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## Building Schools for the Future: setting the hares running

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**ABSTRACT** This article looks at the Building Schools for the Future (BSF) programme and its stated intention to 'transform learning' from the perspective of the author's involvement as an architect/facilitator. Reflecting on his experiences, he focuses on the possibilities of the programme as a learning and change process, rather than as simply a building-focused programme. He explores some of the important themes which need to be addressed and looks at the conceptual/theoretical framework possibly most useful to make sense of the process. Finally, he looks at some of the implications for the design and facilitation of a BSF programme, and the physical and organisational design of a school to support this process.

My involvement with the Building Schools for the Future (BSF) programme has been as an architect and a facilitator supporting schools and local authorities through the early stages, exploring future and strategic visions and translating these into ideas for the 'shape' of a future school. I have worked in this capacity as an independent consultant, as a Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) 'enabler' and as a Creative Partnership (CP) 'creative practitioner'. Involvement has varied from facilitating one-off workshops to the design and facilitation of ongoing participative processes with whole-school communities over several years.

Over many years' practice as an architect, my approach has always been to try to work with building users, community and other groups to develop their ownership of projects and to find their own solutions through processes with a focus on creativity and learning. I have brought this same perspective and approach to my work on BSF.

### **Reflection and Emerging Themes**

While the rhetoric of BSF talks about transforming learning, local and national political imperatives, a project management focus on programme and costs, and

existing cultures within local authorities and schools, can reduce BSF to little more than a school building programme, where existing models of teaching and learning remain largely unchallenged. There is a real fear within many local authorities that any real challenge will only disrupt the 'delivery programme'. As one BSF Project Manager told me in discussion about how our school-based work with Creative Partnerships might support the visioning process for BSF, '...we don't want to set any hares running'.

In these circumstances, vision and challenge become problematic. At best a few influential individuals might become the focus for this vision and challenge, at worst there is none. There is a real danger that the programme will produce either brighter, newer, shinier schools organised around an outdated learning (teaching) paradigm, or alternatively more innovative buildings which struggle to co-exist with an unchallenged teaching culture.

Transforming learning will involve radical culture change across whole-school communities. As Peter Senge argues:

It is becoming clear that schools can be re-created, made vital and sustainably renewed not by fiat or command, and not by regulation, but by taking a learning orientation. This means involving everyone in the system in expressing their aspirations, building their awareness, and developing their capabilities together. (Senge, 2000)

If BSF is to achieve its aims of transforming learning, this whole-system 'learning orientation' needs to be at the heart of the process. Three key interrelated themes that are proving to support this 'learning orientation' are starting to emerge from my experiences within BSF:

- trust and relationships;
- ownership and whole school involvement;
- effective challenge.

*Trust and relationships* have to be at the heart of any whole-system change process, but in many BSF programmes it has been painfully obvious that this trust is missing. Schools often initially mistrust their education authorities, feeling judged and 'done to' over previous building, school organisation or curriculum and performance issues. Similarly, local authorities frequently mistrust their schools, feeling that they are uncooperative, lack vision and are too focused on immediate and local concerns. Head teachers frequently mistrust their staff and underestimate their capacity for creativity and innovation – as one head told me 'there's little point involving the teachers, they are notoriously conservative and only interested in the size of their classrooms and where their desk is'. Similar mistrust can be found between schools and government, schools and parents/carers, students and staff. This lack of trust is not merely anecdotal, it has been clearly identified in the Department for Children, School and Families' recently-published review of the BSF process (PWC, 2007). Without trust, external challenges around BSF are likely to be met with cynicism and resistance, rather than as positive opportunities to move forwards.

*Whole school involvement* in developing a shared vision has been crucial to the success of projects with which I have been involved. It can generate massive energy and excitement, and release huge amounts of creativity, impacting both on future vision and current practice. It can also help produce a strong sense of ownership, critical to the successful development of the project through the BSF bidding and procurement process. Well managed, this process is central to developing relationships and trust.

*Effective challenge* is needed to help schools move from a focus on the immediate future to a longer term vision. The long life of any new school building forces us to try to imagine the future direction of schools and learning, and can be a great stimulus to creative and innovative thinking. In my work with schools, challenge has been framed through questions, usually starting with questions around competencies, skills and attitudes that children will need as they grow up, live and work in the future, and moving on to questions framed by the school exploring the implications of these for possible future school/learning scenarios. To facilitate creative and innovative thinking around these questions, we need to establish the appropriate learning climate in which people feel comfortable taking risks and trying new things, a climate underpinned by trust.

Focusing on these three themes is often seen as at best an optional extra – great if you have the time and resources, but we're on a tight programme with a limited budget, we don't have the time and don't want to disrupt the programme by 'setting hares running'. It is my experience, however, that focusing on these themes is precisely what is necessary, regardless of the transforming learning agenda, to deliver a complex capital programme on time and to budget.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Our mental model for schools is largely based on industrial age assumptions, or a 'machine model' (Senge, 2000) rooted in a Newtonian, mechanistic world view. In contrast, a 'living systems' view asserts that the fundamental nature of reality is *relationships*, not things.

*Living system theory* suggests a parallel between living systems in nature and organisations; the key conditions which nurture living organisms, and allow them to grow, adapt and change in an organic way through 'self-organisation', are the same key conditions that can support organisations to grow, adapt and change as true 'learning organisations'. These conditions have been identified as identity, relationships and information (Wheatley, 2005). Living systems can't be *directed* to change – change comes from 'disturbance', and how this impacts on and changes the living system will depend on the 'climate' or conditions in

which it takes place, and the strength and resilience of identity, relationships and information.

These characteristics of a living system closely relate to the three themes identified above through experience of the BSF programme – relationships and trust, ownership and whole-school involvement, and effective challenge.

- Identity can be seen as the underpinning values of the school, and its future vision. This identity and vision will only have real meaning if it is developed, adapted, shared, understood, owned and acted upon by the whole-school community.
- Relationships are the web of connections between people within and beyond the school community, the trust developed to nurture these relationships, and the sharing and collaboration to develop and extend them. Without strong relationships and trust it is impossible to create an environment for real learning, creativity and risk taking.
- Information allows people to remain connected to the vision, participate effectively in its development, and share learning throughout the school.
- Disturbance is our effective challenge. Without effective challenge (either from without or within), in an appropriate climate supported by identity, relationships and information, the school will tend to resist change and hang on to what it already knows and with which it feels comfortable.

### **Some Implications for the BSF Process**

The challenge in working with schools to facilitate the change management implicit in BSF is to design a process that starts to create and helps to support and nurture the appropriate 'climate' and conditions (identity, relationships, information), while identifying the appropriate 'disturbances' or challenge to generate new actions, ideas and thinking.

So what are some of the principles of the approach that we have been developing, designed around a 'learning orientation' or 'living systems' thinking?

- It is an organic process, and different for every school, starting from the unique culture of each school and its community. It will have an overall 'shape' that fits the practical requirements of the project-managed building process, but will flex and alter as it unfolds, as new insights are developed, as capacities and energies ebb and flow. It will be initiated in partnership with the school, but as the school's ownership and understanding grow it will become increasingly their own. It will seek to always strengthen connections, between different parts of the process, between different people and organisations involved in the process, and between different ongoing initiatives, avoiding where possible 'one-off' isolated activities. It will form a natural extension of and inform the school's current management, initiatives and targets, rather than being yet another 'add on'. While looking to the

future it will provide challenges and inspiration to start the processes of change immediately. It will involve and engage the creative capacity of the whole school, including non-teaching staff, students, governors and parent/carers. Without this there will be no shared vision or identity, and the school leadership will be forced to try to direct rather than facilitate change and creativity from the ground up. But also without this, the school will be accessing only a tiny fraction of its intellectual and creative 'capital'.

- Ready-made or imposed solutions will be avoided. Each school needs to find its own answers and approaches, and grow its own solutions. Questions will be at the heart of the process. It is these questions that will act as a 'disturbance' to the system to initiate conversations and change. A lot of time and energy will go into finding the right questions, and the school will become increasingly adept at framing its own questions.
- In a recent process with a special school we started by framing questions to invite the school to explore some fundamental principles, shared values and difference around learning and the purpose of the school. This moved on to the school then framing their own 'what if' scenarios for how learning might be in the future. One 'what if' question, framed after realising that much of the students' best learning happens outside the school, was 'what if the school were replaced by a garage and fleet of mini buses?' This question provoked a rich discussion which impacted on current practice as well as ideas for the design of the new school.
- Relationships will be at the heart of the process, creating the 'climate' for 'disturbance' and appropriate challenge. Without strong relationships and trust, disturbance and challenge is more likely to produce retrenchment than innovation. This is a major challenge to many schools and asks fundamental questions about power relationships, ownership and inclusion.
- Learning will be at the heart of the process. The design of physical learning spaces, visits to other schools or learning environments will follow from the broader vision and emerging 'shape' of the social and learning organisation of the school. But once building design starts, it must be an iterative process, based on questions and shared exploration, with both the school and the design team open to new possibilities. Finding the right architect with the sensitivities and empathy required is a challenge, and fitting it into the bidding process of BSF an even greater challenge.
- Learning will also be at the heart of the design of the process. There will be creative and imaginative approaches to engagement, challenge and participation, and a diverse range of approaches and activities to reflect and encourage the diversity of the school community. This will not only help to nurture the school's creativity and identity, but can also impact on approaches to learning and teaching within the school by modelling and experimenting with different ways of working.
- Finally, the process will encourage the development of a more aware and explicit spatial 'literacy' – an understanding of how space can impact on

learning and relationships. This facilitates changes in the way that staff and students approach and use their existing schools and learning spaces, as well as developing 'informed clients' who are well equipped to engage with and explain their motivations and needs to architects and design teams.

### **Some Implications for BSF Schools: organisation and learning**

Taking a 'learning orientation' in our thinking about schools, with a consequent focus on relationships, has big implications for how we think about the 'shape', organisation and curriculum of future schools. I am not proposing to develop this discussion within this article (some are explored elsewhere in this issue of *FORUM*), but issues to be explored would include:

- learning in its social context, and the centrality of relationships to learning;
- social organisation and groupings of staff and students, and the size and type of social organisation best suited to nurturing strong relationships and effective social skills;
- the overall size of schools to facilitate creation of a sense of identity and to nurture strong relationships;
- the implications for learning and relationships between adults and children when everyone is a learner;
- the implications of these changed relationships for social organisation (in space and time);
- developing relationships beyond the school – taking learners out into the community and bringing the community as learners into the school;
- management, organisation and decision-making, and new forms of leadership appropriate to living systems.

These are fundamental questions which need to be addressed before we can meaningfully start on the physical design of school buildings and environments.

### **Some Implications for BSF Schools: places and spaces**

A previous issue of *FORUM* has explored the concept of spatiality, of the interaction of physical space and social space, and its creation and re-creation over time (McGregor, 2004). The way that our schools are designed embodies the power relations, ideologies and practices of the time, as well as impacting on how these play out in the present and into the future. The critical idea behind that issue of *FORUM* was that space 'makes a difference'.

So what would the learning orientation or living systems perspective suggest for the places and spaces where we learn, and for the design of our schools?

The first and most important consideration is the capacity for change and adaptation: a living system is in a constant process of recreating itself, of adaptation and change in relationship to its changing environment. A school pursuing Senge's 'learning orientation' and developing as a learning organisation needs a physical environment that facilitates and supports continuous change, adaptation and experimentation. Stewart Brand (1994) has written about the concept of 'learning buildings', and has identified some of the characteristics of different types of buildings which have proved flexible and adaptable over time. For schools we need to look for:

- Designs that express and embody the identity of the school, while encouraging students, staff and the community to take ownership, and continually adapt the building(s) and external spaces. This suggests a lower-key architectural approach than some of latest 'flagship' and 'iconic' designs of the more recent new schools and academies (Norman Foster's Bexley Academy, or Wilkinson Eyre's Bristol Brunel Academy – the first BSF school, completed in 2007, for example). In buildings like these, the building's own identity and character is in danger of overpowering attempts at establishing local identity and ownership.
- Design that allows more major adaptability over time – extension, changes of use, major reconfigurations of internal space, without impeding the continuing functioning of the school. This is often easier to achieve within a more dispersed 'campus' design than in a homogeneous single 'statement' building. Major construction can be more easily isolated, additions more easily accommodated, different areas can be more easily separately managed if use/ownership changes, and also, importantly, it is easier to conceptualise and imagine adaptation and change in a more dispersed building.
- A design and form of construction that allows smaller-scale internal changes or remodelling to be easily carried out, and where the structure and placing of services has been designed to facilitate such changes. Experience suggests that 'low-tech', traditional forms of construction – timber stud or non-loadbearing block partitions, for example – are often easier for users to adapt than higher tech, purpose-designed adaptable 'systems'.
- Design that is sufficiently 'loose fit' to facilitate many different ways to use different spaces on a daily basis, making it easy to open spaces to others, to reorganise furniture to support different learner settings and group sizes, to control the lighting and environmental conditions for different activities. And sufficient storage to support this flexible use. A school designed too tightly around one particular programme (curriculum or social) will rapidly become an obstacle to continued innovation and change.
- A building maintenance and management regime that encourages user adaptation and ownership. This is a particular challenge within the private finance initiative (PFI) model used for new-build schools within BSF.

A second important consideration is how the physical design of schools can support and facilitate relationships, between staff, students, parents and the broader community – strengthening the connection and relationships at the heart of a living system. This is an area where we can learn from some more recent developments in workplace design (e.g. Duffy, 1997).

- Learning spaces should be organised and grouped to encourage interaction, collaboration and sharing: within individual spaces through flexible and varied furniture layouts and appropriate equipment and technology, and between spaces with easy connections, visible links and shared spaces.
- Shared social spaces, inside and outside, should be arranged and organised to foster easy connection between individuals as well as larger groups. Materials, finishes and display should support the appropriate personalisation of such spaces. Consideration of social organisation and relationships in the school might suggest more use of social spaces shared by adults and students, and shared by students of different ages.
- Transparency and visibility between spaces is important for connection and information, for all learners to see the range of possibilities on offer, for teachers to share good practice. It can be a visual representation of the desire for openness and sharing in contrast to the isolation and individualism of the traditional enclosed classroom.
- Connection and relationships thrive on chance encounters. This is well recognised in the design of workplaces, where the organisation of circulation, the siting of kitchens, water-coolers and break-out spaces, are all utilised to bring people into contact with one another. Similar thinking can be applied to schools, to help encourage connections between different parts of the school community.
- The overall design of the school, the size, scale and relationships/separation between different spaces, should reflect the social organisation of the school, and should be consciously based on an understanding of the scale of social organisation best suited to nurturing relationships and identity.
- Display is important to share information, learning, and good practice, and to establish and represent a sense of identity. Anything which encourages fast and easy display and personalisation – from low-tech chalkboard doors to magnetic wall panels to digital projection.
- Virtual networks open up a whole new range of possibilities for staff and students to network socially and share learning and information. Access should be direct and easy rather than locked away in specialist ICT suites.
- The siting of the school in relationship to the broader community, the use of community and work-based learning opportunities and spaces beyond the school, and the collocation and sharing of spaces and learning opportunities within the school, should all be considered and designed to facilitate connections and relationships between the school and the broader community, and between home and school.

## Conclusion

If we approach BSF as a change process rather than simply a school building programme, and locate this process on a 'learning orientation' or living systems approach involving the whole school community, it can be an excellent catalyst for rethinking and revitalising schools and learning, and at the same time can help facilitate smoother delivery of the building programme. If we simply approach BSF as a building programme we miss this major opportunity and risk spending billions of pounds on new school buildings which will be out of date before they are built and rapidly become unfit for purpose.

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