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Research Associate Summary Report

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Learning from the Middle

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

Autumn 2006

Background

The key role that middle leaders play in securing school improvement has been highlighted in a number of sources, for example, Harris et al (2003). In 2002, NCSL launched a new leadership development programme for middle leaders entitled Leading from the Middle (LftM). Several individuals play a key role in the programme; as well as the tutor (an experienced senior leader trained and allocated by NCSL), the leadership coach from the participant's own school is a significant contributor to their learning.

This study aims to investigate the impact of LftM in two secondary schools and assess the extent to which it has helped the participants develop their leadership skills. Both schools enrolled middle leaders on the programme as part of cohort 1 and/or cohort 3.

Methods

A small-scale study was set up in order to seek the response to these two questions:

- What was the impact of LftM on the middle leader participants in these two schools?
- What contribution was made to leadership development in the two schools?

Questionnaires were issued to the nine participants involved. To get a wider perspective, the two programme tutors, the headteachers and the leadership coach were interviewed.

The LftM programme has five stated aims, four of which are to:

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

The fifth stated aim is to enable participants to engage actively in self-directed change in a blended learning environment; this aim is not explored in this study because it does not directly relate to the roles in schools of these particular participants.

These findings explore the extent to which these aims were realised within the context of the two schools studied.

Findings

Leading innovation and change

- There were some positive indications that, by the end of the programme, leaders felt they had clearer targets for others, and a clearer view of how the school's activities are linked to its long-term aims.
- LftM tutors agreed that one outcome is a greater insight into what is involved in leadership.
- Headteachers and leadership coaches were able to provide examples of innovation and change introduced by participants through their engagement with the programme.

The programme itself is very innovative, it challenges people, moves them out of their comfort zone ... there is a tangible benefit since leaders work on an area which is important to the school.

LftM tutor

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

- Participants felt that they had developed in this area and most agreed that they felt better able to evaluate practice and to create a positive environment in which people co-operate and work towards the shared goals of learning and achievement.
- They were, however, less confident in their effectiveness in managing pupil behaviour.

Competence as team leaders

- The strongest gains appear to have been made in this area based on the views of the middle leaders supported by their headteachers, tutors and coach.

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

Headteacher

This supports the national evaluation, which identifies this as amongst the strongest outcomes of the programme (Simkins et al, 2005).

- The development of coaching skills was cited as a particular benefit by participants, coaches, heads and tutors; this was also a finding of the national evaluation (ibid).
- The attitudes of senior leaders in participants' own schools is important to success, however.

The programme has less impact if the school's [senior leadership team] do not take ownership, share the vision and model the behaviour.

LftM tutor

Managing resources efficiently and effectively

- A distinction is made between the management of human resources and the management of physical resources; improved management of the former but not the latter was an outcome.
- Although the use of ICT is modelled in the way LftM is delivered, participants, heads and coaches doubted whether an enhanced understanding of the use of ICT was an outcome of the programme, although this might be explained by existing expertise.

Conclusion

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

- Impact on participants of the LftM programme in these two schools was mainly positive.
- Most claimed to have made significant gains in terms of their professional development where leadership is concerned.
- Most felt themselves better able to lead innovation and change with improved ability as team leaders; the views of their headteachers, coaches and tutors supported this.
- As with all professional development, there were some for whom outcomes were less positive.
- Although it cannot be cited as a direct outcome of the programme, it is worth noting that eight of the nine middle leaders in both schools have been promoted or have taken on enhanced or whole-school roles either in their own schools or externally.

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

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

The development that cohorts 1 and 2 of leaders have undergone has enabled both schools to move a step nearer to a distributed leadership model. It has helped to build capacity through the development of a cadre of middle leaders in the same school, as well as through high-quality team leader and coaching skills:

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

Leadership Coach

References

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Acknowledgements

My very sincere thanks to the headteachers and colleagues in the two schools, and to the LftM tutors who have contributed to this study. I should also like to thank Professor Tim Simkins, who acted in the capacity of e-tutor during the course of this study.

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