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School Leadership

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Research Associate Report

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Learning from the Middle

A study of the impact of Leading from the Middle
in two city schools

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Background

Educational research has highlighted the key role of middle leaders in securing school improvement (Harris et al 2003). In 2002, the National College for School Leadership (NCSL) launched a new training programme for middle leaders entitled 'leading from the middle' (LftM). Its first cohort comprised, among other participants, those from a group of secondary schools in a city in the Midlands. School A enrolled a new group of middle leaders the following year (cohort 3) and school B registered for the first time. I was interested to know what contribution the programme had made to individual and whole-school leadership development.

This study therefore aims to investigate the impact of LftM in two schools and to assess the extent to which it has helped the participants develop their leadership skills.

The report aims to serve different audiences. It provides the middle leader, whether familiar with LftM or not, with perspectives from previous participants regarding what they have gained from it. It similarly provides headteachers or senior school leaders seeking professional development programmes for their middle leaders with the opportunity to discover what contribution to leadership development this programme has made in these two schools.

The study uses the 'standards for subject leaders' articulated by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) in 2001 as one way of measuring the success of LftM, to see whether middle leaders could attribute any personal development towards these standards to their experience on the programme. However, not all middle leaders taking part in LftM are leaders of subjects; many lead pastoral or other teams within school. A set of 'standards' or 'capabilities' produced specifically for the LftM programme provided therefore another measure against which impact on middle leadership could be evaluated.

Finally, it was intended to explore the programme's stated aims in an attempt to establish how far these have been achieved for a group of middle leaders in these two secondary schools.

Literature review

Key role of middle leadership

The key role played by subject leaders in school improvement and on the importance of high quality leadership in our schools has been recognised by many (McBeath 1999; Brooke-Smith 2003; Newton 2003). Attempts have been made to examine and analyse the head of department's role (Bolam and Turner 1998; Gold 1998) and to offer models of subject leadership. It is claimed that this role is one of potential conflict as the middle leader attempts to harmonise the tensions and needs of their work and their team (Busher and Harris 1999). Middle leaders have been variously described as heads of department, middle managers and subject or team leaders (Fleming 2000). In some cases there are attempts to define the differences between the different labels (Kydd et al 2003); in others they seem to be used almost interchangeably (Fleming 2000).

It may be helpful to define the terms 'leader' and 'manager'; the following seems appropriate for the purposes of this study:

... 'leading' involves 'vision and strategy, providing inspiration to achieve aims' whereas 'managing' is 'putting vision into practice'. (Kydd et al 2003: 1)

In school, subject and pastoral leaders who make up the bulk of 'middle' leadership, can be said to fulfil both of these roles.

Leading innovation and change

One of the key areas of the subject leader's role is identified as the strategic direction of the subject (Field et al 2000). Implicit in this view of leadership is the commitment to introducing new ideas, and change and development within the subject (Sammons et al 1997, Harris et al 2003). Middle managers have been described as the 'gatekeepers to change' within the school, taking on new initiatives (Harris et al 2003) It is important to understand, however, that change must be planned and implemented effectively and that real change takes time (Fullan 2002). Yet it is with middle leaders that the major responsibility for change lies:

... within this middle management role, more than any other is the real potential of organisational change and improvement. (Busher and Harris 1999: 315)

It is important that middle leaders have a clear understanding of the nature of change and the reasons why barriers might occur (Busher et al 2000).

Leading teaching and learning

Subject leaders are expected to be the expert in their subject area and to be able to lead and manage others (Field et al 2000). To be effective they must believe that all children can do well and keep a clear focus on learning in everything they do. Research shows the variation in the amount of value different subject areas within a single school can add to pupils' progress (Sammons et al 1997). It is the subject leader who has the greatest impact on pupil achievement in the classroom. Shared vision and goals, teamwork, assessment, the setting and marking of homework, high expectations, a student-centred approach and the involvement of parents and carers are all factors which contribute to good practice within a subject area (Kydd et al 2003)

Also important is the opportunity for teachers to articulate and explain their practice. Strategies for reviewing and sharing practice such as classroom observation rest largely with the subject leader (Wise 2000).

Middle leaders have:

... a powerful influence over classroom practices, and are important gateways to change and development within the subject. (Harris et al 2003: 131)

The role can be very task-orientated, however, and varies from school to school. Factors such as the size of the department or team, the blend of staff within the team, the location of rooms and the amount of non-contact time are all effective (Bolam and Turner 1998). There can be tensions within the role as the subject leader plays a major part in managing change at both departmental and whole-school level (Ernest 1989, Busher and Harris 1999). They must remain close to their team, while retaining distance and respect. Middle leaders have to translate the policies of the senior leadership team (SLT) at classroom level. They must engage their team, improve staff and student performance, monitor attainment and mentor colleagues (Ernest 1989; Busher and Harris 1999). They are the link between the views of team members and the senior team as well as other middle leaders. It is a highly complex and sometimes difficult role.

Building and leading teams and managing resources

Another key area of the middle leader's work is leading and managing staff. This can provide the hardest challenge for some leaders (Wise 2000) yet effective team leadership is essential in order to create an effective school (Blandford 1997).

Coaching, mentoring and good communication, with feedback at all levels, are skills needed to motivate team members. Those middle leaders who work on teambuilding and teamwork are judged to be the most effective (Sammons et al 1997). Good team leaders lead by example and through open discussion; they maintain constructive working relationships by listening and by providing clear direction while maintaining high expectations (Sammons et al 1997). It is important to spend time getting to know people and to support them (Fleming 2000).

The management of resources, including staff, is a key area of the middle leader role (Field et al 2000) and middle leaders will be often be faced with conflict as they are obliged to make value choices (Wise 2000). The status of a subject within the school is often a means of getting extra resources (Busher and Harris 1999).

Middle leader development

The importance of developing leadership in schools in order to improve educational standards has been stressed by, among others, MacBeath (1999) and Newton (2003). Indeed, the Prime Minister Tony Blair launched the NCSL in November 2002 in response.

Until recently there was great variation in the training on offer for middle leaders (NCSL 2002). Standards and frameworks for professional development published in 1998 (Teacher Training Agency, TTA) and 2001 (DfES) laid down standards and expectations for teachers at different career stages and provided guidance as to the role of the subject leader:

Subject Leaders provide professional leadership and management for a subject to secure high quality teaching, effective use of resources and improve standards of learning and achievement for all pupils. (DfES 2001)

NCSL, in its development of the LftM programme, set out to cater for the needs of subject leaders and also other groups of 'emergent' leaders. These were defined as:

... those beginning to take on formal leadership roles or who would like to do so ... in a single subject area or [who] have pastoral or special needs responsibilities. (NCSL 2002)

The programme was piloted in 2002–03 and cohort 1 was launched in September 2003. Since then five cohorts of middle leaders from primary, secondary and special education have completed this year-long programme. A national evaluation was carried out by Sheffield Hallam University in 2005 that indicated that outcomes for leaders and schools were mainly positive. The majority of participants felt that they had a greater awareness of their own strengths and areas for development and a better understanding of their roles and approaches to leadership. Some have claimed that there is already a noticeable impact on student learning (Simkins et al 2005).

Research methods

Research questions

The research set out to address the following questions:

1. What is the impact of LftM on the middle leader participants in these two schools?
2. What contribution has LftM made to leadership development in the two schools?

The survey

It was decided to conduct a survey based on the two schools. These were located close to each other. In total nine middle leaders took part in the survey. Those from school A comprised three subject leaders from cohort 1 (2003/04) and three from cohort 3 (2004/05). Of those from cohort 3, two had pastoral rather than subject leadership roles. In school B, of the three participants, one was a subject leader and the other two pastoral leaders. School B was involved only in cohort 3 (2004/05). The same NCSL tutors worked with both schools in cohort 3. The results from such a small-scale study would be limited and it would not be possible to make general conclusions based on the small sample. However, there are advantages to a smaller study; mainly that it permits a more in-depth approach and the involvement of a wider range of stakeholders (Wallace 1998).

A number of individuals play a key role in the LftM programme. As well as the 'tutor' the 'leadership coach' from the participant's own school is significantly involved in the learning. The tutor is an experienced senior leader trained and allocated by NCSL. Usually two tutors work with a group of participants and meet with them face-to face on five occasions throughout the programme. The 'leadership coach' is nominated by the headteacher of the school in which the participant works. He or she will facilitate the practical aspects of the training, coach on an individual or group basis and arrange other learning sessions within school. Training for this 'coach' role is also integral to the programme.

The collection of information from middle leader participants as well as LftM tutors, leadership coaches and heads from both schools was designed to provide wider and more reliable evidence of beliefs and attitudes. In addition it would provide the opportunity to compare and contrast the opinions of the different groups of stakeholders.

The survey comprised both questionnaires and interviews so that the benefits of both quantitative and qualitative data could be accessed and triangulation would be facilitated. Using both methods would be advantageous as although the questionnaire is more straightforward to administer, the interview is much more flexible and adaptable and it is possible to obtain information that is difficult to access in other ways.

Research instruments

The questionnaire

This was introduced by a short statement explaining the nature of the research project. Participants were asked to complete a few personal details: name, school, gender, middle leader role and length of time in post. They were also asked whether they had

had any promotion since completing LftM. The questionnaire was in two sections, the first comprising 16 statements relating to the DfES 'standards for subject leaders' (DfES 2001) and the second comprising a further 26 statements relating to the middle leader capabilities used in the LftM middle leader diagnostic assessment (www.nscl.org.uk). Responses required were on a Likert five-point scale ranging from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'.

Interviews

The tutor interview: the tutor interview was a three-way semi-structured interview conducted with both tutors who had worked with all participants in the survey. The questions were pre-prepared but the interviewer had the option of immediately following up any unexpected or interesting responses. The questions were open-ended and were directly related to the stated aims of the LftM programme. Tutors were invited to offer other comments and opinions as they wished.

The leadership coach interview: there was only one leadership coach interview, that with the assistant head from school B. For the tutor interviews, the questions related directly to the stated aims of the programme.

The headteacher interview: the head of each of the two schools was interviewed. The interview schedule used was identical to that used with the leadership coach.

Findings

The LftM programme has five stated aims, four of which are directly related to the middle leader's role:

- to increase participants' ability to lead innovation and change within their own school
- to deepen their knowledge and understanding of their role in teaching and learning
- to enhance their competence as team leaders
- to learn to manage resources more efficiently and effectively.

The fifth stated aim is to enable participants to actively engage in self-directed change in a blended learning environment – not explored in this study because it does not directly relate to their role in school.

This section explores the extent to which these aims were realised within the context of the two schools studied.

Have participants developed their ability to lead innovation and change?

The responses to questions relating to participants' ability to lead innovation and change within their own school indicated very positively that they feel that this has increased as a result of taking part in LftM. Most leaders agreed or strongly agreed that they have clearer targets for others, that they can better articulate to others changes that are needed and that they have a clearer view of how the school's activities are linked to its long-term aims (eight out of nine respondents).

Most also agreed that they have a better understanding of what the school wants to achieve and how that impacts on their own area of responsibility, that they feel more goal-orientated and determined to achieve objectives, and that they have clearer targets for themselves (seven out of nine respondents). Over half of respondents (five out of nine) agreed that they have a better understanding of the national agenda for education. It would appear from the responses that these middle leaders felt themselves better able to lead innovation and change following their participation in LftM, and that, for these participants, the programme has succeeded in this aim.

Findings from the LftM tutors' interview would support the view that the participants' ability to lead innovation and change increased as a result of taking part in the programme. One tutor claimed that LftM provides participants with a greater insight into what is involved in leadership and that they experience 'phenomenal growth'. The other tutor commented:

"Often middle leaders are not sure of their role and they achieve more self-motivation and confidence when they realise that 'I can do that'."

The same tutor pointed out that the programme provides the time and space for people to take 'two steps back' and distance themselves from the 'nuts and bolts' of the job. She went on to say:

"The programme itself is very innovative, it challenges people, moves them out of their comfort zone and throws back to them the responsibility for their own professional development. It is also very school-grounded and particularly suited to adult learners as it

is connected to what they are doing. There is a tangible benefit since leaders work on an area which is important to the school.”

Tutors reported feedback from headteachers; after attending the final celebration event they were able to see how staff had changed. All schools except one (which was undergoing an Ofsted inspection) had come back to register further participants. Other schools were joining as they heard about the benefits of the programme through word of mouth.

The interview with the leadership coach from school B was also very positive about participants' increased ability to lead innovation and change. He described how all middle leaders had to have a vehicle for their projects that caused changes in the school.

This was supported by the comments of the head of school B in which all participants are now leading on substantial whole-school projects. The head himself felt confident in them and has been able to take a step back; for example, one middle leader is able to represent the school at external meetings. Significantly, all have either taken on an enhanced or changed role since the LftM programme.

The head of school A agreed that the majority of participants have increased their involvement in leading change and innovation. He added a note of caution, however; he was not certain to what extent this could be attributed to their having taken part in the programme.

Most have progressed since LftM, however; one participant took on the role of school mentor with PGCE (postgraduate certificate in education) students. Following this there was what his headteacher described as a “re-awakening of ambition and success” in obtaining a promoted post in another school. Another has become involved in programmes outside of the normal subject remit of the role. Some have taken an active role in the professional development of other staff and been more prepared to make verbal contributions in a wider school arena. Again, this participant was not sure how far this could be attributed directly to LftM but suggested the programme may have started off the process.

Have participants developed their knowledge and understanding of their role in teaching and learning?

As to whether knowledge and understanding of their role in teaching and learning is deeper, it would appear that here also, gains had been made. Most agreed that they feel better able to evaluate practice, to create a positive environment in which people cooperate and work towards the shared goals of learning and achievement (eight out of nine). They also agreed that they felt more able to help staff achieve constructive working relationships with pupils, that they are more able to create a climate that enables others to develop and maintain positive attitudes towards their subject and confidence in teaching it, and that they are more confident about taking risks to achieve creative and innovative approaches to practice (seven out of nine respondents).

Two thirds of the respondents (six out of nine) felt more able to develop an acceptance of accountability, to establish shared understanding of the role of their subject in contributing to pupils' spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development, and create an environment where the focus is on learning and high performance. They also felt that they understood how the national agenda would impact on their role. Over half

agreed that they had a greater understanding of the importance of assessment and monitoring in managing pupil progress (five out of nine respondents).

Middle leaders were less confident about their effectiveness in managing pupil behaviour; less than a third (two out of nine) agreed that this had increased, over half did not agree or disagree (five out of nine) and the others disagreed (two out of nine). These responses would indicate that the participants felt more confident about their role as regards teaching and learning, but, while they seem to understand the importance of good relationships with pupils, they are still not confident in their ability to manage pupil behaviour. Outcomes for this aim, while still very positive, would indicate that the programme has succeeded less well in this area than in increasing confidence in their ability to lead staff through innovation and change.

LftM tutors pointed out during interview the areas of the programme that would seem to develop confidence about middle leaders' understanding of their role in teaching and learning. They claim that while materials are very accessible, not enough links are made with other important reading. The tutors felt that the middle leader diagnostic (assessment completed by self and team members) helps them to understand their own strengths and weaknesses. The programme helps them to be more reflective; being asked not to talk is an alien concept for them. The 'team health check' (www.ncsl.org.uk LftM: online card-sorting exercise where each card represents an aspect of teamworking) helps them to prioritise what they need to 'fix' and what they need to talk about with their departments.

The leadership coach from school B was less confident about the impact on the leadership of learning and teaching. He felt, however, that their own projects had an impact on learning. He also felt that the self-assessment questionnaires and those completed by others (the diagnostic) helped them to learn a lot and that they became more reflective. He agreed with LftM tutors that the opportunity to reflect provided by the Development Days was of great value, as teachers in their day-to-day work rarely have much time to reflect and think. LftM gave that chance to discuss the day-to-day issues with peers, and then come back to school and put them into action. The coach had observed also that the head took the training very seriously and they were given responsibilities because they were now part of a 'special group'. This in turn increased their confidence. He felt that all participants had progressed equally.

He himself responded to the programme by 'putting things into place' to allow them to do work that showed some of the learning they had gained from LftM. He gave them more independence than he would have done previously.

The head of school B felt that they developed their awareness and understanding, that they were more reflective. This is evidenced by their contributions to head of department meetings and in conversations with himself. However, he (like the head of school A) pointed out that it is difficult to assert that this development would not have taken place without the LftM training, describing it as 'self-fulfilling' in that the colleagues involved were strong leaders already. This supports the view of the leadership coach, his assistant head. It was also borne out by the responses from participant questionnaires that were less positive as regards development towards this aim. The head was particularly pleased with a whole-school development that could be directly attributed to LftM, however; the leadership coach and participants have set up a peer evaluation programme based on the middle leader diagnostic. This has been successful in pilots during head of department and head of year meetings.

However, the head of school A was more confident that all middle leaders have made progress in this respect. He quoted one colleague as saying:

“... it's the first time I've ever known what I was supposed to do as head of department....”

In the case of the others who already had a good idea, the programme allowed them to 'sharpen up', and put into words, and actions, what they could do about things. They have all seen some change and commented on it to him. He could recount examples of where four (of the six) had looked at where they had made mistakes, gone away and thought things through, then come back.

Evidence from the Sheffield Hallam evaluation (Simkins et al 2005) shows that outcomes were more positive for cohort 3 than for cohort 1; this is reflected in the experience of school A. For the school, whether this can be attributed to improvements in the programme (cohort 1 was certainly more prone to technical problems as regards the online materials) (Simkins et al 2005), or the different blend of people in the second group is unclear.

Have participants developed enhanced self-confidence and skills as team leaders?

Outcomes for this aim are extremely positive. All middle leaders felt that they were more able to encourage participation of others in ensuring completion of an agreed project, and to share information with their team. Most (eight out of nine) agreed that they could establish clear expectations and constructive working relationships with their team, that they could appraise staff as required by school performance management, and that they could lead professional development by example and support. They were also more likely now to use coaching as a means of professional development, and better able to implement policies and practices for the team, to push others to pursue excellence and to establish purpose and direction for the team. They were more open to others' suggestions and ways of working, they could create positive working environments and understand better the importance of dialogue and information – sharing in fostering effective working relationships. Seven out of nine agreed that they were more able to help others to achieve constructive working relationships with pupils and to establish a climate in which the team discusses concerns openly. From these responses it appears that the programme had succeeded very well in its aim of developing these participants' skills as team leaders.

The tutors agreed that by the end of the programme leaders were more competent in leading teams and said that it was rare that people did not feel better about themselves after the final celebration/consolidation event. They claimed that the coaching model was a particular strength and this was reflected in the fact that one participant returned to the programme as leadership coach in one of the schools. Evaluation forms completed by participants were extremely positive about the benefits of the development days, especially about the sessions on coaching.

Participants have explored working with difficult people and discussed as a group potential strategies to use with difficult people. One tutor commented:

“It makes them think of where their own leaders might be aware that that's where they could do better.”

The tutors raised the issue of the importance of attitudes of senior leaders back in school. Tutor B said:

“The programme has less impact if the school SLT do not take ownership, share the vision and model the behaviour. Sometimes schools do not have clearly defined job descriptions and middle leaders do not feel that they are part of the distributed leadership. Some schools have not engaged with national standards for subject leaders, which would be a good starting point.”

Clearly in school B the ownership and shared vision are in place as far as the leadership coach and head were concerned. The leadership coach talked about the importance of giving people independence and fully handing over responsibility, while making it clear that they are still there to advise if necessary. In turn, the leaders were able to build capacity within the school by giving more responsibility to members of their teams. He felt that he himself had benefited also by improving his own listening skills.

The leadership coach and the head felt that all participants had learnt skills in dealing with people and that they had realised the need to be assertive. The head said:

“... they would say they do have more confidence ... a lot of middle leaders ... if it gets difficult they'll leave it.”

He was referring to dealing with opposition from team members or other members of staff. The coach agreed that this particular aspect of the course is extremely valuable, as it is not often this issue is tackled in professional development.

There was a more cautious response from the head of school A; he felt that the progress in team leader skills was more noticeable in some participants than in others. Again, he cited the involvement of some in leading professional development training. He felt that they had more confidence, and that they would not have taken this on if they had not had input from some training such as LftM.

He thought that about half of the participants from his school had made great progress as far as managing other people was concerned, but that all had made some progress:

“There is a greater understanding of roles involved in leadership and more preparedness to take it on. There is a better awareness of what should be going on, eg schemes of work and book scrutiny. There are examples with all of them, with varying success, where they have taken a more proactive role with staff.”

He felt that they would not have done this previously.

Most participants from school A have taken on new roles since being on LftM. The head was not sure whether this is coincidental, or whether the programme was the ‘kick-start’ needed:

“It's given them the confidence to move on, half of them are now on the senior leadership team.”

The head thought that this was a more accelerated progress than might have happened without LftM. One colleague had now been promoted outside of the school.

Have participants learned to build team capacity and manage staff and resources more efficiently and effectively?

The issue of management of staff has already been discussed as it overlaps with all of the other headings. Only three questions in the questionnaire could be said specifically to relate to the management of resources and responses to these are mixed.

As far as devolving responsibilities and delegating tasks was concerned (human resource management), the respondents all agreed that they felt more able to do this. The response regarding the management of learning resources was less positive; five out of nine agreed that they are more confident in this area while four did not agree or disagree and one person disagreed. The least positive responses were those that related to the awareness of the advantages of using Information and Communications Technology (ICT) to assist in achieving the school's objectives. Less than half (four out of nine) agreed that they are now more aware, a third (three out of nine) did not agree or disagree, and two disagreed. It would appear that the programme had, for these participants, not been so successful in its aim of building team capacity through the efficient use of staff and resources.

The tutors were unsure as to whether this was an aim of the programme. This would support the view that the programme has limited success in this area, despite the fact that it is stated as an aim. Tutors felt that if it was to do with managing performance, then it could be said to succeed. They claimed that the programme does not look at the management of resources on a day-to-day basis and that it is more to do with the improvement of relationships "so that you have a better team to lead". However, they felt that it does model the effective use of ICT and engages people more with ICT. This view was not supported by the responses from questionnaires above as over half of the middle leaders did not agree that they were more aware of the advantages of using ICT. This could be explained either by the fact that the middle leaders were already fully engaged with ICT, or by the fact that problems had been experienced with this aspect of the programme's 'blended learning' (Simkins et al 2005).

The head of school B was also unsure whether any development was evident in this area, feeling that these sort of management skills were already in place. In fact, one middle leader's work had already been put forward by the head himself as good practice to share across the school, prior to the LftM training. The coach from school B also doubted the success of this particular aim of the programme, with the possible exception of the fact that they may now be more assertive about asking for the resources. The head felt that there was no evidence to support the view that ICT was used any better as a result of the programme; this also bears out the results from questionnaires. This may suggest that this is an aim in which the programme had not had significant impact in these two schools.

This head shared the view of the tutors that the opportunity for a participant to take on the role of coach was excellent professional development. The head appeared to be fully supportive of a distributed leadership model – "I'm not into hierarchies". This bears out the claim of tutors that for the LftM programme aims to succeed, the vision and ownership must be shared by the head and SLT back in school. This head was very positive about his intention to continue to enrol middle leaders onto the programme. He felt that there was a need to focus more on pastoral leadership, claiming that pastoral teams might be more difficult to manage than subject teams. He has identified pastoral leadership development as an area that has perhaps been previously neglected.

All colleagues at school A were in roles where they needed to manage both staff and resources. As far as management of resources is concerned, the head was unsure as to how much experience staff had had previously, and how much the programme focused on this aspect. Clearly, from the comments of tutors above, this was not a major focus.

Do participants feel that they have developed in other ways through taking part in the programme?

Some of the questions related to aspects of personal development that were not explicit in the stated aims of the programme, but may be implicit in them. Questions 1, 2 and 3 related to the DfES 'standards for subject leaders'. Participants seemed to have made a number of personal and professional development gains as a result of taking part in LftM. All claimed that they now had a better understanding of their own strengths. Most felt more able to take responsibility for their own professional development and that they were more confident people (eight out of nine). Most felt better able to achieve challenging professional goals and that they responded better to changing situations (seven out of nine). Two thirds (six out of nine) could take feedback from others in order to make personal development and could push themselves to pursue excellence. Five out of nine claimed that they could prioritise and manage their time better. This would indicate that the programme makes a significant contribution to these middle leaders' professional development and may even have provided some benefits that go beyond the stated aims of the programme, such as the increased personal self-confidence (as opposed to confidence in their ability to fulfil their role) and time management skills.

The head of school B was quick to comment on the increased confidence exhibited by participants. He felt that this was equally apparent with the new cohort who were part way through the programme, and that there had been 'immediate evidence' of this.

The coach from school B added that the way in which participants are approached to enrol on the programme is important. They observed more enthusiasm when the middle leader chose to enrol rather than being 'selected' by the SLT. They experienced some difficulties at first when it was done in this way, in that participants were unsure about why they had been chosen, possibly seeing it as a negative reflection on their abilities. They subsequently appeared somewhat negative towards the training. This bears out findings from the Sheffield Hallam evaluation (Simkins et al 2005).

The head of school A thought that being 'selected' to go on the programme in itself was a boost to confidence; this contrasts with the views of the assistant head of school B, who felt that participants get more out of the course if they 'self-select'. The head of school A also pointed out the added benefits of working with colleagues from other schools, being able to exchange ideas and find out what is going on elsewhere. It was also valuable that the training was 'cross-phase' in that primary and secondary colleagues worked together, which is comparatively rare.

The leadership coach said that he had enjoyed taking part, but that he had asked another senior colleague to take on the role for cohort 5 in order for her to develop professionally through the involvement. They worked together through the early stages and as a team were able to resolve some initial problems with staff that had not initially responded so well to the programme. Both heads and the assistant head from school B were very positive about continuing to enrol leaders on the programme.

Conclusions and recommendations for further study

Conclusions

Leading innovation and change

From the findings it would certainly appear that most of the middle leaders in these two schools felt they had improved or developed skills that would help with this aspect of their work. Both the tutors on the programme as well as the heads and coaches from the two schools were in agreement. Senior leaders were able to give specific examples of successful innovations within school following the involvement with LftM, for example, the setting up of an out-of-hours club in school B, and the contributions made by participants to whole-school professional development on training days.

A note of caution voiced by both heads was the rather 'self-fulfilling' nature of these developments; it is not easy to prove a direct link. Most of the colleagues were described as 'strong' leaders who may have undertaken this work without having been involved in LftM.

Knowledge and understanding of the middle leader's role in leading learning and teaching

The perception of participants is that they have made progress in this area although findings from questionnaires indicate that this may be to a lesser extent than in leading innovation. Some of the leaders were described by heads as having already been effective heads of department. Some leaders had roles other than subject leader and this could also account for slightly less positive responses when asked specifically about learning and teaching.

Competency as team leaders

It would seem that it is in this area that the strongest gains have been made. Responses to questions relating to team leadership were extremely positive and this was supported by the views of heads, tutors and coaches. This is also borne out by the national evaluation that outlines team leader skills (for example, taking account of the views of others and using team approaches and delegation) among the strongest outcomes of the programme (Simkins et al 2005). Coaching skills were cited as a particular benefit by participants, coaches and headteachers as well as the tutors, both in this study and the national evaluation (Simkins et al 2005).

Managing resources efficiently and effectively

It is noteworthy that the wording of this aim has undergone a slight change since the beginning of this study. The original aim refers to the management of resources. An updated version now states 'people and resources'. There was evidence to suggest that the improved management of human resources was an outcome of the programme in these two schools but not to suggest any improved ability in the management of physical resources.

The LftM tutors felt that the use of ICT is modelled in the way that LftM is delivered and that one outcome of the programme should therefore be a greater engagement with ICT. This did not seem to be the case in these two schools. Participants' responses were inconclusive and headteachers doubtful whether there had been any major change in

attitudes to using ICT. Perhaps it can be assumed that leaders were already making extensive use of ICT in their work, and the programme was not therefore necessarily a contributor to this. Also, perhaps the experience of a number of technical problems with online materials, especially in cohort 1 (Simkins et al 2005) could account for relatively negative outcomes here.

What is the impact of LftM on the middle leaders in these two secondary schools?

There is little doubt that the impact on participants of the LftM programme was mainly positive and most claimed to have made significant gains in terms of their professional development where leadership is concerned.

In responding to questionnaires, two or three participants expressed more criticisms of the programme than the others. Findings from the Sheffield Hallam evaluation (Simkins et al 2005) indicate that more negatively inclined respondents tend to be the more (or very) experienced participants. This was not the case here, as all three have been in leadership roles for between two and five years.

A number of the individuals concerned had progressed to promotion either to other schools or within their own schools. Those respondents who had identified negative aspects and who have moved to promoted roles provided the following comments about their new roles:

“... understand the need to delegate and professionally develop others to a greater degree now.”

“I feel more able to give ideas/take advice and delegate. However, I still have quite an insular outlook on overcoming issues. Perhaps this is because I have only been a leader in departments where others have extra responsibility.”

What is the contribution to leadership development in the two schools?

In these two schools, taking part in LftM has had a number of benefits, for example, middle leaders were able to delegate responsibility in an effective way to team members and have developed an awareness and interest in leadership training of staff.

The development that these one or two cohorts of leaders have undergone has enabled both schools to move a step nearer to a distributed leadership model. It has helped to build capacity through the development of high quality team leader and coaching skills. In school B aspects of the programme have been adapted for ‘in-house’ whole-school professional development. The leadership coach cites many benefits, including:

“... [it] raises esteem of participants, the course adds to the coaching culture in school ... enabling leaders to be delegated whole-school responsibilities....”

Two subject leaders and one pastoral leader from school A are now assistant headteachers within the school. Two have taken over responsibility for ‘collaboratives’ of subjects, one is responsible for vocational and 14–19 developments. Eight of the nine middle leaders in both schools have been promoted or taken on enhanced or whole-school roles.

Recommendations for further study

The comparative lack of success attributed to the ICT elements of the programme in these two schools could merit further exploration. Interviews with the middle leaders

may provide more answers on this issue and could also clarify some others. For instance it would be interesting to explore more fully, in the cases of the three participants who expressed more negative responses, the reasons behind this.

It would also be interesting to continue to survey the same two schools, or to conduct a longitudinal study in another school over several years in order to assess the long-term impact of the training programme. In order to determine whether the programme has impacted on school improvement it would be necessary to measure the effects in the classroom. A systematic approach to lesson observation and the use of pupil attainment data would contribute towards this.

Finally, the relatively small scope of this study did not permit the seeking of views of one group of stakeholders: those colleagues being led by the middle leader participants. Further study based on interviews with these people could provide important evidence as to the impact of the programme on the leadership skills of their team leaders.

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