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# **Negotiating the next step: The part that experience plays with middle leaders' development as they move into their new role.**

**Paul Irvine and Mark Brundrett**

## **Abstract**

Leading is not the same as teaching, and middle leaders in schools require different capabilities to those of classroom teachers. This article explores the ways in which these capabilities are acquired by middle leaders in the independent sector during the early stages of their appointment as they progress through a transitional period. It draws on two separate strands of research - the part that experience plays in informing the emergent leader's development and the acquisition of capabilities over time - from which a theoretical perspective is used in analysing data derived from a series of interviews with 20 middle leaders as part of a case study in an independent school in the North West of England. The findings from the study with these two strands to demonstrate the central role that experience plays in the leader's capability set and how, during the early period of appointment to a leadership position, the reflection on experience can significantly ease the transitional period. It is recommended that aspiring middle leaders should actively seek out experience, and that senior leaders should proactively make experiential opportunities available. It is also recommended that such action can be applied to other step changes in the teacher leader's career.

**Key terms** Experience, Independent sector, leadership development, middle leader, skills acquisition.

## **Introduction**

This article builds on findings first published in *Management in Education* which identified the challenges faced by middle leaders on their appointment, together with specific strategies that can support them (Irvine and Brundrett, 2016). The quality of leadership within schools is second only to that of classroom teaching regarding the influence that it has on pupils' learning (Leithwood and Riehl, 2003). Whilst research findings from a range of school contexts across different countries draw similar conclusions, in showing that schools that improve the quality of learning that takes place are led by teacher leaders who make a significant and measurable contribution to the effectiveness of their staff (Busher et al., 2000; OECD, 2008), there are surprisingly few empirical studies into school leadership in the independent sector in the UK (Davies and Davies, 2014; Harvey, 2007; 2015) - a sector which educates over 522,000 children in approximately 1300 schools (ISC 2017).

There remains a long-held view in many countries that school leaders and senior staff need only be experienced teachers for them to take on leadership roles. However, there is a growing recognition that leadership is quite a different role from that of classroom teaching, and as such requires different preparation (Bush, 2011; 2008; OECD, 2008). Whilst the field of senior leadership is relatively well served through research, the area of middle leadership is poorly served by empirical study (Crowther et al., 2009; Spillane et al., 1999; Thorpe and Bennett-Powell, 2014). Although this issue is subject to contestation, it is argued here that there is a moral imperative to prepare teachers for leadership roles, because to expect individuals to take on such roles without any preparation is reckless, and unfair to those who may accede to key positions in schools (Bush, 2009), a view supported by literature from the commercial sector which emphasises that a laissez-faire attitude towards leadership is irresponsible (Brundrett and Rhodes, 2011). Middle leaders in schools need both leadership and management capabilities: this article draws on well-established research, combining it with a case study involving interviews with 20 middle leaders in a secondary, single sex (boys) independent school, drawing conclusions which demonstrate that experience plays a key role in the capabilities set required for leading. The goal of this paper is to explain the differing sources from which useful leadership experience can be gained, and how such experience can be harnessed to inform the mental maps that enable skilled leaders to work intuitively.

## **Leadership and management**

In schools in England the term 'middle leader' refers to those who hold middle level posts in the hierarchy of the school: it includes heads of academic departments, pastoral heads, key stage coordinators, Special Educational Needs Coordinators and ICT coordinators, a disparate group having a wide range of responsibilities that are crucial to the effective running of the school (Bush, 2003; Busher et al., 2007; OECD, 2008). The individuals concerned are frequently a leader in one context, but a follower in another (Busher et al., 2000) and so inhabit more than one community in the school (Wenger, 1998). They have the further challenge of being accountable to a range of stakeholders, including senior leaders, team members, parents and pupils (Bennett et al., 2007; Brundrett and Rhodes, 2011; Day, 2007). Whilst they are the 'synapses within the firm's brain' (King et al., 2001: 95) and are in a position to be very influential in the development of the school (Busher et al., 2000), they also find themselves in the uncomfortable position of being squeezed between the conflicting requirements of the senior leadership team and their departmental colleagues (Branson et al., 2016; Bush, 2003; Scott et al., 2008). Their days are often long and stressful (Gunter, 2011), and for many their most difficult task is managing other people (Busher et al., 2000; Schon, 1991). Because of these layers of complexity, simplistic definitions of middle leadership in schools should be avoided (Briggs and Coleman, 2007; Rittel and Webber, 1973; Turner, 2000).

Leadership is a contested concept, one which neither scholars nor practitioners have been able to define with precision (Northouse, 2016; Rost, 1991), there is general agreement that leadership is distinct from management, although it is accepted that the boundary between them is blurred; leadership is concerned with the general process of influence, whilst management focuses on activities such as planning, organising and staffing (Northouse, 2016). Sound management underpins successful leadership because it is the stability of

organisational structures and routines that enables leaders to build their leadership tasks (Crowther, 2009; Spillane et al., 1999). Research undertaken by Simonet and Tett (2012) indicated a considerable overlap between leadership and management. Whilst leaders need creativity, scope, vision, purpose and tolerance of ambiguity, managers must organise operational implementation through short term planning, orderliness and rule orientation. Leaders and managers both need to demonstrate initiative, set goals, be trustworthy, formulate timelines and make decisions, and this overlap is described as 'co-dimensionality' (Simonet and Tett, 2012: 206). Leadership and management are essential functions, and it is a distinguishing feature of middle leaders in schools that they must be able to fulfil both roles because not only do they need to maintain their departments through the management of systems and administration, but they must also lead change and develop people (Crowther et al., 2009; Spillane et al., 1999). Whilst all teachers are managers to the extent that they are responsible for the management of pupils and resources, only some have the responsibility for other adults, and taking on this responsibility is a key factor in any definition of school leadership (Earley and Weindling, 2004).

### **Leadership capabilities**

To be able to lead, the leader requires a range of knowledge, skills and personal abilities that are appropriate to the tasks that they may face, and these have been identified and categorised in differing ways over time. Whilst it is accepted that the reduction and fragmentation of leadership into a list of competencies risks detracting from a value laden and complex task (Carrol et al., 2008), we have chosen to use the term 'capabilities' as the generic descriptor for those abilities that are needed to lead other people.

Through interrogating pertinent literature, we have noted in particular that in three different pieces of published research (Doh, 2003; Leithwood et al., 2003; Church, 2014) these authors, although using different terminology, each described the same phenomenon. This phenomenon considers the overall capabilities required by leaders and groups them into three categories.

First there are the character traits or dispositions each of us possesses. This is not the same as the 'great man' and 'trait' theories that existed in the early days of leadership theory but, rather, is the acceptance that we all, by virtue of our genes and early upbringing, have a set of personality characteristics that are largely fixed. Second, there are skills, by which each of the present authors means those capabilities that can be readily taught, such as administration or finance. These skills are essential for the leader on a day-to-day basis and can be readily learned through courses, distance learning and mentoring. The third category of capability required by leaders is that of perspective, the ability to draw on previous experience to attempt to predict future events, the quality of the prediction being influenced by the quantity and quality of prior experience, together with the level of reflection, evaluation and integration of those experiences.

During the time when Jay Conger was a professor at the London Business School, he was interviewed and cited three categories of capability to be found in anyone who leads: he

defined these as dispositions, skills, and perspectives (Doh, 2003). Dispositions are those parts of our personality that we bring to the role of leader, and include factors such as temperament, mood and outlook, and are the product of the leader's life, family and, perhaps, genes. Skills are those things that we must know in order to lead, and include both knowledge and the leader's ability to use that knowledge. Crucially, Conger argued that such skills can be taught. Perspectives, he contended, are built over time through self-reflection and experience, and may include specific capabilities such as communication or presentation skills, together with broader aspects such as strategic thinking. These, he suggested, can be developed within the leader through a process of coaching (Doh, 2003).

The theme of differing areas of capability is reflected in the writings of Leithwood et al. (2003) who revisited the results of a major piece of research undertaken by Leithwood and Jantzi in which the original sample was 1253 teachers in 115 schools in the Canadian province of Ontario (Leithwood and Jantzi, 1997). They began by categorising traits, those personality attributes that cannot be changed, and which they defined as the leader's values, their personality, their orientation towards people and their moods. They entitled the next category capacities, which they regarded as those capabilities we can learn, and which include knowledge, both procedural (how to) and declarative (knowing about); relationship with both colleagues and pupils; problem solving; and communication. The third category that emerged from these researchers' findings is that of practices, defined as the capabilities that leaders develop through experience such as taking the initiative; supporting the work of other staff; confronting issues; and making hard decisions. The view that Leithwood et al. (2003) took is that some of the capabilities identified through their research were much easier to develop than others, and they claimed that there is a higher probability of being able to develop capacities and practices than traits.

More recently, this theme of a continuum that runs between leadership skills that can be learned and those traits that are embedded within us, has been analysed by Church (2014) whose *Leadership Potential Blueprint*, brings together some of the work in his 150 published articles and book chapters located in the American commercial sector. Church also categorises capacities into three areas. First, he identifies those core traits or attributes of an individual that are the characteristics which are either genetically determined and/or shaped early in life. They include two central factors: personality, by which he meant traits, preferences and orientations; and cognitive capabilities, defined as raw intelligence, strategic thinking and working with complexity. Church contended that although it may not be possible to make a significant change to these core traits, the leader can be helped to make the best use of the abilities that they have in this area through coaching and self-awareness. Church's second category is that of functional knowledge and technical skills which can generally be developed through methods such as self-directed learning, training courses, job shadowing and mentoring. His third category concerns experiential learning, which can be enhanced through engaging the leader in activities and interventions that focus directly on their development. As part of a development programme, Church recommended the inclusion of experiences that are relevant to both current and future roles. This can involve planning for

new challenges within the leader's current role such as job redesign or special assignment, or by identifying future opportunities and progression.

These three researchers (Doh, 2003; Leithwood et al., 2003; Church 2014), each of whom comes from a very different background (British business, Canadian education and American commerce respectively), have categorised the capabilities required for leadership into three similar areas. Although there are subtle differences in the nomenclature of the categories, each of these researchers has identified three similar areas of capabilities that leaders must have: deeply engrained personality traits which may be genetic in origin; the skills needed to undertake their task; and experience on which they can draw to inform the decisions they need to take.

### **The acquisition of capabilities**

The role of the middle leader in a school is different to that of the classroom teacher (Bush, 2008; Bush, 2011; OECD, 2008) and so, if the newly appointed head of department has no prior experience of leading, then a new set of capabilities needs to be learned. The seminal work of Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1980) identified five levels of skills (capability) acquisition which they defined as novice, competent, proficient, expert and master; this model has subsequently been adopted by many educators (Carraccio et al, 2008). During the early stages of learning a new capability, the novice will rely on an analytical and theoretical method of reasoning. As they become more experienced and confident, they will draw on previously experienced 'scripts' to use a non-analytical or pattern-making process of reasoning (Carraccio et al, 2008). Through experience of different situations, the learner adds to their repertoire of scripts, enabling them to expand ever more complex patterns or mental maps, allowing them to make swift, intuitive decisions (Sergiovanni, 1985; West-Burnham and Koren, 2014). As an example of this transition from analytical to non-analytical or intuitive skills, Orr (1996) described a photocopier organisation where the training manuals and trouble-shooting guides told a very different, rationally ordered story to those of the repair technicians. Orr found that the technicians supplemented the explicit instructions with a rich, shared library of tacit stories which they used to diagnose and solve problems: this demonstrated that although formal and explicit instructions may be readily accessible, they serve as insufficient roadmaps to practice, and so learners need to undertake, share and reflect on experience to understand tasks as they unfurl (Orr, 1996). Teacher leaders thus learn to draw on a broad, deep, and accumulated repertoire of experience, none of which will emerge from teaching alone (OECD, 2008; Raelin, 2007). It is argued that leadership can probably only really be learned through the cut-and-thrust experience of success and failure in real-life scenarios (Leithwood et al., 2008; Marshall, 2012; Yukl, 2010), augmented with constructive self-reflection (Parsloe and Leedham, 2009). There is a paradox here in that whilst there is much to be gained from learning from experience, there is a challenge in planning for it; much learning occurs in retrospect (Mumford, 1980). Because those appointed to middle leader positions will be leading peers, possibly for the first time, and because this calls for different capabilities to those of the classroom teacher, the newly-appointed middle leader will most likely be in the novice category of capabilities as defined by Dreyfus and Dreyfus. First time leaders are not only in a position in which they have less experience to

inform their mental maps, but they may also have less experience in self-reflection, which can inhibit their ability to make the best use of experience as it is acquired. This reinforces the need for adaptation of development programmes as the leader's career evolves (Van Velsor et al., 2004), an observation recognised within the commercial sector where it has been identified that first-line, middle and senior leaders have different development requirements (Leskiw and Singh, 2007).

## **Method**

In the process of gathering data for a case study into the needs of newly appointed middle leaders, we interviewed 20 participants from one selective independent school for boys in the North West of England. The sample was tightly defined according to their relevance to the study (Silverman, 2001) in order to produce deep, rich data; in doing so the study was aligned with the contention that an understanding of the general is enhanced by the study of the atypical (Burns, 2000). Of the participants, 14 were middle leaders who were in the first 24 months of their appointment and six were longer standing middle leaders (up to 26 years), this smaller group of more experienced participants bringing a broader context to the study. The semi-structured interviews were built around a framework which was devised following a thorough review of the pertinent literature and which sought to affirm the contentions that middle leadership in school is important, that it requires different capabilities to the role of classroom teacher, and that a leadership development programme having its focus on those capabilities would be advantageous to both the middle leader and to the learners in the school. Each participant was interviewed once, with the coding of the transcripts commencing shortly after the first five interviews were completed; through a process of constant comparative coding the themes that emerged informed the questions asked during subsequent interviews (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000; Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Saldaña, 2013). We adopted the stance of the 'Critical Realist' in that we used the tools of the social scientist to record the case in an accurate and auditable manner, whilst looking through the lens of the philosopher to create an interpretation which leads to understanding (Denscombe, 2010; Denzin and Lincoln, 2008; Sayer 2000). Although we carried out data analysis in a number of areas related to middle leadership development, this paper focuses on those codes which related first to the theory concerning traits, skills and experience (Doh, 2003; Leithwood et al., 2003; Church, 2014), and second to the theory of acquisition of capabilities (Carraccio et al., 2008; Dreyfus and Dreyfus, 1980; Sergiovanni, 1985; West Burnham and Koren, 2014).

## **Findings**

### *Traits*

In this section, unless stated otherwise, each of the participants has less than 24 months' experience in the middle leadership role they are holding on the day of interview. To begin, the researchers draw on examples of data provided through the interviews to support the contention that leadership capabilities can be grouped into traits, skills and experience as discussed by Church (2014), Doh (2003) and Leithwood et al. (2003).

The area of personality traits was mentioned by a number of participants:

*...because we all have different personalities, we all look at things differently.*  
(Participant 1)

Embedded within this statement is the suggestion that the differing viewpoints people may hold are fixed, and that we each look at things differently because of who we are. A more specific example of how this can affect behaviour was presented by one respondent:

*I don't like to upset people. And sometimes that can lead me to making decisions, and on reflection, looking back, I should have been a bit more forthright there perhaps. And so I've got better at that, but I still occasionally walk away from a meeting and think 'That didn't turn out like I wanted it to turn out' I could see an argument and I tried to avoid it.* (Participant 9)

Having expressed their deeply engrained trait of not wanting to upset people, the participant goes on to explain that, even though they recognise this personality trait, proactively reflect on it, and make attempts to overcome it, they find that it is difficult to change; this reflects the findings of Leithwood et al. (2003).

Having a sound knowledge and understanding of their own traits was seen to be advantageous by another participant who explained how they used such self-knowledge to their advantage:

*Your own personality is probably the most important thing because how people look at you is important within any relationship within a group... you've got to be true to whoever you are for people to understand.* (Participant 3)

These data are representative of a body of evidence drawn from the study which shows that the leader's repertoire includes traits which are largely fixed (Church, 2014; Doh, 2003; Leithwood et al., 2003).

### *Skills*

Skills are those capabilities that can be readily learned, enabling middle leaders to construct an organisational platform on which they could build their leadership. One participant with nine months' experience in his first Head of Department role commented:

*The first thing that I did when I had the timetables was to put them all next to each other, and found a time when the three of us were all free at the same time.*  
(Participant 12)

This is a typical example of a management skill that the middle leader had, and which they needed in order to lead, in line made with the assertions made by Crowther et al. (2009) and Spillane et al. (1999). For this respondent, it was important that they meet with the other members of their department on a regular basis to communicate information and ideas; however, to do this they first had to use their organisational skills to find a time when their colleagues were all available. Because this capability involves the manipulation of resources rather than interaction with people, it falls within the remit of management area of



operational implementation, short term planning, orderliness and rule orientation, but does not fit within the leadership sphere of creativity, scope, vision, purpose and tolerance of ambiguity as described by Simonet and Tett (2012). This is not to say that newly-appointed middle leaders were without capabilities of leadership. The same participant stated:

*...I've got, in my own mind, longer term plans and a vision for the department.*  
(Participant 12)

*...and an approachability, even if you're incredibly tired and frustrated, the idea of constantly being approachable to your department.* (Participant 12)

Several of the participants saw themselves primarily as managers rather than leaders, listing the skills that they felt they needed in order to perform their roles. It is notable that participants with less experience tended to emphasise or prioritise those capabilities that sit within the realm of management over those that would be considered leadership, thus confirming the contention that leadership requires an underpinning of management skills (Crowther et al., 2009; Spillane et al., 1999). These findings align with the established literature, supporting the contention that a leader's capabilities include both fixed traits and skills that can be learned and, moreover, that these skills tend to fall within the area of management as defined by Northouse (2016) and Simonet and Tett (2012).

### *Experience*

What did the data reveal about perspectives that have been built up from experience acquired over time? Here, because the participants made frequent references to their experiences, and explained how they drew on them to inform their leadership decision making, the findings not only supported the concept that experience informs the development of more complex mind maps which enable leaders to work intuitively, but also shone a new light on the different areas from which experience can be gained. During the course of the data being interrogated it became apparent that experience was acquired through five different routes, four of which were drawn from across all interviewees, and the fifth, that of learning on the job, from more experienced participants.

The first source of experience, and one that was frequently cited, referred to experience that participants had in schools, but which was not directly related to the leadership role they now held:

*I've been teaching a long time, I mean I've been teaching twelve, thirteen years across four different schools, but I think during that time I've gained a lot of experience of all sorts of things. I've run a lot of trips, lots of foreign travel, I've run elections.*  
(Participant 19)

*If you take a Y7 cricket team, you're dealing with boys, dealing with parents, dealing with issues... if you run a play, you're dealing with boys after school, dealing with parents. Get on a school trip, go on the battlefields tour, you are dealing with parents (who ask) 'when will they be back?' (or say) 'He's got a nut allergy'. You've got to get involved in peoples' lives, and I think that's important.* (Participant 1)

It was clear that for many of those appointed to middle leadership positions their previous roles, ones which were often unrelated to their current position in the school, gave them a reservoir of experience on which they could draw. It was also interesting to see the way in which participants could adapt their understanding and usefulness of experience in one context to that of another.

The second source of experience came from roles that participants had held previously, and which were in a context similar to the one they now found themselves leading:

*There were things I was doing (at my previous school) like shadowing the budget, doing options evenings, things like that, and taking responsibility for them rather than just being a kind of secondary figure, and running departmental trips, writing scheme of work for just one of the year groups and then evaluating it at the end of the year. And I think those things have stood me in good stead for starting here. (Participant 12)*

In this representative instance it can be clearly seen that the participant has explained how they drew on related experience where they had undertaken tasks that were clearly aligned with the leadership environment in which they now found themselves.

A third source of experience that participants found themselves able to call on was that gained outside the school context altogether. It is of particular interest that some of the participants spoke of leadership responsibilities they had held, or continued to hold, in roles that were beyond the school environment:

*Yes, Life experience. I mean, I didn't start teaching until I was 35. So I had a life before teaching, and all that experience. I've had to speak in front of people, I've had to take sessions, I've had to deal with people, disappoint people, appraise people, and all that has helped enormously. (Participant 1)*

*I suppose outside school, it comes from being a youth worker, it comes from working with children, in my previous life before I was a teacher, so life experience as well informs, really, how I go about my day to day job. (Participant 18)*

*...and then I was lucky enough to find a job in Australia, and America, as an assistant coach, in a different culture, teaching the same skill but to different cultures. And from these roles, I started to develop leadership skills, learning about personalities, character skills, motivation, how to work with people and around people in order to get a particular job done. (Participant 5)*

This points to middle leaders drawing on experiences they have acquired and continue to acquire, from a range of contexts, some of which are gained within the confines of the school, some from previous schools, and some from situations beyond the school gates, supporting the contention that teacher leaders learn to draw on a breadth of accumulated experience that goes beyond the bounds of teaching (OECD, 2008; Raelin, 2007). During the process of coding, a fourth repository of experience appeared, that of the third person or critical friend, someone with greater experience than the newly-appointed middle leader themselves, and some of the participants spoke of how they had looked to others for advice:

*I'm coming into this position from quite an inexperienced starting point, so I've had to tap into other people, listen and take advice, use senior staff. (Participant 2)*

The interview transcripts revealed that this form of experience, acquired through conversations with others, was very common amongst those interviewed, particularly those in the early stages of their middle leadership role. While the data shows that it was mostly good leadership practice that was observed in their peers, there were also instances of participants spotting poor practice which they would wish to avoid:

*I've seen how heads of departments, pastoral leaders operate, and I've plucked my approach from lots of different leaders that I've liked or respected and (also) decided not to do things that I find get on my nerves, or things that I didn't think were well done or well managed, so it's come from many, many different areas of experience. (Participant 1)*

Many of the participants who spoke of approaching other middle leaders to tap into their experience explained that they did so because they were looking for advice. Some spoke of a different reason for seeking out a third party, that of reassurance:

*I like to ask lots of different opinions from people I respect, in areas that I feel they would be experienced in those environments. Some people might suggest that I should rely on my own experience, and have confidence in my own judgement, but I see it as I'm collecting more data and experience, and variables to a decision so that I can have a better informed decision... I would go to certain people at certain times (and ask) What would you do in this situation, and why would you do that? (Participant 5)*

Whether turning to others for advice or reassurance, little evidence emerged in the study as to how participants knew who could help them. What was apparent, was that all seemed to be able to work out for themselves who to ask:

*Obviously, when you start in a new school, it's knowing who to turn to and for what without feeling like you're asking a thousand questions every week, but I do think that there's enough people within this school who work in different areas who are very willing to help (Participant 20)*

One participant described how he would actively look for the person or people that could give him the advice he needed at a specific time, or over a particular issue:

*I usually found that I could confide in adults that are around twenty to thirty years older than me, and who have a wealth of experience in leadership and organisation and responsibility type roles. I sometimes found there were things I didn't know that I didn't know... and it turned out that generally the people who were quite matured from life in a similar role to the one I'm in now, provided a wealth of wisdom. (Participant 5)*

The fifth area of experience identified was that of 'learning on the job', and this was articulated best by a participant who had been in a middle leadership position for 21 years and who was able to reflect on the lessons learned along the way:

*I think that you've got to be very careful when dealing with people. It's the people skills, perhaps, that are the most difficult part of the job, and you've got to know when to use the sword, or when just to be gentle... if you are trying to lay down the law, right from the very beginning, I think you could alienate everyone in the department and never retrieve the situation. And I can think of one or two heads of department who have. (Participant 15)*

It appears from this case study in the independent sector that middle leaders, consciously or otherwise, draw their experience from a range of sources. It is one thing gaining experience; it is another to learn from that experience, and it was clear from the interviews that the participants welcomed the opportunity to reflect on actions taken to consolidate and integrate lessons learned:

*At times, I've really had to make a judgement call, and I've felt 'Have I got this right?'* (Participant 2)

*But you must be able to reflect, or think about what you do, if you are going to get the best out of yourself. (Participant 3)*

This ability to reflect on experiences was seen by one participant to be a key component in their capacity for making progress:

*I think it depends on how the individual perceives their experience. Because on the one hand, if somebody feels that they have been around the block a couple of times, and means that they feel they know what to do, then they will deal with it. But that's about their self-perception of their experience. So I don't necessarily think it's down to length of service, or even number of years of experience, I think it's down to how they perceive it, and then how they perceive it. (Participant 6)*

These responses demonstrate how the participants gained their experience from a range of sources, some of which lie within, and some without, the school context. It can also be seen how they use self-reflection on those experiences, as advocated by Parsloe and Leedham (2009), to inform and refine their understanding of middle leadership.

### *Novice to master: the early stages*

We now turn our attention to acquisition of capabilities, and look to the data to demonstrate the theory of Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1980) and others who argued that in the learning of a new capability the learner progresses from novice to master, together with the contention that in doing so we construct mind maps that enable us to move from working analytically to intuitively (Sergiovanni, 1985; West Burnham and Koren, 2014). As an example of how little understanding there can be of the role of middle leader prior to appointment, one respondent stated:

*But I think until you're in the role, you don't really know what it might involve. (Participant 18)*

It became clear through the interrogation of the data that newly-appointed middle leaders found the early days of their leadership role particularly challenging:

*One of the steepest learning curves I have gone through.* (Participant 5)

*Sink or swim.* (Participant 2)

Each of these statements, both made by inexperienced leaders, echoes a sense of helplessness that would resonate with the Dreyfus and Dreyfus category of novice. Whilst both participants were teachers of some years' standing, because leadership is different to teaching (Bush, 2008; 2011; OECD, 2008), they have yet to create the 'scripts' described by Carracio et al. (2008), relying instead on analytical reasoning to inform them.

### *Novice to master: the middle stages*

A theme that appeared consistently through the interviews was that of the challenge to the middle leader of leading team members as identified by Busher et al. (2000) and Schon (1991), and it was possible to track the growing confidence that interviewees had in this area as they spent more time in post. One participant who was nine months into their role said:

*I underestimated the staff factor. The management of the staff is the biggest part of the job, it's not the boys, it's dealing with the staff, and making your job far more complicated. I wish I'd known more about that. ...that's what I've learnt and probably underestimated before coming into the job.* (Participant 2)

Two participants with more time served in the middle leadership role reflected on the progress they had made:

*I have more experience, and a wealth of knowledge that I didn't have when I originally started the job. And that was starting to happen in the last few months. I could feel that I was getting a better grasp of the system, of how things worked, how people work politically and socially, and what the job actually entailed.* (Participant 5)

*...managing people I think was the hardest bit. I think I have got slightly better at it over time.* (Participant 4)

These statements point to middle leaders gaining experience on the job, learning how to manage and lead colleagues through the cut-and-thrust of success and failure of real life scenarios, in line with the findings of Leithwood et al. (2008); Marshall (2012) and Yukl (2010).

### *Novice to master: Later stages*

Two very experienced Head of Departments with 9 and 26 years in post respectively spoke much more confidently about this aspect of their role:

*So I think you've got to find out about the individuals within your department, genuinely like people, play to their strengths, and if you can encourage them to do things, even if they're not happy, then encourage them, and see if you can actually get them to see the benefits, then that's great.* (Participant 6)

*I think you need to get to know (your departmental) colleagues. And I would establish 'emotional ground' between yourself and a new colleague so that they trust you, and know you, and that you know them. (Participant 15)*

This accumulated experience, from whatever source, informs the leader and gives them a well of knowledge from which they can draw: it was summed up by one experienced participant thus:

*You are coming into this role, where you draw your experience from, so you can say to people 'This is my experience' rather than 'This is my opinion'. (Participant 16)*

The data that has emerged from this study correlate with the assertions drawn from the literature. First, it is clear from the data that the middle leaders interviewed require both management and leadership capabilities as defined by Northouse (2016) and Simonet and Tett (2012). However there was a tendency for those more recently appointed to refer earlier to the skills of management than to the capabilities of leadership. Second, capabilities can be categorised into traits, skills and experience (Doh, 2003; Leithwood et al., 2003; Church 2014) and, further to this, the experience required for leadership can come from a range of sources. Third, the findings of the study support the contention that middle leaders do go through a series of stages from novice to master as they acquire those capabilities required of the leader, but which are different to those of the classroom teacher; and, in the process, they develop mental maps which enable intuitive decision making (Dreyfus and Dreyfus, 1980; Sergiovani, 1985; West Burnham and Koren, 2014). In what follows we use these findings to explain how the needs of newly-appointed middle leaders are different to those who have more experience in the role. We will then demonstrate how these findings can be used to focus specific leadership development learning opportunities on those in the early stages of their role, explaining why the delivery at this stage should be different to leadership development techniques used with more experienced leaders.

## **Discussion**

In this paper, we have brought together strands that are grounded in the literature and linked them to a case study undertaken within the independent school sector in England. We have referred to the contention that middle leadership in schools is not the same as classroom teaching, and that it therefore requires the acquisition of a new and different set of capabilities (Bush 2008; 2011; OECD, 2008), a standpoint that has been confirmed from data acquired from the interviews. We used definitions by Northouse (2016) and Simonet and Tett (2012) as a basis for differentiating between management and leadership, and which have also been supported by the study. The conclusions of Church (2014), Doh (2003) and Leithwood et al. (2003), each of whom wrote about successful leadership consisting of personality traits or dispositions that are deeply embedded, specific skills that can be learned, and experience that can be enhanced through self-reflection, have then been used in our analysis. The evidence presented by the study expands on this leadership capability by showing that not only is experience a key component of leadership, but also that middle leaders' experience comes from five sources:

1. That which has been gained through different roles within the same school;
2. That which is similar and which has been gained previously or concurrently in the same or other schools;
3. That which has been gained from outside the school context;
4. That which is gained through talking to peers; and
5. That which is learned over time 'on the job'.

Finally, we have recognised the work of Carraccio et al. (2008); Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1980), Sergiovanni (1985) and West Burnham & Koren (2014), who between them discuss capabilities acquisition and the development of mental maps.

Data from the interviews has confirmed that, particularly for newly-appointed participants, the capabilities required for middle leaders are different to those of the classroom teacher, and that some of these capabilities, at least, can be identified. Part of their role as middle leaders involves the coordination of resources (timetable allocation; budgets), skills which are encompassed in the territory of management, and it is of note that the more recently appointed referred to this more regularly during their interviews. Classroom teachers are (or should be) good at such organisation and, because we contend that such behaviours fall within the category of skills, these capabilities can be taught. Leadership requires interaction with other people, and it emerges from this study that this aspect of their role presents middle leaders with a far greater challenge than that of resource allocation. Whilst classroom teachers interact with children every day, the dynamic between teacher and pupil is markedly different to that between teacher and teacher, and a significant portion of the cohort made it clear that this was their biggest challenge on taking on the role, an outcome that was in line with Busher et al. (2000) and Schon (1991). Not infrequently, teachers with a sound track record in the classroom are appointed to middle leaders; however, as has been demonstrated, because of the differing capabilities required, success in the former is not necessarily an accurate indicator of ease of transition into the latter.

It has been demonstrated that perspective gained through experience is a key component of leadership, and that this is acquired over time. However, a newly-appointed leader may have little or no previous experience of leading peers on which to draw during this transitional period. The research of Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1980) and others indicated that, as experience is gained and the participant moves from novice to expert, mental maps are formed (West Burnham and Koren, 2014) and, in the process, a range of 'scripts' are constructed which enable the experienced practitioner to behave intuitively and therefore rapidly (Carraccio et al., 2008). However, if the newly-appointed middle leader has little prior experience of the capabilities required for leadership, or if they are unaware of the relevance of other experiences that they have, then they are more likely to have weak and poorly formed mental maps in this area, and so will act analytically rather than intuitively. Because traits tend to be firmly fixed in the individual, and the specific management skills required can be readily learned, we contend that when constructing a leadership development programme the area with the greatest potential for personal development is that of experience. It has been demonstrated that the sources of experience needed to build the mental maps are identifiable, and that newly-appointed middle leaders should be supported in the acquisition

of wider experiences and/or on the self-reflection skills required to identify and make use of the experiences they have already acquired.

We have shown that the experience middle leaders do possess is often in areas that are related to their current positions, whether through performing a wider school role or some prior departmental responsibility. It has also been shown how middle leaders draw on experiences outside the educational context in order to inform decisions made within their school leadership role. Newly-appointed middle leaders appear to have a knack of going to speak to other adults as and when required, sometimes for advice and at other times for reassurance. As the findings of the case study make clear, those newly appointed to middle leader positions tend to be at the 'novice' stage of acquisition of capabilities in the leadership arena, not yet having built up a personal reservoir of directly related experience. They may well possess indirectly related experience on which they can draw, yet may not be aware of its significance. Thus it is argued that the support needed for self-reflection through mentoring or coaching may help them to identify such sources.

## **Conclusion**

We have examined the situation of a cohort of middle leaders as they step across the threshold from the role of teacher to leader for the first time, and in so doing, enter a transitional period. The case study was set in an independent school, a context for leadership about which there is very little, if any, previously published work. Whilst the reader may discern aspects of the case that are different to their own, we observe that the challenges faced by the participants appear to resonate with previous research into the wider field of educational leadership. We have drawn on different strands of literature, combined with the findings of a case study, to demonstrate the importance of experience in a leader's repertoire as they build their mental maps over time. It is to be recognised by both middle leaders and more senior colleagues in schools that experience is a key component of successful leadership, and that both parties can take actions to develop middle leadership development better. Novice teachers should recognise that although classroom teaching may appear all-consuming, taking time to accumulate experience, whether within or outwith the school, can be a sound investment. For their part, the senior leaders in a school should create opportunities for novice teachers to undertake modest leadership tasks so that they are able to develop their fund of experience, ideally under the watchful eye of a mentor.

There are further steps in the school leader's career, each of which has a transitional period, and these may include the move from classroom teacher to head of department or from faculty to assistant head and from this to head-teacher. For each step, the traits that an individual has will remain largely static, and they will require new skills relevant to the role. As they progress through these stages, they will draw on an ever-increasing reservoir of experience and, because experience is central to the leader's success, the leadership development requirements of senior leaders will be different to those of middle leaders. It is therefore contended that the newly-appointed middle leader with little or no prior experience requires different and more focussed support than their more experienced colleagues. Because most of the empirical studies into school leadership examine senior



leadership, and research into middle leadership is scarce, we would argue that our understanding of leadership development needs to be more finely tuned than at present.

For school leadership preparation and development at all levels, this research points to candidates being advised to expose themselves to the widest range of leadership experiences they can. While many teachers will argue that they struggle to find the time or energy to take on responsibilities outside the school, this study shows that those that do so recognise the benefits to their in-school leadership roles. Senior leaders in schools can play a proactive role in this process, offering teachers leadership experiences commensurate with their potential; a further advantage being that such teachers should feel better prepared, and thus more confident about applying for leadership posts. Aspiring middle leaders should not underestimate the wealth of experience that surrounds them amongst their peers, and should seek out more experienced colleagues who can both advise and reassure. Wherever it comes from, school leaders at all levels should endeavour not only to be constantly adding to their reservoir of experience and thus the range of 'scripts' to which they can refer, but also to hone their self-reflection skills to help them develop well informed mental maps. Whilst leadership is context-specific, this study demonstrates that it does not preclude the cross-fertilization of experience from one context to another.

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