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Leadership Development in Struggling Schools

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A paper presented within the symposium
'Leadership for Learning: the Cambridge Network'

Abstract

This paper draws on evidence from a DfES funded school improvement project in the UK to explore leadership development in secondary schools in exceptionally challenging circumstances. Initiatives aimed at leadership development are briefly described. Central to these initiatives is the idea of expanding leadership opportunities for staff in these schools. The early impact of this development work is examined and some cautious comments are offered as to their long-term potential.

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Leadership development in struggling schools

Jane Cullen

Introduction

In April 2002, a research team from the Faculty of Education, the University of Cambridge began an evaluation of a three year Department for Education and Skills (DfES) funded pilot project with eight schools which face “exceptionally challenging circumstances”. The first year of the pilot project was spent in what the DfES describes as ‘audit and planning’ with time spent putting ‘systems, structures and protocols’ in place. The project began its ‘implementation stage’ in September 2002. This includes implementation of a reading programme in Key Stage 3 (KS3) aimed primarily at students in Year 7 (age 11-12); the setting up of a staff School Improvement Group (SIG) in each school to spearhead development work in teaching and learning; the implementation of ‘raising achievement plans’ (RAPs) and a mentoring programme by middle managers who have been trained as part of the project; the incorporation of interactive whiteboards into classroom teaching and learning; the use of a dedicated data management system for student target setting and tracking; and the setting up of video links among the eight schools for collaboration among the staff.

The definition of ‘challenging circumstances’

The eight schools in the pilot project were drawn from a wider pool of schools described by the DfES as being in ‘challenging circumstances’. This term is used widely in official and in research literature, along with seemingly

interchangeable terms such as schools in 'challenging contexts' (Harris 2002), in 'urban and challenging contexts' (Keys et al. 2003), 'in difficult circumstances' (Ainscow et. al 2003) and so on.

The term is used by the DfES (e.g. www.dfes.gov.uk/standards) to describe schools with low attainment: for secondary schools this is fewer than 25% of students achieving 5 A* to C passes at GCSE (Keys et. al 2003). Official figures from the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) which organises inspection of schools, show that the number of schools described as facing 'challenging circumstances' represents less than 20% of all secondary schools, but includes almost two thirds of those in 'special measures', or which have been judged as having 'serious weaknesses' or as 'underachieving' (Ofsted HMCI 2001/2002).

However, besides the clear links made in official reports between attainment and challenging circumstances, Ofsted reports also often use the indicator of the proportion of students eligible for free school meals (FSM) as a measure of the circumstances of the school. The relationship between circumstances external to the school and those within the school itself is the subject of much present research. It is now being more widely acknowledged that the 'challenging circumstances' can have much to do with the circumstances of the family community served by the schools and in the neighbourhood in which the school is located, and that there are *resultant* pressures on schools from being in challenging circumstances, pressures such as student mobility, rates of attendance, student behaviour and staff recruitment and retention.

The eight schools in the pilot project are all located in areas which suffer from severe socio-economic deprivation with high levels of unemployment, sub-

standard housing and a vulnerable and often transient population. Several of the pilot schools have high student mobility, in some cases with a turnover of up to a third of the students each year. Several of them have a high proportion (more than 50%) of their students who speak English as an additional language. Several also suffer from high staff mobility and problems with retaining staff. However, each of the schools is different and each experiences a unique cluster of internal and external pressures.

Leadership development

One aim of the DfES pilot project has been to develop leadership. One strand of development has been to support the headteachers by increasing their expertise and experience, both through training from the DfES, and from sharing experience and practice among themselves. Development has also involved expanding leadership, so as to include a wider group of staff in meeting the challenges found within the schools. This has directly involved middle managers who have been trained as part of the project and the training and development of a more cross-hierarchical group of staff chosen within each school to form a school improvement group (SIG).

Support for the headteachers

The opportunity for headteachers to meet, exchange ideas, visit one another's schools and to develop professionally through structured sessions has been seen by heads as a critical source of support and renewal of energy. Its purpose has been to help heads stand back, to reflect, to plan strategically and bring coherence to the various initiatives funded by the project. There have

been regular day-long meetings for the heads at least once a term, organised by the DfES. Some have been held at the schools themselves but most are held in London with a planned programme of input from DfES provided trainers. The headteachers have welcomed the input and generally describe themselves as having gained significantly from this input over the time of the project so far. There is also a consensus however, two years into the project, that they feel ready to set the agenda themselves and that they would like more (of the limited) time available together to learn from each other. While there is not yet a sense of a lateral network across the heads of all eight schools, a certain amount of strategic networking has developed among the eight headteachers and it is important that this is given every opportunity and encouragement to develop further.

Expanding leadership: the middle managers

There have been twin focuses for expanding leadership in the schools. One such focus has been on the middle managers in the schools (both subject Heads of Department and pastoral Heads of Year). Attention on the role of middle managers in the maintained sector of education has been increasing over the last few years with the sense that they are an undervalued resource. So, for example the government funded National College for School Leadership (NSCL) training programme 'Leading from the Middle' has been introduced with the idea of nurturing emerging leadership. The changing view of middle managers in both official and research literature is not simply a general view of involving more staff in leadership or of increasing competence in leading a designated subject or pastoral area, but also that middle managers can have much more of a role to play in the day-to-day

organisation and running of the school. This thinking meshes with the idea that the school Senior Leadership Team (SLT) would benefit from the resultant freeing-up of time in order to be able to focus more on the strategic development of the school. Clearly in schools which face 'challenging circumstances', where 'fire-fighting' is a phrase used regularly by the SLT members in the pilot project to describe much of the heavy, unpredictable volatile and mundane nature of the workload that they carry, such a freeing up of time to focus on long-term development, would augur well for the school.

Leadership among the middle managers has been one of the developmental strands of the DfES programme and two cohorts of middle managers have been trained, one during the school year 2001-2002, and one at the beginning of the school year 2002-2003. The training focused on leadership within a curriculum area (for example on strategies to monitor and develop staff within the department), but also including training in mentoring other middle manager leaders in the school. This was with the aim firstly of enabling more successful middle managers to help less successful ones and secondly of creating a more coherent group of middle ranking leaders. The training has also included the more strategic use of data, and training in the implementation of a Raising Attainment Plan (RAP). Reaction to the training itself was very positive. Teachers felt 'privileged' to take part in the programme and felt and, as one teacher commented,

...the training was quality training. You know you can't fault the quality of the delivery or of the materials.

However, the training did not seem to take account of individuals' previous experience or needs and the lack of differentiation has been viewed as a

disadvantage. There have also been differing responses to the training which focuses on dealing with people within and across departments. Some managers felt uncomfortable with their training as mentors perhaps simply because 'mentor' has connotations of an unequal relationship with a colleague but perhaps also because of a broader reaction to the difficulties (practical and emotional) of one middle manager setting up such a relationship with another in a school. It seems likely that the success of such a relationship depends at least in part about how much is known and understood about the idea by others in the school (including the SLT). With both the mentoring of fellow managers and the monitoring of staff within a department or team, there is a need for specialised training in skills for fostering the professional relationships needed to make criticism and intervention have positive impact.

Judgement by the schools as to the impact of the middle management training tends towards caution at this stage of the project. In one school, the training of the initial cohort did result in a major and sustained change, transforming behaviour policy in the school. In another, tangible benefits were also cited: giving a higher profile in the school to peer lesson observation, and the much more rigorous and widespread use of data to inform planning. There is the feeling overall among the eight schools that individuals have benefited from high quality training, and some departments in particular have benefited. However it is more difficult to discern an overall strategic impact at the school level. One complication in evaluating the effects of this training is that there is a degree of overlap in terms of philosophy and membership at several of the schools between middle managers and members of the SIG. Another complicating factor is that some of those who completed the training went on to promoted posts in other schools. The impact of the middle management training per se has been difficult to assess given the extent of overlap with the

SIG and with other aspects of the programme which have affected school and classroom practice. Some aspects were widely seen as less successful. Mentoring, for example, has met with resistance. Some middle managers were sceptical that it would spread influence and expertise between departments; others were simply unhappy at the idea of criticising their peers in the school. Where mentoring was positively welcomed, it has not been put into action because of lack of continuity among prospective mentors and mentees. Middle managers in the eight schools have called for more same subject contact among the schools, suggesting a more subject-centred view of middle management which may explain some of the resistance to cross departmental work. An overall disadvantage of the training model was that, in contrast to the model of SIG training, (discussed below) there was not the same systematic and sustained follow up in the schools. This may be another reason for the difficulties with mentoring as middle managers were reluctant to actively pursue the idea without the explicit and consistent support of the SLT. This overall lack of follow-up may have contributed to diminishing the strategic impact of the training.

Expanding leadership: the School Improvement Group

The School Improvement Group (SIG) does appear to be the centrepiece of improvement and is seen by most of the headteachers as a potent energy source with a transformational potential. Its ancestry owes something to the IQEA model developed in Cambridge in the 1990s, a model of improvement which uses a cadre group of staff who act as evaluators of practice and promoters of change. This is neither 'bottom up' nor 'top down', but may

rather be described as 'middle out' since its influence is designed to flow upwards to senior leadership as well as 'down' to individual classroom level.

Training for the School Improvement group began in September 2002 and takes place in three day sessions off site each term. The trainers visit each school after each training session to follow up on specific school plans for development work. There is throughout a concentration on the idea that each school has its own specific agenda for improvement. The training sessions model certain behaviours and provide a template of how the SIG group operates in the school. The SIG initiative is based on 'processes' rather than content and the aim is to make the SIG group in each school an 'enabling' one, based partly on a recognition of the importance of relationships in school, the 'affective domain'. There is an overall concentration on 'teaching and learning' and the SIG initiative is classroom focused. Reaction to the training has been extremely positive and there is a sense, in most schools, of the SIG group having become close and tight-knit, with a confidence to initiate change.

The SIG groups range in size from five to nine members and it a typical pattern is for staff to be drawn from as wide a range as possible. In one of the eight schools for example, membership is drawn from as many as seven departments and includes members whose experience is in the pastoral curriculum and in special educational needs, something the SIG group themselves view as enhancing its impact. While some of the heads describe the process of elections as one of staff volunteering, there has typically been a guiding hand behind the scenes in order to ensure an effective representation of staff. As important as breadth of experience is range in length of experience; another school provides a typical example of a cross-section of

staff: from some who have many years of experience at the school through to new staff, and from middle and senior managers to NQTs. Selection of staff is undertaken with a recognition of the importance of stability of the SIG core at the same time as the permeability of its boundaries to admit new staff and refresh its membership. It was suggested by one headteacher that a floating (or flexible) membership of the SIG was more likely to promote sustainability than where there is a fixed core membership which may fall apart when key members leave. The lesson from the schools is that the SIG is most likely to benefit when there is some turnover, neither too rapid nor too large. Relative stability is seen by the SIG groups themselves as key to the pace of development and the majority of SIG groups have changed only one or two members between this school year and the last. Where there have been more whole scale changes, this has been partly because, at one school for example, previous SIG members, including the SIG chair, have been promoted out of the school. The choice of the chair is seen by some schools as critical, while others are happy with a looser structure and at least one SIG has no chair.

Though the linkage is realised in different ways in the schools, linkage from the SIG to the senior leadership team has been described by all involved as critical to its successful functioning and influence. In seven of the eight schools there is a permanent SLT presence in the SIG. One of the schools has chosen not to include an SLT member but to have the group report directly to the headteacher. The presence of the Senior Leadership Team is potentially a significant factor, one that will play out differently in different schools. Clearly there is a balance to be struck between the autonomy and proactive nature of such a cross sectional distributed leadership group and the reactive or responsive capacity to decision-making processes of senior management.

Built into the composition of the SIG is the idea that its focus can be different in the different schools. Who sets its agenda and how it is set differs from school to school, its priorities deriving variously from HMI or Ofsted visits, being shaped primarily by the head, by professional development needs and planning, or it may to some extent develop its own agenda. Activities across the eight schools are marked more by the variety of their activities than by a central common agenda. This is generally seen as a real strength of the SIG initiative.

It is clear that overall, two years into the project and one year after 'full implementation' began, the SIG is viewed very positively with the majority of groups interviewed in the school assessing the SIG to be having 'a discernible impact'. At its most effective, the SIG is seen as the 'engine of change' in the schools. At two of the schools where the impact seems to be the greatest, this is put down in large part to the regularity and frequency with which the SIG affects development in the school. One school has introduced additional departmental meetings once a week and the other has worked to involve all school departments in SIG activity. For these two schools, the SIG has now taken over staff training.

The impact of the SIG is widely seen in terms of its ownership of the improvement agenda, its sense of authority and the legitimacy accorded it by other members of staff. For example a teacher at one of the schools argued that the Inset provided by the SIG at her school was the most meaningful in terms of its agenda and mode of delivery that she had experienced in her twenty years there. A Humanities teacher at the same school found it 'inspirational'. A significant number of these SIG members are young and relatively inexperienced teachers who have been given an opportunity to

have a say, to exercise leadership, giving a boost to their self-confidence, providing a collegial source of support, a sense of belonging and a feeling of being part of something bigger, enhancing teacher professionalism. One young member of a SIG said, after a SIG-led weekend conference, "I now feel a part of the school'. While there have been attempts in some schools to bring forward 'weaker' members of staff, the SIG seems to derive its credibility and strength from the membership of effective, well-regarded members of staff.

Reservations: the need for caution

Reservations about the impact of the SIG can be expressed in terms of the three dimensions of breadth, depth and length. Groups in each of the eight schools who not members of the SIG provide varying perspectives on its permeation across the school.

There is always the danger of a group such as SIG as being seen as an elite or favoured group and this was true of at least the perceptions in one school in the early phases of the project. The SIG group may develop a strong internal social capital and benefit from the bonding that such a group is able to achieve. The challenge is to be aware of the dangers of bonding and exclusivity and to consider how to move towards the alternative concept of 'social bridging' through which capital is multiplied among other members of school staff.

However, the fact that in at least two of the schools, staff training is wholly in the hands of the SIG group gives one measure of the penetration of the SIG initiative. Another measure is the extent to which SIG activity is known about

among staff who have no direct involvement in any of the project initiatives. In interviews with a focus group of staff who are not part of any of the DfES funded training, the SIG group activity came up most regularly as the initiative which they know about and which is affecting them directly.

With regard to depth, it is perhaps premature to make judgements as to deep impact on learning and teaching given the short time that the SIGs have been in existence and the realistic extent of their influence. The evidence from SIG members and others does suggest that at present there is a rather surface adoption of practices such as 'icebreakers', 'plenaries', 'the three part lesson', 'objectives on the board', use of 'CATS' data and so on. There are implications in this not only for further professional development within the SIG but more widely within the school. A longer term vision is to support teachers in moving beyond supportive orthodoxies to a more challenging evidence-led pedagogy.

Depth is related to the major issue of sustainability. The challenge for the SIG is to continue its same level of engagement and enthusiasm without the benefit of external support and training. The school's ability to release SIG members for training and the facility to create space within the school day, or outside the school day, for members of the SIG to meet has staffing and resourcing implications. The external training model is expensive both in respect of external trainers and the social costs of withdrawing staff from the schools. The extent to which the continuing success of the SIG is dependent on the training is an issue, sharpened as members leave and the embedding within the group of an organisational memory which has a momentum and vitality beyond its individual members. Continuity of headship will also be a consideration given the propensity of many new headteachers to make their

own mark and perhaps to see a powerful SIG as a potential threat. Two of the eight schools, have been much less involved in the SIG training programme than the other six yet still rate the present success of their SIG groups as significant. This may suggest that the external training is not a critical factor and that schools, with appropriate leadership, a sense of ownership, imagination, access to good ideas, are able to take forward initiatives on their own with equal effect. It might also suggest that other factors are involved, including other external resources which these two schools are drawing on to develop their school improvement groups.

Conclusion

It might be argued that both the middle management and the SIG initiative are only as good as the leadership which creates the space for them to flourish but at the same time keeps its finger on the pulse of their development. There is an interesting paradox in this aspect of leadership. While many of these heads may be described as 'strong' leaders it is their pushing down of power to others in the school that testifies to their efficacy. To play the role of follower has, for some, been a powerful learning experience. Monitoring the development of the middle managers and the SIG over the final year of the project will yield valuable evidence as to their deep impact and potential sustainability.

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