Perspectives on teacher leadership for evidence-informed improvement in England

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With a national policy emphasis in England on evidence-based teaching within a self-improving school system, teachers need to create and use knowledge to best effect. It is also imperative that they collaborate within and across schools to develop and deepen their practice. In this context, middle and other teacher leaders can play an important role in enhancing improvement. In this article we will first set out the national context for teacher leadership and improvement, signposting key shifts over the last 10 years. We will then describe three national projects: a middle leader knowledge exchange project with Challenge Partners, a national network of schools, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC); Research Learning Communities, a research use randomized control trial project, in its first of two years, funded by the Educational Endowment Foundation; and a National College for Teaching and Leadership funded network enquiry project. Finally, we will discuss issues and challenges and implications for teacher leadership of improvement.

Introduction

Teacher leadership has a special significance in England's current improvement agenda. Over the last five years, in common with international interest in improving teacher quality in order to enhance school quality (Mourshed et al, 2010), the previous government framed its policies around *The Importance of Teaching* (DfE, 2010). Although it is early days for the new government, the indications are that this focus will continue. This is in line with recent OECD reports which have called for significant change in teachers' practice and development, advocating the need for 'high level knowledge workers' (Istance et al, 2012, p 36) and confident, collaborative and innovative practitioners (Schleicher, 2015). They also clearly highlight the importance of leadership in providing the conditions for such practice.

Evidence-informed practice

Use of evidence to improve day-to-day classroom practice has become a 'hot topic' in England (Brown, 2015) as in many countries (see, eg Hattie, 2012). With many global school systems now engaging in serious structural changes, school leaders and individual teachers are increasingly expected to use evidence when selecting, implementing and evaluating their teaching and learning strategies. As a result, the use of research and evidence is now positioned as something vital to providing validity to

practice (Stoll, 2015a). This focus has merit: growing correlational evidence, for example, shows that where research and evidence are used as part of high quality initial teacher education and ongoing professional development, they make a positive difference in terms of teacher, school and system performance (Sebba *et al.,* 2012; Mincu, 2013; Cordingley, 2013; Godfrey; 2014a; Greany, 2015). Furthermore, the experience of 'research-engaged' schools that take a strategic and concerted approach in this area is generally positive, with studies suggesting that research engagement can shift a school from an instrumental 'top tips' model of improvement to a learning culture in which staff work together to understand what appears to work, when and why (Handscomb and MacBeath, 2003; Godfrey, 2014b).

Many schools have found it difficult to become 'research-engaged', with teachers often lacking the skills, resources or motivation to use evidence or to undertake meaningful and robust research activity (eg Hargreaves, 1996; Goldacre, 2013). On one hand, responsibility for this lies with educational academics, who can fail to make their research accessible to teachers; not only in terms of where it is published and the language typically employed, but also in terms of identifying how their research can make a difference (Brown, 2014). But this is not universally the case, and bodies such as the What Works Clearinghouse[1] and the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF)[2] have aimed to make 'what seems to be effective' accessible[3] - with the latter also supporting the development of the Australian Teaching and Learning Toolkit[4]. Part of the difficulty also lies with schools. Teachers, for instance, are often not allocated adequate time to explore and share existing research on a particular issue. Or, due to timetabling issues, they can find themselves unable to work collaboratively with others to identify and trial ways to address issues of teaching and learning (Godfrey, 2014a). Other activities are also often prioritized over research-informed professional development. As a result, this can find itself falling down the pecking order of things that need attention (Galdin O'Shea, 2015).

A self-improving school system

Another fundamental shift in the national policy context since 2010, and critically important in considerations of teacher leadership, has been the policy drive toward an autonomous and diverse but connected self-improving school system, with schools supporting each other's progress and development. Networking and school-to-school collaboration is common in many countries – for example the Community of Schools initiative in New South Wales and the Investing in Educational Success and Learning and Change Networks in New Zealand. In England's fast changing situation, increasing numbers of independent state schools have been established in concert with new forms of partnership structures and leadership arrangements (Earley *et al*, 2012). Collaborative arrangements

include formal federations, chains of connected schools (multi-academy trusts), and national teaching schools, outstanding schools with a remit from the National College for Teaching and Leadership (NCTL, formerly the National College for School Leadership) to develop alliances with other schools[5], as well as many informal networks and clusters. The intended outcome of such collaboration is to enable schools to 'unleash greatness' (Gilbert et al, 2013).

Evidence use is front and centre in this system, with Greany (2014) suggesting that core characteristics of 'self-improvement' include both teachers and schools being responsible for their own improvement, and teachers and schools being required to learn from each other and from research so that effective practice spreads. Teaching Schools also have a designated role (among others) to co-ordinate Research and Development across their alliance of partner schools.

If evidence-improved practice is to be brought fully to fruition, effective school leadership is needed at multiple levels.

The importance of middle leadership

Middle leaders (eg heads of department and subject coordinators who are also teachers) and other informal teacher leaders are assuming an increasingly important role within this educational landscape. Given that teachers have the greatest impact on students' learning outcomes (Townsend, 2007), ensuring that ways can be found to improve teachers' practice, and support them in informing it with evidence, are critical. Successful middle leaders contribute to departmental performance of individual schools (Harris, 2004), and to the effective practices associated with leading students' learning within schools (Robinson *et al,* 2008). They are a key link between teachers and a school's senior leaders (headteachers and deputy/assistant headteachers) and are well positioned to support teachers' learning.

Extending the previous policy of identifying and rewarding Advanced Skills Teachers (ASTs), the National College for School Leadership (NCSL) designated specialist leaders of education (SLEs): outstanding middle and senior leaders with skills to support colleagues in similar positions in other schools. Like Lead Teachers in Australia who are expected to 'Take a leadership role in professional and community networks and support the involvement of colleagues in external learning opportunities' (Teaching Standard 7.4), SLEs' role focuses on peer-to-peer and school-to-school learning, providing an important potential resource for change and development in pedagogy (Sebba *et al*, 2012). The work

outlined in this article covers both middle leadership and teacher leadership, which overlap conceptually (Harris and Muijs, 2004).

Three projects

We have had the opportunity to explore middle and teacher leadership through our involvement in three national projects in England: a recently completed middle leader knowledge exchange project with Challenge Partners, a national voluntary network of schools; a recently completed teaching schools network enquiry project funded by the NCTL; and Research Learning Communities, a research use randomized control trial project at the start of the second of two years.

Middle leaders as catalysts for improving teacher practice

This one-year applied research project, funded through the Economic and Social Research Council's knowledge exchange scheme[6] was designed, co-facilitated and jointly evaluated by a partnership involving the London Centre for Leadership in Learning at the UCL Institute of Education and Challenge Partners. The UCL Institute of Education team was led by Louise Stoll and included the other authors of this article. Challenge Partners is a collaborative group of 300+ schools across England, focused on improving the quality of teaching and leadership in pursuit of better outcomes for its students. It provides a vehicle for schools that wish to learn from the best of their peers via effective networking, with networks established across the entire partnership[7].

Reviewing the distributed leadership literature, Harris (2009) concludes that leadership distributed to teachers in 'planful ways' has a positive influence on student learning outcomes. As the key bridge between senior leaders (headteachers/deputy heads) and teachers, middle leaders – such as heads of subject departments or subject coordinators – can be fundamental to successful school improvement and improved teacher practice in their leadership of teaching and learning.

Challenge Partners' middle leaders are often outstanding teachers and they are charged with supporting colleagues' development in their own and other schools. Their capacity to carry out this activity effectively is increasingly important, but they are often frustrated in their attempts to connect and share their own expert knowledge with other middle leaders and teachers, especially in other schools. They also do not always know the best ways to track their interventions' impact through to changes in teachers' practice and, ultimately, student learning, progress and development, the heart of school improvement. Challenge Partner senior leaders were keen to collaborate with us in developing these teacher leaders.

We aimed to explore and learn about establishing an effective knowledge exchange and impact network with a group of 16 'catalyst' middle leaders (Stoll and Brown, 2015) across leading Challenge Partner schools, who would then extend this learning to their hub school partners, and share the outcomes of their applied project work more widely to benefit a broader range of educators.

Our project questions were:

1. What do we know about effective middle leadership within and across schools that changes teachers' practice?
2. What are powerful ways to share knowledge about excellent middle leadership practice within and across schools?
3. What evidence-based tools can be designed collaboratively between Challenge Partners middle leaders and academic partners to track changes in teachers' practice as a result of middle leaders' interventions?
4. What leadership conditions in schools help develop and embed cultures of shared outstanding practice?

Project activities involved:

- workshops where research findings and best practice were shared in innovative ways, and middle leaders used new learning to create and refine processes and tools to help them lead more effectively and track their impact;
- face-to-face and social networking activities where the middle leaders tested new ideas and trialled tools in their own and other schools;
- middle leaders evaluating the experiences and the impact on them and colleagues;
- jointly developing processes to embed the notion of sharing high quality research-informed practice between schools in their own networks and for practitioners in other networks.

The methodology was designed to ensure that the different partners pooled their prior research-based and practice-based knowledge, and combined these to answer the project's questions. In a parallel evaluation, we collected information about middle leaders' starting knowledge, beliefs and skills and their schools' orientation to sharing outstanding practice with others in 16 baseline telephone interviews. We followed project activities, observing what happened, exploring and analyzing the knowledge exchange processes and impact tools designed and used by catalysts through 30 follow up

telephone interviews between each workshop and analyzing learning capture sheets used at workshops. Six of the catalysts' headteachers (principals) were interviewed at the end of the project. We also fed in ongoing findings to workshop designs and shared findings with participants throughout to help improve the process and outcomes. In the final session we used a range of self-evaluation tools to help the catalysts analyze change over time, and carried out some final interviews.

We used an iterative co-construction process to generate answers to the four research questions. At the first workshop, colleagues from the Institute of Education supported catalysts as they initially generated answers to research questions, having engaged in processes to connect their own knowledge with that from research. Over subsequent workshops, these questions were gradually refined, based on catalysts' intersessional activity experiences with colleagues and further research input. At the final session, seven messages were derived for each research question (answers to the research questions). As the key project investigators, we then coded all of the data gathered. These were mapped against the messages generated in the final workshop to see if the messages held up. In most cases, the data gathered were consistent with the catalysts' final messages. In the case of Research Question 4, the interview and prior workshop data suggested that a couple of messages had been overemphasised and a couple underemphasised. These were amended by the investigators in the final 'key messages' which were validated with Challenge Partners' colleagues who had attended workshops. We are currently piloting professional (leadership) learning resource cards based on the findings to our research questions. These were collaboratively designed with Challenge Partners and validated by the catalysts.

Some key findings about the middle leaders were that:

Catalysts learnt how to lead educational change in a theory-rich way. Introducing a range of research perspectives on the nature of change itself proved highly significant. This immediately resonated with middle leaders and appeared to be quickly internalized by many of them. They consistently drew on it throughout the project, weaving it into workshop conversations and tasks between sessions.

> Our knowledge of the stages of concern teachers go through has been helping us to personalize our approach to change. Knowledge of adopter types [Rogers, 1971] has been useful to help us work with these different people. We have found that 'laggards' need more modelling and creativity. This leads to peer modelling of success being helpful to motivate your team.

They also reported on resulting successes, and were keen to share what they had learnt about change leadership with other middle leaders in their regional hubs and elsewhere. In essence, they had an

increasingly sophisticated understanding of their own role as catalysts for change in relation to the project's theory of action about knowledge exchange.

Catalysts learnt robust approaches to tracking impact, and enabled others to do the same. Supported by us, they designed research-informed impact tools that they found powerful in helping stimulate and track changes in colleagues' practice and which were focused on improvements in students' learning. Impact measures were contextualized to specific situations and issues, but the enquiry processes always included a baseline against which impact could be judged. They also crafted questions which helped to open up meaningful learning conversations between them and colleagues. This seemed to shift the emphasis from accountability of colleagues to their professional development. As one group reported back to us in a feedback session:

> The tool helped identify issues and facilitated conversation – everyday conversation. It helped us clarify what we were going for. The clarity of the vision was there because we homed in on specific areas, for example numeracy issues, finding them and prioritising them. We were having a reflective conversation and took a strategic approach … We'd say 'the issue is, the baseline is, this is how we're going to collect the evidence, this is when it's going to be looked at again'. Sometimes we don't have time to organise it in that way. The tool did help us.

Catalysts described changes in colleagues' practice and greater openness to change because the process helped build ownership. A considerable number planned to use the tools again this year in different situations, and some had influenced senior leaders to embed them within school development plans. The ultimate goal was change in students' learning, and some were starting to notice changes as one described:

> I learnt how important learning conversations are and now ensure staff have stimulating and engaging conversations about their practice. They never used to have meetings about what they were doing and how this affects the children, and now they are having these every night. As a result they now know their children well and are not afraid to have difficult conversations. For example, recently they looked at how resources were placed, realized that children weren't using resources to learn and so have been changing their resources. They are now getting improved verbal interactions with the children as a result.

Certain catalysts developed the skills and confidence to engage colleagues in powerful ways as they exchanged their new knowledge within their schools and across regional hubs and/or other networks.

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They used what they learnt about networking, change, effective middle leadership, impact evaluation and Challenge Partners' models to design collegial learning processes and strategies, or used or adapted ours. Headteachers of these catalysts were very pleased with the changes they had instigated, and further network activities were planned and are ongoing. In less successful instances, either their own immediate context or their own middle leadership capabilities or experience limited the reach and depth of their impact.

Teaching Schools Research and Development Themes project

Over two-and-a-half years from 2012-2014, teaching school alliances (TSAs) across England involved in the National College for Teaching and Leadership's (NCTL) research and development (R&D) network engaged in collaborative R&D projects investigating three themes:

- Theme one: what makes great pedagogy?
- Theme two: what makes great professional development which leads to consistently great pedagogy?
- Theme three: how can leaders lead successful TSAs which enable the development of consistently great pedagogy?

R&D is one of Teaching Schools' six responsibilities ('the big six'). The National College for Teaching and Leadership (NCTL) funded 98 teaching schools to enable them to undertake collaborative R&D in their alliances within one of the themes, with one third focusing on each theme.

The project aimed to:
- support teaching schools to engage in and build their capacity for research and development activities using evidence
- provide opportunities for training and a forum for networking and sharing expertise between teaching school leaders and teachers so that they could learn from each other
- produce robust evidence to disseminate more widely

External facilitators from UCL Institute of Education and Sheffield Hallam University were commissioned as the national research partner for themes one and two. Karen-Spence Thomas and Carol Taylor led the team, and another author of this article was involved in the project, also writing an overarching report at the project's completion (Stoll, 2015b). Theme three's research partner was the Isos Partnership, working with Robert Hill and Qing Gu from the University of Nottingham. To support

alliances, national research partners convened regional enquiry clusters once each school term to provide structure and direction for schools. This chapter mainly focuses on themes one and two. A key aim of our enquiry clusters was to support them to develop and embed a sustainable model for deep professional learning through a rigorous and supported R&D methodology (Harris and Jones, 2012, in the case of theme one and two alliances). It was also important to finding ways to connect teachers with the research base. Schools were encouraged to engage in innovative and creative ways with bespoke literature reviews produced for each theme (Husbands and Pearce, 2012; Stoll et al, 2012; Gu et al, 2012). Each review proposed 'claims' from the literature which schools used to reflect on their practices and to determine and refine their areas of focus. TSAs and schools also drew on a range of other research sources and/or higher education institute (HEI) support in addition to these reviews.

Our findings are based on analysis of final reports and case studies from 66 TSAs involved in themes one and two. Impact reports followed a template created by the IOE/SHU and refined by the external facilitator assigned to each project. Case studies were written to a common structure and describe activity and findings under the R&D methodology phases of *implementation, innovation* and *impact*. Several partnerships provided additional material as appendices to impact reports and/or final reports. These appendices included evidence collected to support impact such as extracts from teachers' reflective diaries, samples of student work and student attainment data.   Evidence from these final reports and case studies were compared with claims from the literature reviews which formed part of the framework for the research.

Overall the evidence shows that TSAs combined 'external' knowledge from the literature reviews with their own experiential, practice-based knowledge to create insights and capabilities in ways which were new for them (Nelson et al, 2015)[8].

Some key findings pertinent to teacher leadership include:

Changing roles of participants – As TSAs joined the project in three waves over the course of the two and a half years, so the roles of those participating changed. For the first group of schools investigating themes one and two, the majority of staff attending regional clusters were TSA heads or principals. By wave two, however, several headteachers had distributed project leadership to a senior colleague with designated responsibility for R&D. By wave three, some middle leaders and more recently qualified teachers, often loosely defined as 'research champions', had been brought on board to drive collaborative investigations both within and across schools. This suggests a strategic move by schools

over time to create capacity for R&D by shifting its leadership from senior level through to the middle tier and even directly and more widely to classroom teachers.

Leadership distribution is important – Analysis of case studies and impact reports indicates that this distribution of leadership within and across schools as part of a collaborative enquiry process appears to be important for sustainability and capacity building. Where collaborative activity was most productive, senior leaders created a clear and compelling shared vision for the difference it would make for student learning. They were then able to operationalize this by creating the time and space for middle leaders and teachers to engage positively with each other over time. Enabling teachers to centre their enquiries in their classrooms within a common, overarching, cross-alliance theme or focus was shown to be highly motivating and effective, ensuring that teacher engagement was more likely to be sustained over time (Nelson et al, 2015).

Teacher leaders can play a powerful role in tracking impact – Enquiry facilitators worked with their teachers to flesh out the desired impact of the investigations on student learning and outcomes. Teams then gathered baseline evidence of practice and learning against which the impact of changed practices could be evaluated. This process of individual, classroom-centred visioning again proved empowering for teacher leaders, providing them with a rigorous framework with which to think deeply about and articulate the needs of their students. Enquiry facilitators, often middle or teacher leaders in phase three of the project, supported enquiry teams of teachers to analyze data and determine whether changes in teacher practices had brought about improvements in student learning. Collaborative approaches, for example research lesson study (Dudley, 2014), enabled teachers to grow in confidence and develop the criticality necessary to critique and scrutinize each other's practices.

Research Learning Communities

In response to the current policy environment and to encourage schools to specifically 'self-improve' through the use of research, early in 2014 the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) funded a project, led by Chris Brown, and including two other authors of this article, that is focused on increasing the use of research in schools and understanding of how schools can be supported in applying existing research findings to improve outcomes. The ongoing two-year project (Research Learning Communities) has been designed to address four distinct but overlapping and interdependent organizational learning factors facing schools that seek to become evidence-informed in the self-improving school system. These are:

1. developing approaches to building teacher capacity to engage in and with research and data
2. exploring how school cultures can become more attuned to evidence use (ie that make research use a cultural norm)
3. exploring how schools can promote the use of research as part of an effective learning environment
4. examining what structures, systems and resource are required to facilitate research use and the sharing of best practice

Because of EEF's mandate only to invest in proven initiatives, EEF stipulated that there must be an independent evaluation of the pilot project, including a randomized control trial to assess its impacts effectively[9]. Accordingly, we recruited 114 primary schools across England, with 58 forming Research Learning Communities (RLCs) (made up of 10 groups of 5-6 schools) and 56 forming the control group.

Each school engaged in RLC activity provided two leaders: a senior leader and an informal opinion leader. Formal leadership buy-in to research use is vital: school leaders not only promote both the vision for and develop the culture of a research-engaged school, but they also provide the necessary resources and structures (eg time and space) for sustained and meaningful research use to become a reality (Leithwood *et al.,* 2006). More than this, senior leader involvement within RLCs is key. Having first-hand participation ensures that such activity is more likely to remain a priority. In addition, it enables senior leaders to 'walk the talk': both in demonstrating their commitment and in engaging in leadership for learning practices such as modelling, monitoring and mentoring and coaching (Southworth, 2009), they are more likely to ensure wider buy-in to the RLC approach across the school.

At the same time, leadership must be a process of influence. Leadership activity as a form of influence can be undertaken by more than just those possessing 'formal' responsibility. Perhaps more than formal leaders, it is informal leaders who determine the fate of reform initiatives, and implementing new initiatives must attend to the informal aspects of an organisation as lived by members day-to-day (Spillane *et al.,* 2010). Drawing on middle leadership knowledge exchange project experience about the importance of catalysts, in developing the project design for Research Learning Communities (RLC), we wanted to ensure that we would have the right people in the room. Analyzing the informal organisation requires an approach that enables identification and mapping of informal structures and provides an understanding of the roles of social actors within these structures. We therefore employed Social Network Analysis as an approach to circulating research knowledge within schools, by finding potential central actors – teacher leaders – who are in favour of the idea of research-informed practice. These people are then used to act as research 'champions'.

Based on this rationale, each participating school is represented by a senior leader (sometimes the headteacher) and an evidence champion. We work with these colleagues in their Research Learning Communities (RLCs), who came together for a one-day work shop four times a year in the first year to examine research and evidence relating to a commonly agreed area of focus, and to develop, apply and evaluate school or key stage[10]-wide improvement strategies based on this evidence. The externally facilitated sessions are also designed to build capacity for sustainability of the approach, ensuring that schools can continue to run RLCs and use evidence effectively after the project ends. In the second year, participating schools are leading sessions, with external facilitators on hand to support and challenge.

A social network survey was used to explore two major dimensions of social capital among the project schools: structural, referring to overall properties of a social network, and relational, referring to the quality of ties, described in terms of the norms, values, and expectancies shared by group members (Finnigan and Daly, 2012). The survey was repeated at the end of the first year of the project and will be repeated again at the end of the second year. Our survey focused on the following areas:

1. measures of 'attribute' characteristics: e.g. years of experience, content knowledge, leadership experience
2. social capital measures, e.g. work related information interactions
3. whether school cultures are geared towards research use
4. extent to which teachers perceived the four aspects of organisational learning were present in their schools
5. teachers' perceptions of levels of trust within their school

Survey questions predominantly employed a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'. Of 77 schools responding to the survey (all 58 engaged schools and 19 control schools), we analyzed network data for the 43 schools with a response rates of 75 per cent or above. This corresponds to responses from 828 teachers.

Some early findings from this data analysis with relevance for teacher and middle leadership are:

Relational trust as a facilitator of evidence use – Data analysis illustrates the importance of trust in facilitating the types of relations needed to provide teachers with access to research-centred social capital that resides within a school. In other words, in our 43 schools, higher levels of trust are likely to

lead to more frequent (and so useful) ties that result in a variety of reciprocal efforts, including collaboration, learning, complex information sharing and problem solving, shared decision making, and coordinated action: ie actions essential to development of new and effective practice informed by research and evidence. As a result, high trust levels appear to lead to teachers perceiving that they are encouraged to use research and that the improvement of their school is being driven by research. Survey findings demonstrate that the primary teachers are as likely to believe what middle leaders and senior leaders in their schools tell them as what other teachers tell them, with factor analysis indicating that when there is trust in a school, it typically exists across formal hierarchical levels rather than existing in specific pockets or in relation to particular job roles.

Senior leadership support bolsters teacher leadership activity – Formal organizational learning factors, arranged by senior leaders, positively impact on research use. In part this is because some of these factors, such as making time available, will directly lead to higher levels of capacity to engage in research, while others correspond to the structures required to effectively share information around an organization eg forums for sharing information among staff.

Building intra-school trust – It is likely that there will also be a more complex interplay between organizational learning and trust. Many of the organizational learning factors, for instance, examine whether teachers are able to question existing assumptions and challenge the status quo. So it is probably the case that when these factors are present – for instance when teachers are actively encouraged to try new approaches – this helps build levels of intra-school trust; simultaneously, that trust facilitates teachers acting upon the organizational learning messages they receive from school leaders. It is likely, however, that across school systems, the presence of organizational learning factors and so teachers' ability to use research (as facilitated by these factors) will be variable. Again, trust has a role to play here since high levels of trust serve to mediate such variability by ensuring that approaches to teaching and learning based on research are likely to be believed and accepted.

Challenges and implications for teacher leadership

Looking across the three projects and their findings, and the national context in which they have been functioning, messages emerge about teacher leadership for school improvement and its challenges in the current climate. This may not be surprising because we have worked together, in different combinations, across the projects. Nonetheless, they have implications for teacher leadership.

The accountability environment presents a challenge to teacher-led evidence-informed improvement

While there appear to be benefits to evidence-informed, school-led self- improvement, as the level of more centralized support for schools is rolled back to facilitate it, challenges have begun to arise for England's school system. As we noted, hanging over Teaching Schools is the removal of their Teaching School designation if they lose their 'outstanding' OfSTED[11] grade. This can hamper the extent to which schools wish to take risks in experimenting with innovative practice. Similarly, the emphasis on accountability (and the power afforded to OfSTED) has led to a disproportionate pressure on school leaders to "to find *quick fixes* where standards are lower than national benchmarks" (Godfrey, 2014b, p 4).

High stakes accountability can also affect the social conditions within schools. This, in turn, inhibits collaboration and so the exchange of practice (Finnigan and Daly, 2012). Likewise, external accountability can lead to headteachers gearing their structures, procedures and practices towards addressing accountability requirements in an instrumental way: for example, performance management systems that align teacher 'success' to student outcomes or to where teaching and learning practices are designed to ensure they produce exactly the outcomes required by OfSTED (Supovitz, 2015).

Working across schools provides particular challenges for teacher leaders

Two of the three projects placed a particular emphasis on teacher leaders as change catalysts. All of the projects confirm that the support and backing of senior leadership is critical, and that the two levels of leadership are interdependent. But playing a leadership role across schools is challenging and, as the theme three researchers found in the NCTL R&D project, it requires using leadership skills in a different way (Rea et al, 2015). The RLC projects findings on trust highlight that this is likely to be a particular issue between schools, and a number of the middle leadership project change catalysts struggled in their attempts to mobilize the knowledge they had created beyond their own schools. And yet, others experienced considerable success (Stoll ad Brown, 2015).

There is a need for capacity building to help develop skills of middle and teacher leaders so they become leaders of evidence-informed improvement

In a high stakes accountability system such as England's, development programmes for middle leaders tend to focus on efficacy, performance and improving student achievement. Middle leaders are often

required to enact intensive intervention strategies designed to bring about immediate results rather than focus on the kind of deep learning that leads to greater student independence and improved confidence. Teacher leaders who want to progress their careers as excellent practitioners, and policy-promoted Advanced Skill Teachers (ASTs) – or more recently Specialist Leaders of Education (SLEs) – are also under pressure to bring about improved performance both within their schools and more widely across partner schools. But evidence from these three projects demonstrates that it isn't enough to model excellent classroom practice. Teacher leaders need to know how to work alongside others over time – both within their school and with colleagues elsewhere – to articulate and share their knowledge about what makes great pedagogy in systematic ways. They need to learn powerful forms of enquiry. As Durrant (2004, p.14) argued in the previous special edition on teacher leadership:

> "Enquiry is not simply a source of information from which to make decisions about directions and strategies for change. It is integral to the sustenance of a critical and challenging approach to practice, a focus for collaborative working and a motivating and energising force. Involving teachers in processes of gathering and interpreting evidence is often the first step towards developing their capacity to exercise leadership; it spurs them to envision and instigate change".

Support for teacher leaders needs to focus on understanding and facilitating professional learning, building research literacy, practising coaching skills and developing trust with colleagues in other schools in addition to more typical management and performance dimensions. While senior leaders brokered relationships and set in place strategic structures to support collaborative enquiry, they turned to middle and teacher leaders to enact the process. To a lesser or greater degree, both within and across schools, these colleagues needed to be able to: facilitate professional learning; access, critique and share the 'external' knowledge base; trial new strategies and evaluate their impact; bring colleagues into investigations and build teams; evaluate the impact of changed practice on student learning and achievement; share findings in accessible and sustainable ways. These skills need systematic and structured development in supportive practitioner communities with opportunities to apply and reflect on learning between sessions. This supports the case for structured development programmes for 'research champions' in schools both at senior and middle leader level.

To a greater or lesser degree, all of the project approaches are, or have been centred on learning about evidence in order that it might be employed expertly, with an emphasis in the middle leadership and RLC workshops and exercises on employing learning conversations to achieve knowledge creation (ie. learning in the constructivist/social-constructivist modes). A RLC project requirement is that this

expertise is subsequently diffused: in other words that as a result of intersessional activity, RLC participant experts then create more expertise among other teachers within their 'home' schools. This mirrors approaches used in the middle leadership project where the catalysts were also expected to go back to their schools and networks, trial approaches and use and adapt project approaches to support colleagues' development. The hypothesis here is that developing further expertise doesn't require cascading of the project activity to individual schools but instead will involve an alternative form of activity that enables an equivalent process of learning to be achieved.

Particularly pertinent in relation to teacher leadership is that when learning from peers, practitioners are engaging with knowledge that has already been 'assessed' and employed by a trusted colleague, and so who is, for want of a better term, issuing a warrant for its validity.

Conclusion

Teacher leadership in England has been evolving over the last decade. The good news is that it now assumes greater significance in the educational landscape, along with the greater emphasis on leading teaching and learning. The challenges are that powerful teacher leadership in today's world depends on using evidence and creating knowledge that can help solve educational problems and being able to lead colleagues, not only within your own school but in others, to become equally evidence-informed. And all of this is taking place in a high stakes accountability environment. It's a 'big ask' for any leader, but for those relatively early in leadership it's especially demanding. Our evidence suggests that researchers can support teacher leaders in developing the wherewithal to lead evidence-informed improvement, but there is still a way to go.

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[1] See: http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/

[2] This is a grant-making charity in England whose work centres on identifying and funding promising educational innovations that address the needs of disadvantaged children in primary and secondary schools[2]

[3] See: http://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/toolkit/

[4] See http://australia.teachingandlearningtoolkit.net.au/

[5] See: https://www.gov.uk/teaching-schools-a-guide-for-potential-applicants

[6] ESRC Knowledge Exchange Opportunities Scheme R&D project – Grant: ES/l002043/1

[7] See: http://challengepartners.org

[8] Overall project findings are available (Nelson et al, 2015; Rea et al, 2015; Stoll et al, 2015).

[9] Full detail on the evaluation including its methodology can be found via: https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/projects/research-learning-communities/and results will be available in 2016

[10] Key Stage 1 refers to 5-7 year olds, Key Stage 2 to 7-11 year olds (KS1 and KS2 are primary stages), Key Stage 3 to 11-14 year olds, Key Stage 4 to preparation for GCSE examinations, and KS5 to preparation for A levels.
[11] OfSTED is England's central school accountability regime