Middle leaders as catalysts for improving teacher practice: an R&D project involving the UCL Institute of Education and Challenge Partners (CP)¹ – Further findings


Middle leaders play an important role in school improvement. They can offer support and challenge to teachers and lead their learning both within their own school and across partner schools. Two important features of middle leadership are the ability to ensure that knowledge about successful practice is effectively circulated, and being able to track impact on changes in practice and improvement in pupils’ learning opportunities and outcomes. In short, middle leaders have the potential to be catalysts for evidence-informed change. We explored this in a year-long R&D project, carried out in partnership with Challenge Partners (CP), a charity, owned and led by a partnership of more than 300 schools across England. We worked with 16 middle leaders from hubs across the partnership, describing these middle leaders as ‘change catalysts’. Our R&D design is described elsewhere (Stoll and Brown, 2015), but jointly we decided on four project questions:

1. What do we know about effective middle leadership within and across schools that changes teachers’ practice?
2. What are powerful ways to share knowledge about excellent middle leadership practice within and across schools?
3. What evidence-based tools can be designed collaboratively between Challenge Partners middle leaders and academic partners to track changes in teachers’ practice as a result of middle leaders’ interventions?
4. What leadership conditions in schools help develop and embed cultures of shared outstanding practice?²

What have we learnt about evidence-informed change?

This experience provided rich learning about evidence-informed change, summarised in eight points.

Evidence-informed change can be powerful in partnership - Universities and schools, or networks of schools, often have different goals. Like any partnership, we needed to come to shared agreement about project aims and activities. We increasingly involved catalysts in planning sessions and a couple led workshop activities. The middle leaders thought that genuine knowledge exchange between practitioners and researchers should be practical, active and collaborative, involve deep dialogue and be focused on having an impact on pupils. Over the project, most catalysts developed a more collaborative understanding of genuine knowledge exchange where researchers can be partners and also engage in genuine knowledge exchange. We have developed a professional learning resource in collaboration with CP which we are currently trialling, and are writing articles with catalysts.

Effective research use stems from a process that’s both engaging and challenging – Catalysts’ comments about genuine knowledge exchange highlight ways they think research findings can be brought to life. This social process, which we call knowledge animation (Stoll, 2010), is a way that people make learning connections when engaging with research findings. People’s tacit knowledge needs surfacing, then blending with research knowledge. Assumptions can then be explored and challenged in learning conversations which lead the knowledge to be jointly interpreted and converted into new knowledge for use to change practice. Our processes and tools were designed to help catalysts self-evaluate and audit their situation and contexts, identify problems and think about ways to resolve them, prioritise alternatives, compare approaches, plan and take action, and lead and manage change.

Catalysts can track their impact on colleagues’ practice - Catalysts learnt robust approaches to track impact, and enabled others to do the same. Supported by us, they designed research-informed impact tools that they found powerful in helping stimulate and track changes in colleagues’ practice and which were focused on improvements in pupils’ learning. Impact measures were contextualised to specific situations and issues, but the enquiry processes always included a baseline against which impact could be judged. They also crafted questions which helped them to open up meaningful learning conversations between them and colleagues. This shifted the
emphasis from accountability of colleagues to their professional development. Catalysts described changes in colleagues’ practice and greater openness to change because the process helped build ownership. A considerable number planned to continue using the tools in different situations.

Choose potential catalysts carefully – The project ‘reached’ some catalysts more powerfully than others. The initial identification process meant that some participants engaged less actively. But many highly committed and energetic catalysts enthusiastically participated in workshops and, often creatively, tackled the challenging intersessional tasks. This included bringing together colleagues in their hub schools to exchange key ideas developed during the project. Some headteachers told us that the catalyst representing their school was the kind of excellent and influential colleague (Daly 2010) who helps spread and embed high quality practice, and that the project had deepened the catalyst’s research understanding and provided important networking opportunities.

Educational change theories can help middle leaders as catalysts – Our project’s experience was that understanding and applying theories of change was fundamental. Catalysts found these research findings among the most compelling, and told us that research on change helped them to make sense of their leadership and approach colleagues differently. We also found that their comments about other aspects of the project were frequently couched in references to the change literature. Change theory and its implications for practice should be core features of any leadership development experiences.

Commitment of headteachers and other line managers is essential – Catalysts were the core change agents, but they didn’t work in isolation. Support and backing from headteachers and other senior leaders was vital. Catalysts needed the right conditions in their schools for their interventions to work, both within and across schools. Some heads and line managers were more actively interested, encouraging and supportive than others, using ideas and tools generated in project tasks. Impact tools were new to every catalyst, so we assume that they’re not commonly discussed between middle leaders. Leading evidence-informed practice involves being able to track the impact of your leadership on others’ practice and sharing that with other leaders. Headteachers are important in creating those conditions for sharing, so need to understand the potential of evidence-informed practice for their school.

Evidence-informed change beyond their school can be challenging for middle leaders – A key goal was to develop or deepen middle leader networking and catalysts’ ability to work with colleagues in other schools. Some found this easier than others, and there were considerable disparities between catalysts in their reach beyond their school. Reflecting on change agent skills they used with different colleagues, catalysts highlighted the importance of nurturing positive relationships, including trust building, understanding others’ contexts and realities, ensuring equal participation and inclusion and sharing evidence of success when working with colleagues in other schools.

Technology’s potential for spreading evidence-informed middle leadership practice isn’t yet realised – Some catalysts were more confident technology and social media users than others. Several used technology to present intersessional task findings. Social networking can assist teachers to reflect on their practice and challenge thinking (McCulloch et al., 2011), but some catalysts preferred interacting face-to-face. Social media can be helpful in spreading evidence-informed messages, but further work is needed on this.

References

1 ESRC Knowledge Exchange Opportunities Scheme R&D project – Grant: ES/I002043/1