

Schools We Need Project**The 'CONSTELLATION' Experience****Val Culff****25 June 2004***Head teacher of Crockerton, a small rural primary school in Wiltshire**NOR: 88**Has been head teacher for almost six years, previously teacher at the school for eight years.***Looking back**

I have always been a teacher. Even now, I still teach for over half the week and this has a lot to do with the perception I have of my role. I have never really lost the perception of myself as simply a teacher and even the recent praise given by OFSTED for my leadership has done little to reassure or 'realign' how I see myself, professionally. Much of the time, this is not a problem and being a 'chalkface' Head teacher has many positive implications. There are times, however, when I feel that I don't fulfil the requirements of a 'good' Head. Nothing to do with filling out forms, consultations or budget templates...the school runs perfectly effectively without me doing all that (others can do it very efficiently). In other words very little of all that has any direct bearing on the children's day to day experiences and learning which is what I'm really concerned with. No, it's the relationships which are difficult and where I am less than confident. I taught at the school for eight years before 'becoming' Head. The last Head walked out one day, three weeks before our first OFSTED. I became Acting Head overnight and secured the permanent position eight months later. 'Becoming' a Head at a school where you have been a teacher is a very strange experience and the re-inventing of your responsibilities, relationships and role is complex and demanding...for everyone. Somehow it's taken me almost six years to realise that my 'new' role must include the shedding of some others. Therein lies the problem

The Constellation

This was based around a family in the school. Single Mum, her mother, two children, Dad still living locally with new partner and children; a family with a great deal of difficult history and 'baggage'. Adults not coping with their own relationships and anxieties and two little girls stuck right in the middle of an emotional turmoil. This inevitably was involving the school and we had somehow become the focus of the mother's anxieties, anger and frustration. Great tension had developed between the mother and certain members of staff and in an attempt to mediate I had unwittingly become her counsellor, confidante and at

other times the butt of her fury ! There were things I could not tell the staff regarding her history and this only served to make them more resentful and angry at the situation, feeling that I was spending too much time on one family. No matter how I tried to support them they felt that I was taking HER side against them.

I found the initial choice of people to 'represent' in the constellation quite difficult and inevitably chose people for a range of reasons – gender, type, age, but generally because I felt I could TRUST them with my issue. Placing them was easy for me. Someone remarked later that this is very difficult for some people, but having directed many plays in the past made the juxtapositioning of bodies to suggest emotion or dilemma second nature and really quite satisfying. This process alone was strangely cathartic and calming.

As Judith moved amongst my constellation I felt a range of emotion. I experienced, initially, a sense of relief that the issue was one worthy of her and everybody else's attention and felt that some sense of ORDER was being explored when I had previously felt only chaos and insecurity. Everything seemed to move in slow motion and again the overwhelming sense of calm and consideration. There was enormous RESPECT from everyone involved, which made me feel valued and cared for.

I began, also to feel enormously upset – initially just at the placing of certain players in positions which seemed right for them, but where I knew they would actually find it very hard to be. The most disturbing part of the constellation was when Judith suggested to the 'mother figure' a possible reason for her anxiety regarding the girls' relationship with her ex-partner. It was like a 'bubbling' to the surface of a truth that I had known but not told Judith in my introductory explanation. There were several other moments like this when either Judith or one of the 'players' seemed to feel or glean a truthful fact, emotion or dilemma, undisclosed previously by me as the issue holder. The subsequent 'saying' of words or phrases which would or could never be said was intensely moving and disturbing...but also eerily comforting, and seemed to impose a sense of 'closure' on the issue. Even though the real people had not spoken the words, and never would, it didn't seem to matter. The fact that they were no longer 'unexpressed' and 'unspoken' seemed to alter my feelings and I believe my relationship with those people.

Seeing the constellation was very hard. It made starkly explicit so many relationships...not just within the specific situation, but also echoes from other times, other places, other people. I suppose that is how we live our lives ...an interrelating of experience and attitude, a sort of composite and ever growing profile. Happening right in front of me was representation of my struggles – all through the representation of one situation.

- Where ARE the boundaries of a Head's role ? Are there any boundaries ? Does each person just make them up as they go along?
- Have I really ever accepted the 'role' and what it should be ? Sometimes I feel good about it and confident and at other times hopelessly inadequate.

- Am I too child and people centred? Am I capable of greater detachment? Should I develop a 'bigger picture' and leave the 'people stuff' to my staff?
- There is a sense of conflict between some of my staff and some parents...a 'them and us' feeling. It feels all wrong and far too judgemental. Parents don't always get it right, but they're doing the best they can and they're human. I don't like the atmosphere, but I know that some of the staff think I'm an easy touch and too soft about giving up my time and energy, when they perceive that I have more important things to be doing. I do those too, but I know they resent it when I seem to be getting tired and burnt out.
- BAGGAGE ! Everyone seems to have so much at the moment...staff, parents and kids ! Sometimes it seems to me that there's so much cluttering the place that I can't breathe ! Is it really up to me to shoulder it all ? All by myself ? And what about days when I have some too ?
- Who's out there supporting ME ?

Is all of this a particular feature of

- Small schools ?
- The school that I've shaped ?
- This school alone, for no reason to do with me?

Visitors (including OFSTED) almost always comment on the warm, friendly, family-like atmosphere of the school. My son told me once, " you're only a good Headteacher because you treat the school like a big family and run it like a Mum !"
 BUT IS THAT APPROPRIATE FOR A SCHOOL IN 2003 ? CAN THAT POSSIBLY STILL MAKE ME A GOOD HEAD ? I know that I'm running myself ragged doing all the good managerial things that I'm undoubtedly doing , alongside all the caring.

Immediate impact of the Constellation

Well...eventually it made me think in a very focused way. I had thought the situation itself was the main problem, but not so. It simply represented a much deeper problem and I was able to think that through in a very wide ranging way. I am not sure that the actual issue was of central importance. I have only seen another two constellations apart from my own, but I would certainly say this was true in all three cases. Implicit in all of the issues was a much wider and deeper systemic problem, of which the specific issue was simply symptomatic. Initially it was emotional and difficult and keeping the journal helped. I drew mind maps, pictures and wrote agonised outpourings but gradually I could see the thread and the pattern and was able to clarify my feelings and thoughts. I could see that part of the picture was mine and another part was other people's'.

Perhaps change all round is needed ...next stage, how to begin to initiate and effect that?

Any actions taken/ apparent changes as a result

- ✓ I started saying 'NO'. Not very effectively at first.....I still got talked into things with very little effort on other peoples part. But I got a lot better. I remembered times in the constellation when events could become much less chaotic and emotional if I could be strong and set boundaries.
- ✓ I started being more defined about my role. My mantra became 'I'm sorry but I don't think I can help on this one, but I'll try and contact someone who can.' I've since refined this to 'Why don't YOU contact
- ✓ I don't LOOK for problems ! If parents want to talk about problems I'm available, although I have started an 'appointment' system rather than an ever open- door policy. If they're desperate enough, they'll let me know. If they're not, then often by the time I see them, the problem isn't quite so big ! The feeling in the constellation of 'stepping back' and having time to consider and watch made me less reactive and inclined to give myself and others time and space.
- ✓ I'm beginning to prioritise more effectively. What do I need to do today which will improve the learning experience for the children in my care?
- ✓ I've become a lot more open and honest about maintaining a sensible work/home balance. I feel OK about defending my right to a life outside school and also that of my staff. In the constellation, I was considered and valued as a person and not just as a 'figurehead' in an organisation.

The subsequent coaching support

▪ **How has this support helped?**

Enormously! It has helped me through the aftermath of the constellation which has been far from easy. Everything had to get worse before it got better! Realising where the issues for change lay was a tortuous journey. That combined with exhaustion and some personal crisis left me 'wrung out' and far from 'sorted' before the Spring holiday. Now that I'm relatively rested and regained some objectivity, I am able to look back on my notes and analyse the issues. The support was two-fold – it kept me focused on finding a way through and it constantly reinforced the confidence and empowerment to make the necessary decisions and changes.

▪ **What impact has it had?**

It's made me think very seriously regarding the nature of a possible support system for Heads and Senior Managers in schools. I've known, personally, several who have become broken people with very few outward indications. By the time you're down that low, it's too late to ask for help...and frankly

there doesn't seem to be much help in any case. Governors, the LEA, even staff and parents all have their own agenda which generally and sadly doesn't encompass supporting an struggling and thereby (albeit temporarily) ineffective Head. Some professional and impartial support is needed. A Constellation is a most effective way to explore an initial problem, and with further support can be used to focus in on the wider issues that were implicit in that situation. If that support is totally impartial, non- education based and timetabled it is of wonderful value and enables a Head to explore the system in which he or she works in a creative and powerful way.

What has changed?

- *Personally – my own perception of my leadership*

I'm beginning to feel easier and more certain about the boundaries. I'm still not sure that I totally like what I really need to be or that I'll ever be able to be as clinical and detached as I maybe should be for the good of the school. However, acknowledging that there are limits within which I should be working, as well as limits to my own abilities has been liberating. There has been so much publicity given to the pivotal role of the Head teacher in both failing and successful schools. This has, I feel, put an enormous and not always healthy or effective pressure on many of us. I now see myself as a part of the system and a part which needs support and reassurance as much as anyone else within it. I suppose I should really be the 'brain ' of the system, (although I will never be able to give up interfering with the 'heart' bit !) In a way, both are pivotal, but neither can function without all the other bits being healthy and doing their bit too !

- *Relationships*

They haven't been easy and much of that was my fault. I was confused and tired. Also realising that I'm in fact doing loads of things, which others ought now to be doing made me initially resentful and quite angry with them. Now I know that it is my fault for not sharing, with them, what needed doing . Worse still, they feel that I haven't trusted them. As soon as this became explicit, I started letting go and giving people a lot more responsibility. My fears about them feeling overworked have proved groundless – my Deputy is thriving on it. I mustn't be such a control freak – back to the family analogy – the school isn't MINE, and everyone needs to feel ownership. It's getting the balance between that and good leadership which is so challenging.

- *Hierarchy*

There was me and everyone else ! We've clarified responsibilities in the school. It wasn't that they didn't have the responsibilities in name or that they weren't being paid for them.....just that I never let them or expected them to take charge and actually DO anything !

Outcomes. Have these resulted in any improvements within the school?

- ✓ I feel better and will be happier and therefore more effective!
- ✓ The staff seem happier and somehow more energetic. This may be that the after effects of OFSTED are eventually wearing off or because it's summer. I prefer to think that we all got a lot off our chests last term and a clarification of roles and responsibilities has made the hierarchy more defined and easier to work with. I think that they seem to feel more 'important' and valued. I have always valued them so much, but telling them that is not enough. I needed to prove it by trusting them to help me with the 'brain and heart' bits.
- ✓ The parents are definitely less demanding. I make conscious efforts at certain times and in certain situations to maintain the 'caring' persona and parents still feel I think that I'm there for them. The whole 'caring bit' just seems far more manageable and balanced and I make sure that unless it's absolutely impossible, I always involve another member of staff in trying to resolve problems....and don't go it alone.

The Journey

Tough. Exhausting. Emotional. Worth every moment and every tear!

Looking ahead

Hard to say ! I still feel that I should probably now move on, but less so than last term. Because things have changed I feel satisfied and interested to see where we're going. I'm very excited to be involved with the setting up of a Constellation 'Clinic' in our area and pleased, too, that the LEA have taken an interest and appear to be aware of the need for real support for Senior Managers.

I'm also quite interested to explore the use of constellation work with children. I am sure that there are very real possibilities for the use of this approach in order to develop their awareness of order, pattern and relationship within their lives.

Val Culff, June 2004

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