that he was only trying to help and he could not understand Mr Smith's actions. The other younger science teachers did not react in this way at all. In fact they did all that Peter told them to without a murmur.

"After all," thought Peter, "I am head of department. And the main aim of being head of department is to see that everyone in the department works properly and professionally."

One morning Peter was called to the headmaster's office. "What's happened to Smithy?" asked the headmaster. "After 16 years in this school he is asking for a transfer."

Discussion

1. Can you trace any possible reasons for Mr Smith's request?
2. Do you think that anything (a) could have been done,
(b) could now be done to make Mr Smith change his mind?
3. Discuss the statement made by Peter in the penultimate paragraph. If you agree with the main aim as stated by Peter, discuss how it could be achieved.

2. HEADING FOR CHANGE

You have recently taken up your first headship in a large primary school in a district some distance away from where you live and formerly taught. Your last school in which you were senior teacher was, by local standards at least, progressive - unstreamed, with informal relationships, modern methods, with good discipline though the strap was hardly ever used etc.

Your new school on the other hand is rigidly streamed, discipline is rigidly enforced, especially by the Senior Teacher. Different approaches to teaching are used so that the children are confused as they move through the school. For example, subtraction is taught by 'equal addition' as well as 'decomposition', several different methods are used for the teaching of reading, and the separate subjects - Geography, History etc. are taught by some teachers while others teach Social Studies.

The staff consisting of a good percentage of young, untrained teachers are divided into various camps - a division that existed before you took up your position. These camps are led by three or four more experienced teachers, each apparently believing that her/his course alone is right. There is Mr Snaggs, a firm egalitarian who is convinced that streaming is wicked. He can "prove to you" that the few middle-class children in this predominantly working-class school occupy the top streams, and get all the attention. On the other side of the fence is Miss Higgins. She teaches the Common Entrance class, and is convinced that mixed-ability grouping would hold back the bright kids, and would not in any way help the less bright. She has not had any direct experience of this, nor has she read anything of the vast literature on the matter, but she knows! She also believes in a common approach and finds herself opposed to Mrs Gross, who champions the cause of the teacher doing his/her own thing. It is good for the children to be exposed to different methods and approaches, and after all, the teacher has a personality. The senior teacher, Miss Sawyer, is always clashing with Mrs Neil over her lax attitude to discipline. Mrs Neil believes that children are little people with rights just like big people. They should not be flogged and subdued, and she allows them a good degree of freedom which Miss Sawyer calls disrespect.

You have allowed yourself a 'comfortable settling-in period', and you have made an assessment of the situation. This mess cannot go on! It is the children who suffer in this state of uncertainty and chaos! You have a chat with your district education officer, who reveals that she is fully aware of the situation and has been for quite some time. She agrees with you that something has to be done.

Discussion

Where do you go from here?

3. ESL

It is the policy in a certain island country to teach English as a second language. The authorities have spent a good deal of money in providing resources and in sponsoring in-service courses in the Tate method. While the local language is still used in primary schools it tends to be replaced by English as the language of instruction in the second form of the secondary school.

Raurenti, the headmaster of a village primary school, fully accepts the policy of his Ministry in relation to the teaching of English but he is encountering a good deal of opposition from the village elders. He is further troubled by the imperfect English used by some of his teachers and the evident boredom of some of the children during English lessons.

At a meeting between the teachers and the parents the matter comes to a head when Sione, an influential elder, is openly critical of the teaching of English to his grandson - "so encouraging the boy to discard his own language". The village is divided in its feelings and, as Raurenti hopes to persuade the people to build a new classroom for which he needs their co-operation he feels great concern.

Discussion

1. What are the issues, including the hidden ones, in this case?
2. How should Raurenti handle the whole matter?

4. RAISING STANDARDS

On taking charge of a large primary school in Singapore, Mary Choo was distressed to find that, for a number of years the results of the external examination at the end of Grade VI had showed that only 40% to 50% of the children had ever mastered the syllabus. What distressed her even more was that the teachers accepted the situation as inevitable. They pointed out that half the children came from the lower socio-economic group and that there was little exposure to English in the homes. Since the hope of attracting a better class of children to the school was remote, teaching, it was felt, could never become a satisfying challenge.

Two questions haunted Mary Choo -

1. Was it possible that so many 'stupid' children were born year in and year out?
2. Was there anything wrong with the syllabus?

Mary Choo could not bear watching the children accept failure before they could even enjoy life. Something had to be done. Interviews with the parents revealed that they felt as helpless as their children. Some were anxious to unburden themselves and were openly distressed, some instructed Mary to take harsh measures and make the children learn, some were defensive and some were antagonistic.

Initially any solution of necessity rested with Mary Choo and her staff.

Three years later the position had completely changed. Morale was high and pupil performance in class and at the final examinations had greatly improved.

Discussion

1. What steps had Mary Choo taken?
2. What had been the sequence of reactions from (i) the staff, (ii) the parents, (iii) the children?

5. COMMUNICATION

Background

A large school with up to approximately 700 students and a staff of around 70. Staff relationships are relaxed and a 'professional' attitude exists. The principal is keen on innovation and considers himself progressive - he is well-regarded within the teaching service.

Problem

In an attempt to improve lines of communication the principal had established a daily 'briefing session' with his heads of department. These meetings are short, about 10 minutes, and are held at the beginning of the day. Staff bulletins are issued monthly and the staff notice board is religiously kept up to date by the V.P.

At a meeting of the education committee, consisting of the entire staff, it was decided as a useful exercise that teachers should be given an opportunity to list any problems they encountered in the general running of the school. (This was to be done anonymously to obtain a more realistic result.)

On analysing the lists of 'problems' which were presented, it was found that quite a large majority indicated that there was a 'lack of communication' in the school - the principal reacted strongly to the implication.

Discussion

1. What, if anything, was wrong with the lines of communication within the school?
2. What should be done now to rectify the situation?

6. EXTRA-MURAL ACTIVITIES

Mr John MacNeil was a rather popular deputy headteacher of a primary school in the suburbs of Greeting. He was very active in voluntary social organizations, and a member of the church council.

Eventually he was appointed headteacher of a small country school, and planned to channel all his enthusiasm into making this school one of the best in his small island. He was confident that the skills he had used with such success at his former school, would work even more successfully in the country environment. But at the first staff meeting, held the week before school was reopened - he felt the first pangs of doubt. His senior teacher, who had been filling the place of headteacher during the previous term did not accept his overtures of friendship. In discussing current programmes of the school, members of staff seemed reluctant to contribute unless they read approval in the deputy's expression. Information which would be helpful in formulating new programmes was deliberately withheld, as the new headteacher found out later.

During the first term he tried his best to establish rapport with the staff and parents as well as the pupils. The latter returned his goodwill but the parents seemed to avoid him and the teachers were respectful but aloof. Each member of staff found some good reason why he or she could not be responsible for some extra-curricular activity. Some attended evening classes or had family responsibilities, which necessitated leaving school at least five minutes after dismissal in the afternoon.

But the headteacher was determined to have a Brownie pack, a Guide company, a Cub pack, a Scout troop, a Drama group, a 4H Club and a Parent-Teacher Association going before the end of the school year. He tried to start the drama group and a cub pack by himself, but found these along with his other duties exhausting. He kept on however, in the hope that three of the younger teachers would be encouraged to help him. Eventually, he learnt through the grape vine, that the teachers were wary of offending the deputy headteacher, who resented not being appointed head of the school. No teachers volunteered.

The tension in the school was now to be felt. The deputy was not filling in the supportive role, although outwardly he was pleasant enough. The headteacher did not want open hostility to develop, so ignored what antagonism he could. Yet he felt that it was his duty to upgrade the school in all the ways possible. He knew that there was potential only waiting to be tapped, and that a great deal more could be done to help these children's development.

Discussion

Where should he go from here? What would you do if you were in his place?

7. THE CONSERVATIVE

Sandra X, an experienced secondary school teacher, had been seconded a year ago by her government to act as a Project Implementation Officer to co-ordinate the activities of a two-year multi-national project in five pilot primary schools in her country. The project, founded by an international agency, was aimed at producing revised core curricula in the four principal subjects taught in primary schools in the countries of the region.

At the regional teacher workshops, some very interesting and, in Sandra's opinion, good material in mathematics had been developed. In four of the pilot schools, the materials had been introduced with very positive results. The teachers had found that use of the materials had had a dramatic effect on the students and their interest in mathematics. The children were responding to the course with a great deal of interest and the teachers had by and large responded favourably, since the materials contained detailed instructional content, thus helping them with a subject that many of them had found to be difficult.

In the fifth school there was a problem. Although some of the teachers who had seen the material seemed favourably disposed towards it, the course was not being widely used. The materials had in fact stayed in the headmaster's study. In response to Sandra's requests, he had always sounded evasive and had made comments such as, "I want to check them first, to find out if they will fit in with our programme. Maths is in the eleven plus test, you know, and our results have always been very good." Or, "I will give them out next week." Or, "Just give me a little time. I don't want to confuse the children with too much new stuff at one time." And once when she arrived at the school, she heard the headmaster telling his staff, "Don't pay too much attention to all this new stuff that Miss X is trying to force down our throats. She's only going to be here for a couple of years, but this school will be here for long after she's left for some big-shot job at the University. I'm thinking about the children, not the project."

The project Maths specialist had also been expressing his frustration with the situation to Sandra, and had asked her for assistance.

Discussion

1. What were the possible causes for the conflict?
2. What possible actions are there for Sandra to take now and what are the likely outcomes of each? Which would you recommend?
3. Detail a course of action that a person in Sandra's position could take during her first year in office to reduce the possibility of such a conflict arising.

8. COMMUNITY READING IN THE CLASSROOM

In Territory 'A', an Education Officer conducted a workshop on community reading in the classroom for a group of trained, practising, primary school teachers.

At the inception there was continuous conflict, due to the lack of understanding of the concept - community reading.

Teachers asked questions such as 'What is meant by community reading?' Some said that community reading was just another time-wasting approach copied from overseas, and the children of Territory 'A' would be better off if they were taught to read through the traditional method.

As the workshop progressed some expressed the view that they would go through the motions of the workshop, but when they returned to their regular classroom they would certainly forget everything said at the workshop, and would most definitely continue in the traditional approach to the teaching of reading.

One of the main fears expressed centred around the ideas of community reading drawing heavily upon the language of parents and peers. Teachers were definitely not willing to admit that meaningful learning could be achieved through constant interaction between the language of professional (teachers) and that of non-professional (parents and peers).

By the conclusion of the workshop the same teachers had a better understanding of community reading and were optimistic and eager to use the approach on their return to the classroom.

Discussion

1. Why did trained and practising teachers react in such a way to the new approach?
2. What may have taken place at the workshop in order to change the opinion of these teachers?

