



## The Mulberry Bush Outreach

Showing the way in teaching, practice & research

# The Mulberry Bush Peer Review Case Study. 01



### The Mulberry Bush Peer Review

is a model of sharing best practice, it's not an inspection and it's not an accreditation system. Its aim is to provide a reflective self-evaluation process by developing a supportive network of leaders, in order to improve outcomes for children.

This is done by identifying two peers, from a similar type of school, to visit you, looking at agreed areas of practice which you identify.

This model has been run by The Mulberry Bush for the last seven years, and has involved over sixty schools.

*"The peer review reaches the improvement parts that other processes fail to reach..."*

Andrew Denham has been head teacher of Standlake Church of England primary since September 2014, judged "Good" in February 2013. Soon after becoming head teacher Andrew's own evaluation, supported by his school improvement partner, was that the school required improvement for the following reasons:

- Variation in quality of teaching and learning
- Lack of differentiation in teacher's planning

- Expectations were too low
- Attainment was low in all areas, evident through poor SATS results
- A general feeling of it being '....a nice village school' with no need to do anything differently
- A lack of proper structure regarding assessment and progress tracking
- Governors were not in touch with the issues facing the school with no accountability

When Andrew said that he felt pupils should, and could, be doing better, he experienced strong resistance from the staff team with teachers responding badly to feedback, and being reluctant for classroom observations. His determined drive for improvement was met by many staff leaving the school and questions being asked by parents and governors about the schools leadership.

### Peer Review

For the review, Standlake were joined by two primary heads. Andrew divided the day between time to talk together about the challenges he faced and time for the team to talk with pupils about their experiences of the school.

The experience of having external, experienced leaders, talking to the pupils led to deeper thinking and sharing of their views. The reviewers identified key themes including that the pupils liked the school, particularly areas such as Forest School, whole school celebrations, after school clubs and liked the staff. However, pupils were critical of spending too much time sitting on the carpet feeling bored, and made little reference to any academic work, which appeared to support Andrew's self-evaluation.

The reviewing heads recognised the difficulties Andrew faced, both having gone through similar experiences. Andrew felt empathy from them and validation in what he was doing. The subsequent written feedback included the following:

- "I really valued our conversations throughout the day and I hope you found them as helpful and encouraging as I did"

- “My impression is that you know exactly what is going on in your school and that you have already identified areas for improvement.”

- “I too share the same impatience to get everything right immediately .....don’t hang about – get on with it!”

The second part of the peer review involved Andrew being part of the review team visiting Carswell Community Primary School. During this visit he was able to observe a number of new ways of working, such as Growth Mindset, which he was able to take back and introduce at Standlake School.

The following year Standlake were peer reviewed again by two different head teachers. Although Andrew chose to structure the review in the same way, the themes from the pupils were markedly different. Pupils talked specifically about what they had been learning, with references to the Big Write, learning about new things, Learning Objectives, science being good fun, liking drama, and enjoying math challenges. Once again Andrew felt his decisions were validated and that things were improving for the children.

Discussions with the peer review team focused on sharing practice about approaches to assessment and measuring progress, and the range of interventions that were being used for pupils who were not making expected progress, or had special educational needs or disabilities. This was felt to be helpful, broadening the range of strategies tried in the school. From the discussions with the pupils the reviewers identified that pupils with lower abilities were aware that they were working at ‘bronze level’, and didn’t get the chance to have a go at ‘silver’ or ‘gold’ work. Pupils in some year groups didn’t seem to be yet benefiting from the Growth Mindset work, and others had a limited understanding of how religious education was being taught. Andrew found all the feedback helpful.

“We also found the professional discussions with you very interesting and it was really helpful to think about the parallels between our schools.” –

**Peer Review Team at Standlake 2016**

## Impact

Andrew places great value in the peer review process and the opportunity to get objective feedback from other heads who understand and have to cope with similar pressures. As a result, he feels more integrated into the wider county head teacher network, well supported and more energised. Although he is part of a very effective multi academy trust, which offers excellent ‘professional dialogue, challenge and support’, he sees the peer review as adding another perspective, furthering his level of support. At times he has been able to tell critics of his work that peer review head teachers had validated the work within his school.

## “Good” – OFSTED 2017

**By the time of OFSTED returned in June 2017 Andrew was confident that things were different, with many aspects of the inspection report conferring the findings of the peer review process:**

“Since your arrival in September 2014, you have quickly identified the correct areas for further improvement, and your relentless determination has led to pupils making good and sustained progress.”

“The refinements that you have made to teaching and learning are having a positive impact on pupils’ progress.”

“One pupil said, ‘They talk you through the work, to help you understand.’ Pupils say that work is sufficiently challenging for them. In lessons, pupils are highly engaged, and learning activities are appropriate to their needs. Pupils take pride in their work and are very appreciative of the adults who help them learn.”

“The profile of reading for some lower-attaining pupils has been further raised by providing them with additional adult support and resources. These pupils have been accurately identified as they need to make greater progress to achieve as well as they can.”



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## The Mulberry Bush Peer Review Case Study. 02



### The Mulberry Bush Peer Review

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**"The peer review reaches the improvement parts that other processes fail to reach..."**

Viv Hutchinson is the head teacher of Marcham Church of England primary school in Oxfordshire, a school judged as Good in 2014. Influenced by Malcolm Gladwell's "Blink" she was looking for a model which matched her experience of spending time in classrooms and the insights this gave her with the support she felt she needed with the specific challenges she faced in her own school.

**The last OFSTED inspection had identified leadership and management roles as an area for improvement.**

### Peer Review

Viv decided to focus on the leadership and management roles for the first review where Marcham were joined by two primary heads. Viv started the day with a tour of the school before introducing the visiting heads to her leadership team for a series of informal interviews based on questions Viv had previously identified and shared with her staff team. However, she was clear in her brief that she was very happy for them to deviate from the questions and explore other emerging issues. The day was designed to include time with the children, the school council and for the review team to meet with staff groups to share their views openly throughout the day.

Although both visiting heads were fairly new in post, Viv felt confident with their ability to review the school's leadership and was pleased they seemed interested in how the school curriculum was managed. The feedback from all of the interviews confirmed that good progress was being made around strengthening distributed leadership. The children spoke very positively about being members of the school council, and were proud of the school. The team made a number of suggestions for further strengthening middle leadership by:

**Drawing up actions plans for each subject in order to link their work more closely with the school development plan.**

**Considering whether there are any awards which individual curriculum teams could work towards.**

**Ideas to boost the English leader's confidence.**

**"I found the review very helpful" – Viv Hutchinson, Head teacher**

As part of the peer review process Viv was involved in reviewing two primary schools. The first had been judged as outstanding by Ofsted but wanted the review team to have a general look at the provision, to see what current strengths and weaknesses were apparent. Viv felt that she was able to make a

useful contribution to this process whilst also observing practice that she could take back to Marcham. The second primary had very recently been judged as requiring improvement and the team were asked to review whether they felt the school was taking the appropriate action to address the identified weaknesses. Viv was able to feedback her observations of the high level of staff commitment to the children, the strength of team work, to validate aspects of the school's work, which seemed to have a very beneficial impact on the school's leadership team. The strength here was of peer reviewing, with the host school feeling supported and not judged.



In the second year the review at Marcham focused on how effectively pupil premium funding was used. Similarly to Marcham the review team schools had small numbers of children funded in this way. Viv asked the head teachers to bring with them information about how they used the money and the day was planned so that both pupil premium and non-pupil premium funded children were interviewed, to see if there was any common features in how the different groups of children experienced the school. Again time was allocated for the three head teachers to have extended professional conversations about their work. The review identified that some of the pupil premium funded children appeared to be less confident and resilient as learners than other children, enabling the school to subsequently work on this issue.

During the second year Viv visited two Oxfordshire primary schools, the first wanting an evaluation of how effectively it was implementing their approach to Growth Mindset. From observations and meeting with children and staff the team were able to feedback how evident this model was throughout the school.

The second school was much larger and requested a focus on the impact of current work on improving writing outcomes. At the last minute the other reviewing head teacher had to withdraw, which Viv recognised changed the dynamics of the review. However she still felt her contribution helped the school recognise clear evidence of progress, spotting some inconsistencies in their approach which could be subsequently be addressed. This led to a useful discussion about potential benefits of things being different in different parts of the school, for example, whether targets need to look the same for different year groups.

## Impact

Reflecting back over the last two years  
Viv identified the following overall benefits:

“Having the opportunity to see different school contexts and developing her understanding of how leadership styles adapt to create similar outcomes. For example how larger schools can create a close knit community”

“Working with headteachers she didn’t know, and using new networking links beyond the peer review visits”

“In the process of supporting other leaders in their work she found herself continuously reflecting on what this told her about her own practice”

“Involving other senior and middle leaders in the process helped to strengthen the knowledge and experience of people holding these key positions”

“Have the time to have deep professional conversations. This led to a real sense of cross fertilisation of ideas. This often occurred over the lunch time which was a ‘eat , share , listen, learn, ponder’ time”

“The peer review has made a significant contribution to helping maintain, and further strengthen, the good quality of education that Marcham Primary School provides for its pupils.” – Viv Hutchinson



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## The Mulberry Bush Peer Review Case Study. 03



### The Mulberry Bush Peer Review

is a quality improvement network of schools, creating a supportive group of leaders who collaborate in non-judgemental ways, with the aim of providing the best possible outcomes for children. The peer review is a visit to a school by two colleagues from a similar type of school. They spend a day looking at agreed areas of policy and practice at the host school's request. It is an opportunity to network between schools, to share practice, learn from others and build on what works well. It provides a great chance to share professional expertise and improve provision.

This model has been run by The Mulberry Bush for the last seven years, and has involved over sixty schools.

**“The peer review reaches the improvement parts that other processes fail to reach...”**

Daniel Lewis is head teacher at St Nicholas, a special school for pupils aged 4-19 with severe, profound and complex learning needs maintained by Kent County Council. With a group of local special school head teachers, they formed a ‘professional learning community’, based on The Mulberry Bush Peer Review Model. The aim was to develop a system of much needed support during a period of

reducing input from the local authority, and pressure to increase pupil numbers and meet a broader range of pupil needs. Daniel has now completed three cycles of the peer review process.

### Peer Review

In the first year Daniel used his peer review to evaluate the quality of Key Stage 5 provision. The school knew that radical change was needed, and although things were beginning to gradually change, more needed to be done. The two head teachers carrying out the review spent time observing teaching, looking at curriculum documents, and interviewing key staff. They identified some very clear development lines for the school to follow. Good use was made of these resulting in significant improvement made by the end of the following year.

Daniel took part in reviews at Milestone and Abbey Court schools, looking at Personal Social and Health Education and PE respectively. As well as providing feedback on these specific curriculum areas the reviews promoted reflection on broader leadership issues related to the way in which management roles were organised, and how the curriculum was structured. Daniel was particularly interested in how curriculum specialist teachers were used.

The following year the review at St Nicholas focused on the management role in Key Stage 2, how effectively senior leaders supported this role, and how the role fitted into the overall school leadership structure. The outcome of this was a recognition that middle leaders needed a different meeting structure, should have time to work together without the direct involvement of senior leaders, and have regular time allocated for development work.

The review at Oakley that Daniel was involved in looked at how the strengths observed in curriculum enrichment areas such as forest school and art therapy could benefit the teaching in other subjects. At Five Acres the school used their review to evaluate the impact of work related learning in Key Stage 5 on pupils' growth in independence skills. Whilst recognising the strength of the provision the review team were able to suggest some next steps to support further progress.



For his review this year Daniel decided to ask the visiting head teachers to look at the areas for improvement identified at the school's last inspection to see how much progress had been made. Although the reviewers noted strengths in the quality of teaching in these specific areas, they suggested that pupils could be too reliant on staff. As a result they might not be learning as much as they were capable of.

At Milestones the focus was on how playtimes and lunchtimes were organised. The well-resourced play areas were fully used, with staff engaging pupils appropriately. However the review identified those activities could be planned to increase opportunities for learning, which would entail giving more able pupils greater levels of challenge. The Ifield review looked at how well the speech and language therapy team were working across the school. It found high quality practice and suggested ways in which those skills could be further shared and developed. It also considered how recent curriculum changes for pupils with profound and multiple learning difficulties in Key Stage 5 had incorporated ideas from staff. This confirmed the skills of the staff, and how well leaders used their ideas in curriculum developments.

## Impact

Daniel has found taking part in the peer review process really helpful. In every review he values seeing how other leaders think about particular issues and challenges. He continuously notices different leadership styles, and the structures and systems used to manage specific aspects of schools' work.

He uses all of this to reflect on his own leadership. This in turn affects his approach to management and leadership, and has had positive impacts on his ability to improve his own school. He sees all of this as evidence of the professional learning community in action.

**"The peer review experience is all about developing my leadership."**

