Account of practice:

Leadership development

Ryan Gibson, St Joseph’s RC Voluntary Aided Comprehensive School, Tyneside

Ryan Gibson is the director of applied learning and vocational training and a member of the senior leadership team (SLT) at St Joseph’s Comprehensive, a large, mixed Roman Catholic school in south Tyneside. He is not a teacher, so the key influences on his leadership development have been:

- learning from on-the-job experience
- working with an inspirational headteacher
- learning from others
- winning a fellowship
- dissemination
- developing resilience

Learning from on-the-job experience

When Ryan started at St Joseph’s five years ago there were just 12 students on vocational courses – now there are 180 in Key Stage 4 alone. His headteacher, Dr Campbell, says:

Ryan Gibson has transformed the ethos of applied learning from ‘something for the disaffected’ to an exciting opportunity for all. He has outstanding people skills and carries out his duties as director of applied learning to the highest standard, both within school and beyond.

His career journey began seven years ago when, as a history graduate, he gained a job as a learning mentor in the sixth form at Ryton School in Gateshead. Within about eight months, he became head of work-based learning and citizenship and had the brief to disseminate workplace learning through the school. After 18 months he became vocational education manager at his present school, St Joseph’s in Hebburn. It started as quite a low-level post with just 12 students on vocational courses. He is now director of applied learning and a member of the senior leadership team. As such, he is responsible for overseeing all vocational and applied learning provision and partnerships; managing the school specialisms of technology, leading-edge (innovation) and applied learning; and leading work-related learning provision, the engagement programme, enrichment, post-16 transition, enterprise education and employer engagement. He is also responsible for a pastoral year group, Key Stage 4 options and line manages the special needs department. As a colleague says, “People can count on things when he is in charge”.

Ryan is passionate about helping students to see the relevance of their learning and its application in the real world. Behind a mild, self-effacing manner, Ryan has a great deal of drive and creativity inspired by a clear vision. He is highly reflective and this has been fundamental to his effectiveness:

I’m not somebody who would sit back and just do the role given. I look for new opportunities, new challenges, new ways to make things better. That’s just my personality.
Working with an inspirational headteacher

Ryan’s leadership development has been enhanced by working in a well-led school. It has been judged outstanding by Ofsted in all its inspections. He considers that he has learned a great deal from many staff in the school, but singles out the headteacher, Dr Campbell, as the greatest influence on his leadership:

The head here is really quite inspirational. He’s very visible; he likes to be at the cutting edge.

The headteacher’s vision and risk-taking have also been an inspiration to Ryan and his backing has meant that there has never been a barrier between the vocational and the academic that exists in many schools.

Because he’s trusted me to do the job and given me great opportunities, I try to do my best to repay him.

Ryan has learned from the headteacher’s modelling of values, vision, visibility, trust, communication, distributed leadership, risk-taking and desire to be at the cutting edge – and all these are clearly features of his own leadership. He distributes his leadership by, for instance, setting up the applied learning champions group, which has a member from each department.

Learning from others

Ryan’s leadership development has been aided by learning from others. His degree in history has perhaps helped him in learning a great deal in a comparatively short time and then being strategic in putting ideas into practice. The director of Key Stage 4 commented:

He is a stabiliser, good at setting up systems, following through and establishing lines of communication.

Being knowledgeable in his field is essential in being able to influence others and get them on board. Ryan attends key national and local events and has an impressive array of networks.

He reads widely to keep up to date. A report that has inspired him recently is ‘It’s about who you meet’ (Mann, 2012), which is about how employer contacts at school make a difference to the employment prospects of young adults. His reading provides more opportunities, such as finding out about grants and new opportunities.

Learning from others extends to schools in other countries. In 2010 Ryan went to Sweden to look at the Kunskapsskolan model of personalised education (www.kunskapsskolan.com), primarily to help him gain ideas for the diplomas that his school was introducing. It was very interesting but what he also took away from the visit were ideas for enhancing the role of the form tutor. He spots and seizes opportunities: “I try to learn from every situation I can”.

Winning a fellowship

In 2009 Ryan successfully applied for a fellowship. From a highly competitive field, he was one of just 30 people from across the country to win this prestigious award – and one of only three who were not teachers. The fellowship funded him to spend two days a week for two terms developing innovative external links and relationships to improve pupil aspiration and attainment. It opened up many opportunities such as networking with inspirational, like-minded people from across the country, attending events with the prime minister and senior figures and contributing to high-level conferences and seminars. Being forced into the limelight in this way boosted his confidence and developed his leadership and management skills, especially as he had to prove the impact of his work to an external evaluator. But most of all, the benefits of the fellowship were related to being given the gift of time. For Ryan, this was:

- Time to generate new ideas, time to develop existing ideas, time to establish more networks and contacts, time to build links, time to reflect on practice and provision, time to develop and disseminate practice and provision.

Ryan’s work and its impact are published in a Department for Education report (Bubb, 2011) on the website (www.outwardfacingschools.org.uk).

Dissemination

Sharing his knowledge and ideas with others has been a powerful form of leadership development for Ryan, which concurs with the Ofsted report on outstanding secondary schools (Matthews, 2009). He was a lead practitioner in applied learning for the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust (now The Schools Network). This gave him experience of embedding national directives locally and promoting good local practice nationally.

He has published an article (Gibson, 2010) in the journal ‘Professional Development Today’ about how he organised a staff training day that involved 150 people spending a day in the real world to enhance applied learning in their fields. Keen to disseminate his knowledge, he has written a business engagement charter (Gibson, 2009), a guide for schools to consider when working with business, and which has been on the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust website for three years.

Developing resilience

Ryan maintains his resilience through understanding the importance of careful planning. Everything he does is well thought-through and has a clear rationale. His leadership is underpinned by clear values. The director of Key Stage 4 describes him as “calm under pressure” and says, “Ryan has the ability to separate the person from the problem”.

St Joseph’s is very concerned with staff and pupil wellbeing. The headteacher is fundamental in developing this culture. Speaking of Dr Campbell, Ryan says:

- Although he is innovative and cutting edge, he’s also very careful to make sure people are happy.

There is a wellbeing group which looks at the school’s calendar of events to try to avoid times of overload. Each term there is a wellbeing week where there are no after-school events and everyone leaves by 4.30pm.
Ryan has learned to delegate and now has a deputy director of applied learning. He works hard from 8am in the morning until about 6pm but then switches off, something that is made easier by having a young family.

With a reflective, positive and analytic outlook, Ryan has a deep understanding of himself as a leader and a learner:

- It's important to shape your field rather than being shaped by it.

He has developed by analysing the leadership of others in the school, primarily the headteacher. As well as developing his emotional literacy, communication and planning skills, this has inspired him to be a values-driven leader with a clear vision. As the director of Key Stage 4 says of him:

- Ryan gives pupils chance after chance to improve – this is a major strength – he never stops believing in them.

References

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