

Effective middle leadership

– making a real difference to learning and teaching in schools

With their classroom experience, detailed knowledge of colleagues and children and the power to effect change, middle leaders play a pivotal role in making schools successful.

A discussion of exactly how they do it produced a very popular talk2learn debate, in which over 1200 school leaders participated. Many agreed that, at a time of ongoing change in education, shared leadership is more important than ever.

One of the biggest advantages of effective middle leaders is the way they support the vision for the school and act as a link between senior leaders and the classroom, said Jane Dilozenzo, an assistant head in a large primary.

"It is the only way some headteachers, who often have little up-to-date 'hands-on' experience, can know what goes on," she said.

"I have been fortunate enough to have grown from a subject leader 12 years ago to my current position by a headteacher who values and supports everyone's career development.

"Staff in my school have found this invaluable and it has had the effect of developing morale and confidence."

"He allows middle managers to take responsibility and trusts them in the role they do. Our middle managers are involved in off-site management days throughout the year and training is organised to suit their requirements," said Jane.



Shereene Khan, now a deputy head, said she had gained many skills as a middle manager, adding that teachers should undergo management training – "they become better teachers. I believe a 'flagging' teacher gets new life from these courses."

Another school leader agreed. "Middle management courses refresh stale thinking and change perceptions about people's roles. Staff in my school have found this invaluable and it has had the effect of developing morale and confidence."

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Saron Urding thought the practice of middle managers leading professional enquiry groups "encourages them to operate outside their 'comfort zone' and, therefore, to rethink processes and practices; it encourages dynamic reflection on leadership processes, behaviours and actions." Effective middle leadership has other strategic benefits, such as enabling heads themselves to maintain a better work-life balance, suggested one contributor. "So many heads I've met have ended up a 'frazzled mess' due to too high a work load and expectations which are just too high." ►

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However, some heads and deputies find 'letting go' very difficult, admitted another. "Having worked with two heads who could not delegate I am heartened to see that middle leadership initiatives are now firmly on the agenda."

How can new deputies be inspirational leaders if they haven't experienced directing policy, research and change?"

It's exactly that philosophy headteacher Tessa Mason has taken to heart in developing seven middle leaders at her large primary school in Leeds.

"It is really exciting – they all have huge potential and are leading phase teams (key stages if you like) and four curriculum cluster teams. It has generated enormous enthusiasm and a very positive response indeed from our recent team of Ofsted inspectors."

"I am planning particular development opportunities for them as a distinct group, meeting their specialisms and the general need to develop their leadership skills and styles. They have gained in confidence and influence and are assisting in outreach to other schools in our network. I see this as one of the key ways to prepare individuals for future leadership."

"This must cascade down the whole school, especially to those on the receiving end of all this – the pupils."

The revolution is not confined to teaching staff, however.

Sally Stone, who has worked in school administration for more than 20 years, described the rise of the school business manager and the promotion of some non-teaching staff to school management teams as 'a breath of fresh air'.

"I feel that, as a direct result of support staff being more involved in policy making and strategic planning everyone is benefiting. New aspirations and plans are filtering down to the support staff and they are not just carrying out orders any more but understanding why new initiatives are happening."

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There are downsides to the rise in prominence of middle leaders, as one contributor pointed out. The perception that a school succeeded or failed on its middle management engenders what she described as 'a huge amount of pressure'.

"With my role teaching a full timetable and my role as a middle leader, there is little time to effectively carry out all my responsibilities."

"I am very keen on peer observations and mentoring but again time is an issue –

inevitably few teachers share my non-contacts. How are we supposed to carry a strong responsibility whilst teaching full time?"

Other middle leaders agreed that they were too often 'thrown in at the deep end', while one recalled the lack of formal training she received as she progressed up the career ladder from class teacher to head of year.

"[However] I did have an excellent head who made it clear what he wanted for his school and empowered us to be both hands and feet whilst he remained the brain."

She added that schools could not function without the multitude of roles played by middle leaders:

"Middle managers are the arteries of a school. They are in the classroom so know how to lead from within. They are in each other's classrooms so they can see how to support. They are conduits back to the senior leadership team." ■

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