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Research Associate Summary Report

Jenny Francis, Former Headteacher, Stevenage

Getting out through the middle

The role of middle leaders in the journey from failure
to success

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Richard Steward, *Headteacher, Woodroffe School, Lyme Regis, Devon*

Introduction

Education is awash with research promoting effective styles of leadership and successful strategies for school improvement. Despite this, in 2005/06, 13 per cent of all secondary schools were still judged inadequate by Ofsted (Ofsted, 2006). For such schools it is vital to implement both effective and sustainable improvement in a short space of time.

Much research recommends using the full capacity of the school to create a structure of distributive leadership. In particular, middle leaders are seen as crucial in supporting the work of senior leaders in implementing change and sustained improvement. However, in schools in crisis, it is frequently considered that the heroic leadership or authoritarian leadership model (MacBeath, 2003) is more appropriate.

This study looked at how five secondary schools, judged to be in special measures or as having serious weakness by Ofsted, have used their middle leaders to promote school improvement. It describes the emergence of examples of good practice that may help future leaders harness the capacity of all their leaders to effect a quick transition to success during this challenging but inspiring journey.

The importance of middle leaders to improving standards

Ofsted (1999) has highlighted the important role middle leaders play in raising standards in underperforming schools, noting that:

The role of the middle managers... is crucial to the steady and sustained improvement of schools [in special measures]. The headteacher and senior managers provide the vision and direction for the school, but middle managers effect the long-term changes which will raise standards and improve the quality of education.

(Ofsted, 1999 p 42 para 126)

This view was echoed by the headteachers and middle leaders in these schools. As one head noted:

Could I have done it without the middle leaders? No, I don't think so. I needed them to preach the message. They are the missionaries out there selling it to their teams.

Heads saw middle leaders playing an important role in promoting and implementing the broader strategic vision for school improvement on the ground, and for monitoring its implementation. Conversely, middle leaders recognised the significance of their role in supporting the move out of special measures, and appreciated the value placed on their work by senior leaders in the school. As one middle leader said:

The school has improved teaching and learning through the middle leaders; the middle leaders have done it with the help of the senior leadership team, their guidance, support and initiatives.

The growth of middle leaders

Typical of schools being classified by Ofsted as underperforming is a diversity of issues to address. These include desperate behaviour, lack of routines, low expectations and a culture hit by shock, disbelief and despair. In spite of this, each school could still identify a small cohort of strong staff amongst its middle managers who were still trying to do the right thing: many interviewees commented on the scale of personal development experienced by middle leaders in these schools as they moved out of special measures or grounds for concern. These personal journeys had three distinct stages.

Early stage

In the early stage, initial action varied, reflecting the theory that there is no single model that fits all. Nevertheless, some commonalities existed. These included creating a mindset or culture to accommodate the new initiatives, bringing in additional leadership and establishing procedures and training along with clearer roles, monitoring and accountability.

At this stage, middle leaders often lacked leadership skills and had limited understanding of the full expectations of the role. In these schools, the extent to which they identified weak teaching as being an issue in the school's performance overall was limited, and judging or supporting teaching or learning had not usually been a part of their role. They had seen themselves more as middle managers than leaders.

Levels of resistance to change varied among these middle leaders and sometimes a blame culture began to develop. However, middle leaders generally demonstrated a real determination to move forward. As one head said:

Mainly [the middle leaders] were very passionate about the school and wanted it to succeed. They wanted to be part of getting us out of this; and the ones who didn't want to be part of that... were pushed out or they jumped ship.

Development

In these schools, the initial impetus for school improvement generally came from the headteacher. Indeed, headteachers often took a didactic lead in strategic development, frequently acting against their own belief in distributive leadership in order to structure the improvements within the required timescale. As one head stated: "an advantage of doing it without distributive leadership in the early stages is that it gives you more control".

However, schools moved quickly to implement training and support in order to empower the middle leaders and increase capacity.

Practical key strategies to promote this included:

- training staff in what makes a good lesson and helping middle leaders to make judgements about teaching and how to support weak staff
- structuring training in a variety of ways to ensure opportunities exist for staff to work together to build trust and a positive ethos
- one-to-one coaching for middle leaders by senior leaders or consultants
- the development of structures for monitoring which, despite early resistance, middle leaders mainly found rewarding
- the use of consultants or additional leaders, which improved initial capacity
- providing practical support such as extra time for middle leaders, which was felt to be invaluable

Emergence of middle leadership

In the final stage of development, middle managers grew into leaders. They began to take responsibility for leading change, thus building capacity for school improvement within the school. They developed their own pedagogical skills, but also started to accept that they were accountable for the quality of provision within their area.

In addition to monitoring the work of their team, these leaders identified needs and provided guidance, mentoring, coaching and even led continuing professional development within their own specialisms. Although not involved in initial action-planning, they had now reached a stage at which they could act more strategically on wider improvements in their areas.

Conclusions

In each of these schools there was a period initially in which the headteacher had to take an autocratic role in order to introduce clear standards and expectations. After this phase, there was a major input of culture-building, which enabled the schools to establish capacity across the various leadership levels. Skills training was balanced against team-building. Articulation of roles and levels of accountability supported reflection and debate on pedagogy and practice.

As a result of careful leadership by the heads, most middle leaders felt empowered and invigorated by the entire experience. Although initially the label of a failing category was seen as shameful, the middle leaders who stayed rose to the challenge and developed expertise and leadership skills, enabling the schools to implement sustained change and improvement. There was no doubt that using middle leaders was key to the speed and effectiveness of raising standards across the whole school.

As one middle leader summed it up:

I think we did it together, all of us working together, supporting each other.

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National College for School Leadership

Triumph Road
Nottingham NG8 1DH

T: 0870 001 1155
F: 0115 872 2001
E: ncsl-office@ncsl.org.uk
W: www.ncsl.org.uk

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