NCSL National College for School Leadership

Inspiring leaders; improving children's lives

Research Associate Summary Report

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Ringing the changes

The middle leader's role in leading change

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Introduction

"Not more change," teachers often proclaim. Nonetheless, whatever concerns are expressed, the one certain constant in education is change. So how do leaders in schools encourage their colleagues to value and practise the latest initiative?

Middle leaders, often the unsung heroes in a school, provide the link between senior leaders and their colleagues, ensuring that whole-school policy and planning is implemented at a classroom level. They are both the conduit as well as the interpreters of either discussions with or decisions made by senior leaders. In particular, middle leaders are expected to embrace, implement and monitor the large number of change initiatives schools are required to introduce. This case study investigated the role of middle leaders in implementing a change with the intention of identifying effective leadership strategies which helped the process of embedding. The initiative undertaken was the implementation of Assessment for Learning (AfL) within each faculty area of a large suburban secondary school. However, the principles examined are applicable to any change initiative.

Methods

The project involved working with seven middle leaders, each of whom was interviewed at the end of each year of this three year research project. Interviews sought to evaluate the aspects of AfL which had been effectively implemented and to reflect on how they had managed the change. Staff completed the 'Learning How to Learn' questionnaire (see Pedder, 2006) in 2004 and 2006 to determine how their assessment practices and values had changed over two years. The questionnaire also evaluated colleagues' attitudes towards professional learning and management in the school. A student questionnaire and student interviews in 2004 and 2006 provided data to triangulate Middle Leaders' perspectives. Consultants' and Ofsted evaluations provided further verification of middle leaders' views.

Findings

Leadership approaches – adoptive or adaptive?

In introducing the changes to their colleagues, middle leaders used a combination of two different leadership approaches, adoptive (top-down) or adaptive (bottom-up). In most instances, middle leaders introduced the initiative using an adaptive approach with a democratic and collaborative leadership style. Initial resistance of colleagues led middle leaders to switch quite quickly to an adoptive approach with a more coercive or authoritative style of leadership, insisting that colleagues adopted the AfL practices. Later on, when staff had a greater understanding of the initiative and when there was less resistance, middle leaders once again used an adaptive approach with a more democratic leadership style.

Change through structures and culture

Structures ensured closer monitoring and support for colleagues in shifting their practice and beliefs. In some instances, these structures shaped a change of culture in faculty areas and also in the whole school, particularly generating livelier discussion and a more concerted focus on teaching and learning:

"We're quite good at sharing practice and talking about what we're doing. We always sit together at break and we're sharing…People are more receptive to discussions…informal discussions at break and lunchtime show beliefs have changed." (Middle Leader, Year 3)

However, structures and close monitoring in some instances led merely to a mechanical application of the change strategies and did not necessarily secure a change of beliefs; embedding was not always secure.

Senior leadership matters

Frequent reference to the importance of senior leadership vision, drive and structures to support change was made by middle leaders. They asserted that a change initiative has greater chance for successful implementation if it is part of a whole-school drive, led by an enthusiast, and is underpinned by whole-school continuing professional development (CPD):

"I think just the constant nagging and returning back…the fact that senior management have continued through with the learning agenda and assessment…there's no way of getting out of it – they (colleagues) can see that it's been followed up and that it's being done." (Middle Leader, Year 3)

CPD is essential

Effective CPD is an essential tool for securing both a change in staff practice and beliefs. Middle leaders viewed it as critical to a change initiative's successful embedding. CPD included faculty discussions, whole-school INSET, consultant support, coaching or peer observation and attendance at courses. Whole-school INSET was shown by middle leaders to be necessary to lay the foundations and induct staff into the change initiative which must be a school development priority. However, it was not sufficient to secure either lasting belief or practice shifts. The most effective follow-through CPD was in-classroom development. Faculties which had extensive one-to-one work with consultants, team-teaching with joint reviews and provided regular coaching opportunities for colleagues, made the most significant progress in embedding both practice and belief shifts. This is because it facilitated reflection as well as refinements of practice and beliefs through discussion with other colleagues:

"…the most effective strategy was working in twos and threes in a non-threatening, non-judgmental way supported by structures…People need to feel safe in their own teaching and so when they are trying out new ideas they mustn't be judged. They must be allowed to make mistakes within reason and they must have the backing of the hierarchy to do that."
(Middle Leader, Year 3)

However the in-classroom CPD was not widespread across all faculties. There is still significant work to be done to establish a culture in which individual teachers learn through on-going inquiry into their own practice and that of their colleagues.

One-size does not fit all: balance whole-school and team needs carefully

Each faculty area encountered different problems in embracing the changes depending on the nature and demands of their subjects. Also, the team composition affected how quickly and readily the initiative was embraced and embedded. Senior leaders needed to strike a balance between middle leaders customising the pace of the implementation and the change initiative itself. At the same time, they needed to remain resolute in pursuing their vision of change and securing uniformity of delivery and student entitlement.

Prior experience of the change

Where previous practice closely approximated the change, middle leaders noted that beliefs and practice were easier to shift. Assumptions, however, could not be made that all colleagues would automatically adopt new strategies – even if the changes were more nuances than significant variations in practice. All leaders needed to monitor and evaluate teaching practice regularly.

Team composition makes all the difference to successful change

The team composition was critical to how successful or unsuccessful a middle leader was in implementing change. While the whole-school initiative was successfully launched by senior leaders with middle leaders, the real challenge lay with the middle leader selling the initiative to their faculty colleagues, some of whom were resistant to any change. Middle leaders revealed that just one colleague in the team could shape the change initiative's successful or unsuccessful implementation at any stage. Team leaders had to alter how they introduced and managed the change, depending on the colleagues in their team.

Change takes time

The introduction of an extensive initiative required significant effort and time to shift colleagues' beliefs and practice – at least three years. Change concepts introduced right at the beginning of the research needed constant revisiting by all leaders.

Conclusions, recommendations and implications

Middle leaders play a critical role in implementing and embedding change. Their leadership approach and style alter in response to their team members. They need to utilise a combination of adoptive (top-down) and adaptive (bottom-up) approaches to influence their colleagues' beliefs in and practice of an initiative. A lack of understanding or cynicism towards a change means that they have to alter their leadership style to become more coercive or authoritative, insisting on change. Structures, both within a faculty area and across the whole school, are very important to support change and to ensure monitoring of the initiative. However, changing the culture is also an effective means to secure change – especially by encouraging and developing collaboration, discussion and in-classroom peer support.

Senior leaders must support middle leaders by:

- Providing whole school structures to support the desired changes.

- Constantly revisiting the importance of the initiative and its fundamentals.

- Providing regular and relevant professional development opportunities especially in-classroom coaching and support.

More than anything else, senior leaders need to recognise that changing colleagues' beliefs and practice takes time – years rather than months. They need to provide sufficient time and resources for middle leaders to truly embed one initiative before moving on to the next.

References

Pedder, D, 2006, *Organisational conditions that foster successful classroom promotion of Learning How to Learn*. In Research Papers in Education, Volume 21 Number 2, June 2006, pp 117 –200, Routledge, London

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