National College for School Leadership

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Research Associate Report

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Getting out through the middle

The role of middle leaders in the journey from failure to success

Spring 2007

Contents

Introduction

This study considers the journeys of five urban comprehensive schools that had been judged as inadequate by Ofsted, having been placed in special measures or identified as having serious weaknesses. In particular, it focuses on how such schools used their middle leaders to promote effective school improvement. It describes the emergence of examples of good practice, which may help future leaders of schools facing similar circumstances to harness the capacity of all their leaders, in order to effect a quick transition to success during this challenging but inspiring journey.

As school improvement becomes a key focus of the work of school leaders, research such as the work of Fullan (2001), Hargreaves and Hopkins (2004), and Stoll and Fink (1996), amongst many others, identifies patterns and practice that, whilst not necessarily bringing about immediate improvement in all cases, is nevertheless recognised as being helpful in many schools.

Such research has focused at various times on a range of strategies, including building capacity, sustainable change, the developing role of school leaders – in particular, the headteacher – and, more recently, the work of middle leaders.

While school improvement is a constant issue facing all schools, it is also recognised (Harris et al 2001, 2006) that the style and focus of the methodology and practice varies between schools and is related to their different circumstances. This study focuses on a specific category of school; that is, secondary schools that have been placed into an Ofsted category which, for the purposes of this study, refers to serious weaknesses or special measures. It also asks the question: 'Can middle leaders make a difference here and, if so, how and to what effect?' It considers whether generic research into school improvement applies with exactly the same degree of impact or whether a different approach is necessary for these schools.

In the context of this study, a middle leader is considered anyone who leads a curriculum, pastoral, phase or subject area team. These are staff who initially would have held titles such as head of department or head of year, although these titles and areas of responsibility are changing, particularly with the introduction of Teaching and Learning Responsibility allowances.

It is hoped that, based on the results of this research, other schools in similar circumstances will be able to identify possible useful strategies, as well as the pitfalls to avoid. It is also hoped that future leaders in these schools will be able to prepare themselves for stages to come, empathise with the comments made, and draw the reassurance and strength required to reach the end of the difficult and often lonely journey ahead.

A very pertinent quote from Gray (2000) describes that road ahead:

> "Those who work in schools 'causing concern' (or those who take up the challenge of working with them) know that there are few easy answers. They will make mistakes and pursue blind alleys; only stubbornness and sheer determination will get them to their destinations. It would be unwise, however, to ignore the fact that some progress is being made. A few years ago there were simply travellers' tales about how to get from A to B; the footpaths were not well marked and sometimes petered out. There are now some minor roads and well-worn tracks to which this review of schools' experiences may

> serve as a rudimentary guide. Some of the major roads to improvement for schools in difficulties are, however, still in the process of construction."

It is hoped this study may add a few more paving stones on the roadway.

Background research and theory

This section considers a small sample of research pertinent to the study, reflecting briefly on school improvement work in general and on its rapid evolution. In addition, it considers research on leadership styles, capacity-building, distributive leadership and the roles of middle leaders. Finally, it considers the issue of being a school in challenging circumstances, along with some of the current guidance for schools placed in Ofsted categories.

The growth of research into school improvement

The research base identifies patterns and possibilities that can be more effective in bringing about sustainable improvement. Although no one claims to have created the perfect formula, it is nevertheless recognised that certain actions and processes are more effective than others. However, the perceptions and demands of becoming an effective school are changing regularly. Moreover, there can be no doubt from all of this evidence – along with personal observation – that not only are schools changing, but that the roles of the various leaders in schools have also changed exponentially over the past decade. For example, Michael Fullan, in his book entitled *The New Meaning of Educational Change* (2001), not only maps out the changes that have occurred and the new principles that must apply to effect such changes, but has also had to adapt the content of the book itself in order to reflect the changes that have occurred between editions, clearly indicating the current pace of change.

Changes in leadership styles

The role of headship in the 1980s was a very flexible position. In the 1990 text by Torrington and Weightman, it was noted that "headteachers remain free to organise their jobs in almost any way they choose," thereby recognising that at this period a headteacher could very much create their own style with little, if any, direction or accountability" and again, "Although there may be consultation, it is expected that the headteacher will personally resolve major aspects of school policy." Within this structure, headteachers wielded enormous individual power, and frequently had total autonomy over many or all aspects of school organisation and strategy. At this time, the ideal model of headship was frequently considered to be the "heroic head" and, indeed, MacBeath (2003) was able to identify a complete "alphabet soup of leadership" to illustrate some of the changes and trends that emerged during the period. The model of the single authoritarian power – although very effective in times of crisis – constitutes a weak model once the crisis has passed and is unsuitable for sustained change and developments in time of transition. As a result, many other styles have emerged at the forefront of education. MacBeath's identification includes strategic, transformational, distributive, shared, invitational, learning-centred and teacher leadership, and student leadership. The evolving present-day emphasis in all of these terms is the principle that harnessing the skills, energy and full commitment of the entire learning community will enhance capacity and enable ongoing sustainable improvement. In addition, it will impact on the individual, who will feel not only empowered but also valued.

The importance of capacity-building

Capacity is now seen by many as being the key to school improvement. Indeed Hopkins (2001) asserts:

> "There is now a significant amount of evidence to suggest that a school improvement strategy is more likely to advance achievement for all students if it addresses not only the learning of individual teachers, but also other dimensions of the organisational capacity of the school. This is now referred to as school capacity. Without an emphasis on capacity, a school will be unable to 'transform' itself or sustain continuous improvement efforts that result in student attainment."

Similarly, a National College for School Leadership (NCSL) research paper on building school capacity (2002) describes a school in special measures as having a low capacity, and distributive leadership as a means to improve capacity.

The importance of distributed leadership

Although the ultimate focus on student leadership is still in its early stages, the practice of building this capacity through aspects of teacher leadership – in particular, relating to those with specific leadership roles within the school, such as subject leaders – is already becoming a prominent model. Consequently, middle leaders in particular have increasingly become a focus of such change. This is exemplified in many ways, including a wide range of literature by prominent researchers, including Harris et al (2006), and is supported by NCSL through middle leader courses as well through several major research projects. Supporting this emerging emphasis, Harris and Lambert (2003) note that:

> "Research shows that the most effective heads generate the capacity for improvement through investing in the development of others, by distributing leadership within the organisation and developing systems that invite skilful involvement. In short, they 'build the capacity' for improvement by empowering others to lead and develop the school."

The emerging role of middle leaders

The work and roles of middle leaders has become a key focus of research and is a particular interest of the National College for School Leadership. Two major studies were undertaken in 2003. The first (Bennett et al, 2003) looks in particular at the current research surrounding the roles of middle leaders. It notes that:

> "The changing expectation that middle leaders should act as line managers, which itself is not universally shared by senior managers… stands at odds with some middle leaders' belief that their primary obligation is to their department rather than the school, and calls into question the basis of the subject leader's authority within their area of responsibility." (p 3)

It cites a major research project, based at Keele University, by Glover et al (1999):

> "There was evidence in Glover's et al's (1999) study that many subject leaders were reluctant to hold members of their team accountable for what happened in the classroom. Middle managers still generally define their role as subject administrators, looking after human and teaching resources: they would, according to some senior staff, use administration as a refuge to avoid the awkwardness of entering the classroom of another to engage in monitoring."

The second major NCSL research project (Wise and Bennett, 2003) is based on questionnaires sent to half the secondary schools in England, looking at how middle

leaders perceived their roles and also obtaining the views of their headteachers. This work was a follow-up to a similar survey, undertaken by one of the authors seven years previously. Some of the key findings from this work are as follows:

- Overall there had not been much change since the 1996 study in what they saw as their roles. Half the middle leaders surveyed "regarded themselves primarily as teachers".
- Very few middle leaders had received any management or leadership training, with 12 per cent having had none at all.
- For almost a quarter, developing the curriculum was not seen as a major priority in their role.
- Less than half of those surveyed placed leading Inset sessions for their own team in the top six priorities of their work.
- Middle leaders were most likely to say that academic and educational tasks are at the centre of their role, but that when pushed for time they did the administrative tasks, as these are those most visible.

They sum up:

> "The lack of change in expectations from the 1996 survey is worrying given all the training and publicity that has been invested in the need for change in the role of middle leaders in secondary schools. The survey population's attitude and values are little changed from the earlier survey."

This was felt to be of particular concern given the comment of one respondent:

> "The whole area of being a middle manager has changed since I started doing the job 10 years ago. I feel a refresher training course is needed every three to four years to renew enthusiasm and ensure that middle managers are not forgotten. It is the middle managers who carry out the change within a school. Without sound middle managers, the school will fail."

From this research, it can be surmised that although the theory points to the extended use of middle leaders, in practice this is not always the case.

Schools in challenging circumstances

The present study aims to look at leadership structures that are particularly focused on schools that have emerged from Ofsted categories. Such schools are frequently in challenging circumstances and, therefore, to a great extent, the term ‘failing school’ has become synonymous with the category ‘challenging’. However, this is not necessarily the case.

Harris and Chapman (2002) look specifically at the leadership within schools facing challenging circumstances – that 8 per cent of all secondary schools designated as such by the DfES according to achievement and free school meals indicators. In 2000, 10.6 per cent of these schools were in special measures compared with 2–3 per cent nationally. Therefore, although it is clear that a level of correlation exists, the terms failing and challenging are not synonymous. This is supported by the 2005–06 Ofsted report, where an analysis of the 13 per cent of schools deemed inadequate reveals a range of socio-economic deprivation.

Much research – for example, Hopkins, 2001, Harris and Chapman, 2002, Harris et al, 2006 – has already been directed at schools in challenging circumstances as well as at government projects focusing directly on these schools. Consequently, this

present study has focused on those schools which, whilst not specifically defined as being in challenging circumstances, have nevertheless been judged to be failing.

These schools required effective and sustainable school improvement, which needs to be implemented at a fast pace, very often alongside other important issues such as staff recruitment, budget deficits and the low self-esteem of students and staff. School improvement is more than just desirable, it is imperative for the future of each of these schools as well as to ensure that all students get their entitlement to an educations which is at least satisfactory. School improvement needs to be carried out against a background of emotional backlashes and often local community rejection, and under the close scrutiny of inspections and local authority monitoring. In many respects, the situations in such schools could be classified as a crisis, and the study investigated whether current trends towards distributive leadership can still be effective, or whether the success formula implied reverting to a heroic head model.

Hargreaves (1995) captures the image of a failing school most effectively and, in so doing, identifies some of the peripheral factors that may influence the improvement drive.

> "For both teachers and students the school is close to breakdown – a classic 'at risk' situation. This is a 'survivalist' culture. Social relations are poor; teachers are striving to maintain basic control and allowing pupils to avoid academic work in exchange for not engaging in misconduct. Lessons move at a leisurely pace; little time is given to academic tasks. Teachers feel 'on their own', unsupported by the [headteacher] and colleagues in curriculum planning and classroom control. They manage each lesson as best they can. Life is lived a day at a time. Many students feel alienated from their work, which bores them, but there are no compensations in warm relationships with their teachers, who enjoy little professional satisfaction. Delinquency and truancy rates are high as is staff absenteeism, especially of the occasional kind. The ethos is one of insecurity, hopelessness and low morale."

The study seeks to explore the patterns, possibilities and pitfalls that may address such situations.

Available guidance for schools deemed to be failing

There are a number of publications, dating mainly from the late 1990s, that set out guidance and advice for schools placed in Ofsted categories. While some of these publications are more bureaucratic – and others perhaps dated – the Ofsted booklet *Lessons Learnt from Special Measures* (1999, p 2), has some practical and clear examples. Like several other publications, it stresses that:

> "Every school's problems are slightly different. No single solution will serve as a panacea to remedy all the ills that befall schools, and the speed with which schools overcome their weaknesses varies widely… It is important to remember that a strategy which works in one school will not necessarily work in other schools. There are many ways to secure improvement: some succeed in many schools. Others are effective only in a few… Each school must find its own route along the road to improvement and make its own critical evaluation of its progress."

Ofsted's report went on to talk at length about the work of the headteacher and the importance of their role. It also touches on the wider involvement of all leaders in the school. For example, it states:

> "Good management of a school makes an enormous difference… most importantly of the headteacher… But they cannot do it alone… The management responsibilities of senior staff, heads of department, phase and pastoral leaders, subject co-ordinators and others need to be clearly defined, and all involved must be enabled to fulfil their duties in guiding and supporting school improvement." (p 41)

However, there is still no clear indication that the middle leaders should develop leadership roles in their own right. Many of the examples given in this report suggest a model in which middle leaders carry out tasks, show skills in their own subject and make recommendations to the more senior leaders. But there are few examples of middle leaders actually being involved in the development of their colleagues, for example, through mentoring or coaching. This is echoed in the work of Bennett et al on the role of middle leaders:

> "Headteachers stated that heads of department were often prepared to report problems and inadequacies in their departments but not to deal with them, thus denying themselves a leadership role." (p 13)

The study therefore aims to establish to what degree, if any, this holds true in the sample of schools selected for this investigation.

Methodology

The study investigated five secondary schools in the south of England. In order to look at effective processes and the means of implementing improvements within the schools, it intentionally focused on those that had been in an Ofsted category of either special measures or serious weaknesses in the past five years, but which now have all been taken out of these categories. Ofsted publishes termly lists of schools that have been removed from such categories, and this list was used initially to identify some prospective schools to investigate. In order to avoid bringing in information from beyond the study, or personal extraneous knowledge, the study avoided using any local authorities in which the researcher had professional experience.

Basic school data was gathered from the internet – along with copies of the recent inspection reports – in order to provide background information on each of the case study schools. This was followed by a visit to each of the schools to interview the headteacher, for approximately one hour, as well as to conduct shorter interviews with a small number of middle leaders. The middle leaders interviewed varied across roles within their respective schools, spanning subject, faculty, phase and pastoral leaders. All the middle leaders interviewed had spent time in post while the school was in an Ofsted category, and most had been at the school for the entire period it had gone into and emerged from the Ofsted category.

The interviews were semi-structured in style and, by meeting a number of people, it was possible to triangulate the information gathered. Each interview was tape-recorded, while notes were taken to ensure the accuracy of the transcription. Carrying out face-to-face interviews enabled easy prompting for further information and allowed the interviewer to clarify any points that arose. The confidentiality of the interview process guaranteed a certain level of confidence in the accuracy of the information and opinions gathered.

Both the middle leaders and the headteachers were asked about conditions when the school went into a category, skill levels of competence at that time, and the general responsibilities for aspects of school development. They were then asked about the process of change, who implemented which aspects and how this was undertaken. In particular, the focus was on where middle leaders had been used and how they were developed to be able to undertake such roles. Finally, the interviews explored the overall impact of the middle leaders and the work they undertook.

The case study schools

All five schools were mixed schools and were fully comprehensive in nature. Only one of the schools had a sixth form, while some of the others contributed to consortium teaching across the towns. However, in each case, the school structures were fairly typical of the area. Each of the schools was close to the national average in size, with around 1,000 students on roll.

The percentage of five or more A*–C grades at GCSE was generally maintained above 20 per cent in all five schools, with four of the schools having over 40 per cent, thereby being near national averages on raw examination data.

While all the schools had a range of ethnicity represented, the number of students with English as an additional language varied from less than 1 per cent to nearly 14 per cent. All of the schools had students from a wide range of backgrounds and, in three of the schools, it was stated in the Ofsted report that above-average numbers

of students were disadvantaged by their socio-economic background. The number of students receiving free school meals varied from average to above average, while pupil mobility was not high in any of the schools.

The current headteachers each took up their post either just as the school went into an Ofsted category of inadequacy or afterwards. For each, it was their first headship and none had any prior experience of being in a senior leadership team in a school in such a category, although two of them had some previous experience of working in a supportive role with such schools.

Findings

What the schools were like initially

Although Ofsted has guidelines about what constitutes the need for a school to go into a category of serious weaknesses or special measures, each of the headteachers was asked to describe their own impressions of the schools at that time. In each case, they referred to a breakdown of behaviour, a lack of systems and procedures, a lack of leadership and a wide range of inconsistencies. The description tallied closely with that given by Hargreaves (1995) earlier in this study as the survivalist culture.

Behaviour was a key factor. Headteachers used terms such as “desperate”, “pitiful” and “grim” to describe the early situation. In one school, things were considered to be normal if no one was shouting in a lesson. Another headteacher stated that:

> "Challenging students and poor behaviour had been allowed to grow without being sufficiently challenged."

A third recalled:

> "It was a free-for-all really. In every school, you're always going to have your dominant negative behaviour. The question is, are you going to limit the influence of that or do you allow it to take control, and here it had taken control."

Poor behaviour was accompanied by low expectations, while achievement was often described as haphazard. It was within this environment, described by the headteachers as a situation of “despair” and “mayhem”, that staff morale hit rock-bottom. A number of schools allowed students to swear openly at their teachers without being challenged or disciplined. This lack of leadership at a whole-school level was reflected in most aspects of school life, not least in the work of middle leaders.

One significant factor was that all of the five schools identified a small group of strong teachers, including some middle leaders, who “despite the management, were trying to do the right thing", or, according to another interviewee, there were "some good ones who created their own havens, who had high levels of professionalism". One headteacher referred to “individual fiefdoms” being created by these staff. Such staff offered a lot to the students and were popular. Overall however, the level of control exercised by both senior leaders and middle leaders could generally be described as fire-fighting: individuals plugging dykes, trying desperately to hold things together. All of the schools referred to inconsistency as one of the greatest issues that had faced them.

The effect of going into a failing category

Going into an Ofsted category is always a shock, even when to the outside it may seem inevitable. In three of the case study schools, this Ofsted decision was totally unexpected by both the schools and the local authorities at the time, as the schools had seemed relatively successful.

Each of the schools related a similar pattern and story emerging at this stage. In their own ways and in their own time, all of the staff went through stages of shock,

disbelief, denial, blame, anger and despair. Morale plummeted further and many members of staff resigned, all of which resulted in increased stress for those who remained, as classes were covered by supply teachers and behaviour became an even greater issue. Most agreed that there needed to be a period of bereavement and mourning before things could change. But since time was of the essence, this needed to be quickly faced and dealt with, and then the school allowed to move on.

The initial actions

The initial actions taken at this time varied from school to school. This was particularly noted in schools where the headteachers had taken up post up to a year after the initial classification, where little progress had been made prior to their arrival. This picture reflects the research findings (Harris, 2002; Ofsted, 1999) that there is no one route, no quick fix that can be applied in every school with the same degree of success.

One headteacher summed up the initial approach like this:

> "When a school has just gone into special measures, you've actually got to do something which is about putting the brakes on, putting the brakes on decline, which doesn't mean you necessarily improve because you can't; you have to stop getting worse. And when you've got loads of staff leaving and the good kids leaving – all that kind of stuff – then putting those brakes on is jolly difficult."

As well as appointing a new headteacher during the crucial period, one school brought in an executive headteacher, while two others used additional funding for the secondment of an additional deputy headteacher. These appointments were all seen as exceptionally useful. Speaking of the executive headteacher, the current headteacher said: "He did all sorts of things that we're still reaping the fruits of now. I don't think I can overestimate the impact he had."

Other strategies in place in the early stages included remodelling and restructuring, the massive input of training into aspects of teaching and learning, as well as monitoring and accountability. However, all of the schools referred in some way to the degree of readiness required for such initiatives to be able to have a positive impact. One school referred to the necessary mindset, and another to the culture; but clearly all recognised the need for both senior and middle leaders to be receptive to the changes necessary for school improvement.

The middle leaders

During the early stages of being in a category, every headteacher encountered immense problems with the functioning and capability of the majority of their middle leaders. They also found many vacancies in key posts. The skill levels of middle leaders varied, but those subject leaders that did anything at this stage tended to be managers rather than leaders. One headteacher described a significant number of middle leaders as “not having a clue” about what was expected of them, while others echoed similar sentiments. Levels of resistance to initial change varied, both between schools and within them. One school found they had the entire range of reactions, from passive resistance and non-action to open hostility. In another, the staff were so relieved that someone was about to take the helm that they actively supported every idea put forward. In some schools, middle leaders initially tried to deflect the situation by blaming the students, the local authority or the leadership team for the inadequacies that existed, and the local area for the effect it had on student

behaviour, making them unteachable. At this stage, there was a reluctance to reflect upon practice by looking at outcomes. Judgement of lesson quality, where this was made, referred primarily to the behavioural response of the students and not to the quality of learning.

A contributory factor leading to a lack of understanding of the role was the inconsistency and inadequacy of job descriptions – if these existed at all. In most cases, the role was prescribed around tasks, which were then fulfilled to varying degrees. They did not include leading and supporting the teams, nor did they include monitoring the delivery of lessons or student learning. All of the headteachers discovered very quickly that this needed to be a prime focus of training. In several cases, this involved going back to the basics of exactly what made up a lesson and the need to plan. Throughout the early stages, heads of year had frequently played a crucial role in holding behaviour in check, as far as possible, and one headteacher described them as "stalwarts", offering a degree of support and security to the students and parents alike.

Despite the many issues, the headteachers all found some degree of willingness in the majority of middle leaders to seek to improve the situation. As one headteacher said:

> "Mainly, they felt very passionate about the school and wanted it to succeed. They wanted to be part of getting us out of this; and the ones who didn't want to be part of that… were pushed out or they jumped ship."

The start of school improvement

From the interviews undertaken, it would seem that at this stage, every headteacher adopted a similar strategy to kick-start the improvement stage. In several cases, this meant putting aside for the time being personal preferences and beliefs in distributive leadership. Consultation was minimal and the model was one that MacBeath (2003) would label as authoritarian. As one headteacher described:

> "For lesson planning, we didn't have time for debate. I took the didactic, autocratic approach for a good lesson. I just said, ‘this is what I expect to see,’ and then I went on to lay it on the line."

Similar strategies were also implemented for the introduction of monitoring procedures and expectations of accountability. A second headteacher confessed that:

> "An advantage of doing it without distributive leadership in the early stages is that it gives you more control."

For all of the schools, the biggest task was establishing clear standards of teaching and, therefore, learning in the classroom. Training included aspects of a good lesson, how to plan, as well as developing schemes of work. The actual implementation varied with each school, but certain commonalities existed.

Several schools recognised an urgent need to generate not only consistency, but also teamwork and a supportive atmosphere. They therefore chose to do much of the initial training as a whole school. One school chose to have a whole-staff conference off-site and found this made the world of difference. However, by contrast, a headteacher from another school reflected on the dangers of this, saying:

> "In many respects, not having the whole staff together was positive, especially if it depends when you are talking about. Later it would have been better, but in the early days, it would have generated – if you were not very careful – a very negative position, where they shared one another's misery, had a bit of a wallow in it. So, in some ways, focused training on smaller groups was more manageable at first."

Setting a culture

Following the initial input of authoritarian leadership, the model in most of the schools quickly changed to become more inclusive. The theme of developing a school culture and a collegial mindset was very explicitly articulated by two of the headteachers, while a similar theme was echoed implicitly throughout the work of the others. It was not just about teaching staff that made a good lesson, and it was not just about ensuring middle managers had a monitoring file; it was all about creating a group of staff who understood the purpose of their roles, who believed in the importance of giving good lessons in order that students would learn effectively and achieve highly. It was about creating staff who cared passionately about education and who wanted the best; staff who were prepared to stand up and say, 'that's not good enough,' and who were willing to reflect and take feedback to secure wider improvements. This was referred to as an underlying theme in much of what was said by headteachers about school training.

As a statutory requirement, each school had to write an action plan and work in association with the local authority to secure school improvement. Although these initial plans were shared with senior leaders, none of the schools used any major input from middle leaders at this juncture, partly in recognition of their limited skills and partly due to the time constraints regarding the plan itself. Instead, the completed plans were shared with staff, and middle leaders were encouraged to consider their roles in the context of this plan.

Defining the roles

In each case, headteachers identified clear roles for both their senior and middle leaders, together with a structure for how they would work together. Even though at this stage the lead was generally taken by the headteacher, in consultation with local authority staff and governors, it was the middle leaders that inevitably played a crucial role in the work that had to be done. The actual process of creating this new role varied between the schools. One of the schools immediately redesignated its middle managers as middle leaders. The headteacher's rationale was that:

> "Changing the name middle managers to middle leaders was really important; it encouraged dialogue but it also emphasised the accountability, and who they were accountable to."

In another school, the roles were all rewritten in terms of managing people and not things, not subjects. In one school, they did not define new roles at this stage but conveyed the expectations by word of mouth. However, every headteacher was absolutely clear that the paper the roles were written on were worthless without the discussions, the understanding, the process and the conversations that went on with the middle leaders about the real accountability and expectations of the post. The style and opportunity for these discussions were varied. Most initial discussions were led by the headteacher on a formal basis, within training sessions or meetings where the accountability and responsibilities of the role were discussed around a table. These discussions were then continued in a less formal forum, in the staffroom and

even in the pub, between pairs or small groups of staff. Several headteachers referred to the importance of finding time to be around staff for such informal dialogue to take place naturally, and this was seen by some of the middle leaders interviewed as being a valid and useful exercise. The redefinition of roles did, in itself, create some resistance from middle leaders at this time; as indicated in the study by Wise and Bennett (2003), several middle leaders did not relish the prospect of judging their colleagues through lesson observations. However, the vast majority understood the inevitability of the role and had an overriding interest in getting the school out of the failing category. If that was what it was going to take, they were prepared to put in the extra hours and to do it all.

Bringing in support

The training required for school improvement was delivered through a number of routes and by a range of personnel. In each case, the local authority's initial reaction was to send in a large number of consultants and advisers to support the school and, in each instance, this was found to be too much. The quality of advice varied and the quantity was often overwhelming. Each school soon settled down successfully to a core of external input that could meet their needs more effectively.

Each of the schools brought in specialist consultants or obtained outside help at some stage, although it is equally true to say that the headteachers led a lot of the training themselves. What they agreed on was the need to have the bulk of the work done in-house, as this enabled staff to build up levels of trust and to work together as they developed their skill base. This also resulted in consistency – a key factor in the overall success or failure of the endeavour. External providers were often seen by the staff as having little credibility in the classroom, unless their previous experience justified their status as specialist consultants.

Introducing the training

Schools recognised the conflicting needs of keeping the day-to-day business of the school running efficiently, whilst at the same time providing training and development. All of the schools focused their training into Inset days and twilight sessions, whilst releasing groups of staff to go off-site together to focus on specific issues. Middle leaders were often grouped together for training purposes in order to allow discussion and debate. Throughout this period, dialogue and communication were seen as key.

The process of delivering training varied between all five schools. There were no identified patterns as to whether or not they started training the senior leaders, then went on to the middle leaders and let that cascade down; or to those who did the training, for example, in lesson observation, as a whole-school event. All schools presented some aspect – such as what makes a good lesson and how to plan – to all staff, but the rest varied in content and approach. However, each school in some way ensured that everyone concerned knew the basics of teaching and learning. In addition, all schools tightened up procedures and documentation on issues such as behaviour. As one headteacher put it:

> "Writing a staff handbook was crucial because there was nothing for people to hang onto."

This becomes clearer when considered against the backdrop of the incredibly low morale in the schools at this time.

Bringing in monitoring and accountability

All five schools placed a major emphasis on monitoring. Self-evaluation had not really taken place with any rigour at any of the schools prior to their inspections, and there was little objective evidence available. All the schools placed monitoring as a high priority on the action plan agenda. In a minority of the schools, the main monitoring was initially undertaken by senior leaders, but in the others it became the role of middle leaders to undertake this initial work; this was then followed up and monitored, in turn, by the senior leaders and then the headteacher. In these schools, a high priority of early training was how to judge teaching and learning and how to give feedback. A key aspect of this work was paired observations in the classroom. Some schools relied on senior leaders to complete the main observation schedule, whilst recognising that they could have used middle leaders more at this stage. When middle leaders were used, it was noted that they performed the task quite well, despite initial reservations. A number of middle leaders were still reluctant to make judgements of colleagues and, in some cases, the judgements made were overgenerous. This was an issue that was addressed in part by conducting additional paired observations in order to moderate standards. A further issue arose with a clear reluctance on the part of some middle leaders to be the bearer of bad news. This was countered, to a great extent, by senior leaders monitoring and mentoring middle leaders in order to help them fulfil their role professionally for the overriding good of the students.

Building whole-school capacity

As well as the development of monitoring roles, there were the key issues of building up knowledge capacity across a team. This involved initiating dialogue at whole-school and team meetings, creating a culture where teaching and learning was openly discussed. The schools all succeeded, to a significant degree, in building up trust, particularly within team groups but less so between the different subject teams and departments.

Line management

Although a level of trust and efficiency was emerging, it was also very carefully framed and nurtured. Each school developed a very tight system of line management. In every case, senior leaders were allocated a number of departments with which they held a regular meeting, usually weekly. This was underpinned by a rigid monitoring schedule, which prescribed the agenda for each meeting, the evidence required and the nature of the discussions to be undertaken. The headteacher, in turn, then met with senior leaders to ensure this was happening. As one headteacher said: "We check that they check." This level of control was seen as absolutely necessary in the early stages of the journey; but each school also said it had started to be relaxed as time went on for those departments that were judged to be doing well. Some of the headteachers did acknowledge weaknesses among their senior leaders – particularly in the early stages – in being able to hold the middle leaders to the required levels of accountability; but this was something that they themselves generally felt they were able to coach and guide, in order to build sufficient rigour and consistency.

External courses

All of the schools had tried using outside courses in order to build capacity, particularly for middle leaders. Each school considered Leading from the Middle and four of the schools did send people on it. Unfortunately, none of the headteachers

could identify any in-school impact as a direct result of this, although they did not write it off out of hand. It was felt difficult to differentiate the effects of whole-school training as opposed to the benefits of a specific course in terms of improved skills in leadership or management. Furthermore, as one headteacher said: "I'm not sure that it addresses the consistency issues, which is still the issue with middle managers here." This lack of development of consistency, teamwork and shared culture was echoed by all the other headteachers. One headteacher recognised that the staff themselves seemed to have enjoyed the experience of the course, while others speculated on the selection process of who to send on such a course. There was an unsolved dilemma as to whether or not to send the weaker middle leaders, with the hope that the course would make a difference for them, or whether to send the stronger middle leaders, in which case the additional improvements gained might not be easily measurable.

Similar comments were made about other long-term courses, including Master's degrees, although few of the schools had many candidates doing these. One school had used a DfES course on behaviour and attendance, yet, despite the pertinent nature of the course to the school, little impact was observed. Local authority courses varied in impact. Subject-specific meetings and courses, which mainly supported subject planning and schemes of work, were useful within their limits but did not cross subject boundaries.

Two schools were involved independently in groups of teachers being trained together in coaching and mentoring. This seemed to have been a positive experience for the staff concerned, and was utilised within the school to further improvement. The criterion applied when deciding which staff to send on such courses was not whether they were middle leaders, but whether they were good teachers. Both of these schools identified one of the success criteria as being the opportunity for a number of staff to work together at the course and then to create a significant coaching and mentoring capacity within the school, supporting each other in their work. However, feedback from two other schools in the survey suggested that coaching alone at this stage in a school's development was not a useful tool. One headteacher supported this view with a comment about coaching:

> "It's useful for moving things further on, but its too slow and cumbersome in the early stages, the process is slow [and lacks]… the intensity that's needed for those who are poor but could improve… I see coaching as taking satisfactory teachers on, there's more use for it over a period of time… than shifting a consistently unsatisfactory teacher on to be satisfactory. That really needs an intense sort of input if it's going to make a difference."

Collaboration with other schools

Working in association with other schools is frequently seen as a useful tool for schools in need of improvement. However, the opinions and views of the sample schools were divided. While some schools found other schools willing to reciprocate by sending as well as receiving staff – and which provided useful support mechanisms for subject leaders – others found the differences between the intake and calibre of students to be so extreme that they made similarities in teaching requirements difficult to assess. They also felt their own school, despite its failing category status, had many strengths and areas of expertise, which outweighed those at the Leading Edge school, and these were not recognised but frequently put down by staff at the host school.

However, all of the schools did have some degree of linkage with other schools, even if it was only to send an individual teacher in to observe a lesson or talk about schemes of work. Most of them found this strategy to be an extremely useful addition to the toolkit of practice needed to improve quality.

Views, responses and actions of middle leaders

One of the most significant aspects of the interviews with middle leaders was their varying perception of the state of their schools as they went into an Ofsted category. Although some recognised the breakdown of strategic planning and organisational processes that had led to the judgement, many did not perceive the situation as having been that bad. Behaviour was seen as a key feature but none really acknowledged that poor teaching was a contributory factor in this.

Each of the middle leaders interviewed referred in some way to the deterioration of morale, particularly at the point of being assessed by Ofsted as unsatisfactory. They referred to a range of emotions, from anger to resentment, a lack of confidence and low self-esteem. Several referred to a reluctance to meet up with colleagues from other schools for fear of being considered a failure, and this did affect the decision to attend training provided by the authority.

Virtually all the middle leaders identified weaknesses in senior leadership, some directed just at the headteacher who had been in place as the standards fell, others at the entire team or some amorphous body which managed the school. Some placed the blame on the local authority, others on the behaviour of small cohorts of unmanageable students.

None of them identified weak teachers or colleagues as being part of the problem, although they did refer to inconsistencies across the departments; but there was no clear understanding as to why this was so. None of the middle leaders felt that the skill levels of middle leaders had been a contributory factor in the outcome, although they did go on to talk about how they had subsequently developed. Some of the middle leaders interviewed had been heads of departments of areas that were recognised by Ofsted as being satisfactory or even good. However, they were not really clear about what had made the difference, although some had some ideas as to why this might have been so, referring to “running a tight ship” and “working well as a team”.

Perceptions of their role

Several of the middle leaders did recognise that they had not understood their role as middle leaders at the time the school went into a failing category; but this varied amongst the group interviewed. Some were relatively new to the post and just picked up on jobs that were immediate, such as the need to buy stock and so on, while others had already developed – on their own initiative – a team ethos and a sharing of knowledge and experience. This was often supported by regularly going into each other’s lessons – and even team teaching in some instances – but without the formality of monitoring logs or observation sheets.

There were several who managed the administrative aspects of the area effectively and who produced good lessons themselves; and, at the time, this was considered a good model for a head of department. All middle leaders had been working very hard at the time of going into a category and continued to work very hard throughout the period. None referred to a specific time when what they were doing changed significantly, but indicated a gradual change in the focus of their work.

Reactions to change

The attitudes of middle leaders regarding the arrival of a new headteacher coming in and implementing change were almost universally positive. They all recognised that after going into the category, that changes had to be made, and most believed that the incoming strategies were effective. However, those in departments that were relatively successful did not feel that so many of the changes impacted on them. A number of middle leaders interviewed, across all the schools, identified staff that had not felt they needed any support or help in how to teach, despite an indication that a range of practitioner skills existed across the school.

The first changes middle leaders noticed from the new regime were those directed at behaviour management and procedures. They all felt this was a very necessary prerequisite to other changes, and were appreciative of an authority figure coming in and putting that stamp on the school.

In schools where the headteachers had referred most passionately to building a culture or a mindset, middle leaders referred to the initiatives as getting people to open up, building trust and getting teams to gel together. They felt this was a useful, perhaps essential, strategy that they had not really focused on before. However, they did not all recognise such developments.

Perceptions of training

Middle leaders mostly referred to the vast range of training programmes that had been made available in teaching and learning, although even with this issue there were differences in perception of what had happened. In one school where both the headteacher and some middle leaders had referred to endless training programmes, there was still one middle leader who said there had been "no training to speak of". Throughout the interviews, training was referred to almost as if it was divorced from anything they were personally involved in. At this stage, no middle leader had any input into the training programmes that had been set up, whether in an advisory role in sharing the needs of their own teams, or in a practical role of demonstrating good teaching. Video resources were all taken from other sources and no mention was made of the good practice available within the school in the early stages. Several of the middle leaders admitted they had found this disappointing, as it implied that there was no good or exemplary practice within the school, although each of the headteachers interviewed referred to the good practice that had existed.

There were varying opinions regarding the value of bringing in outside consultants, although, on the whole, they were recognised as being useful. As one middle leader put it:

> "The personalised touch is more important than bits of paper – consultants and the like can help you to focus on what the role of a head of department really is."

Middle leaders did not see whole-school training as so useful, as it did not sufficiently meet the different needs of the audience. Similarly, some felt that having all middle leaders together was also an issue for the same reasons. This reflects exactly the closing statement from Wise and Bennett (2003) who state:

> "There is evidence here that it is not acceptable to treat all middle leaders in secondary schools as one homogeneous group… Some of these need to

work together but it is unlikely to be accomplished by treating them as all the same."

Many middle leaders found it really useful to have one-to-one support and training, particularly in carrying out paired observations and in giving feedback. There was no consensus as to whether this was best carried out by internal or external staff, so long as they felt that the person doing it had sufficient credibility. Lesson observation was an area where they all identified they had had a training need, and all felt they had developed a lot in this area. The heads of year in the study had received the same training in some schools but had been left out in others. Those who had not been trained felt disappointed by this and felt they had missed out on an important opportunity to enhance the learning of the students in their care.

Understanding their roles

Several middle leaders recalled being trained in their roles with groups of other middle leaders; some, in particular, were taken off-site in smaller groups for this purpose. They generally found this to be an extremely useful experience and several remarked that, for the first time, they understood what the full purpose and implication of their roles were. They felt the main bonus was that they had the opportunity to take time out to reflect on what they were actually there to do and, in particular, to discuss their roles in small groups. These discussions were initially quite structured, and included significant input from either the headteachers or the external facilitators with the aim of raising issues of expectations, responsibilities and accountability that had not previously been considered. In several of the schools, this discussion was backed up by written documentation covering the precise details that the role would encompass in the future, although the documentation was secondary in impact to the process of discussion. One middle leader, however, dismissed the process as “probably necessary but not very useful". Having a clearly structured input at this stage did detract slightly from the ownership aspect, but it had the advantage of enabling the discussions to move on quickly in order to achieve the rate of improvement necessary for a school facing the prospect of termly inspections.

Perceptions of accountability

Accountability was generally seen to be tied up purely with the process of monitoring. Middle leaders all talked about the regimented style of line management and several referred to the monitoring folders structure, that had been dictated by the headteachers. There was a general feeling that this was part of the role. Contrary to the findings of Wise and Bennett (2003), they were all willing to observe their colleagues, to provide feedback and to keep records of this work, which would then be scrutinised by the senior leaders. There was an overall acceptance that in a failing category, this was going to be necessary. There was even a positive view in several of the discussions that it was really useful to know what your colleagues were doing and not just to rely on faith, as they had done before. A number of the middle leaders saw that this evidence base would enable them to build further on the good practice that existed and to make things even better for the pupils. There were still one or two middle leaders interviewed who, although they saw the value of this training for some of their colleagues, did not consider it was necessary for them personally as they felt that the good practice already existed.

Like the headteachers, middle leaders talked a lot about consistency; as one said: "the biggest barrier [is] getting all staff to do the same, to follow the same procedure." They saw this as a potential challenge to be achieved with difficulty, while several said it had yet to be achieved. They recognised that the more teams worked

together, the greater the degree of consistency that would be developed; but, at the end of the day, people still went off and did their own thing.

Perceptions of training courses

When asked about training courses, the common view was that they had not really experienced many good external courses and that the best training was on-site or at least with their own colleagues. Those who had attended courses on topics such as mentoring together with a number of their own colleagues did find this beneficial as they felt that, with a number of them together, the learning could be brought back effectively into the school environment. The most favoured training was the one-to-one support they received, usually from a consultant or from a local authority adviser in aspects of the role or in lesson observations.

Middle leaders who had attended the Leading from the Middle course seem to have found it useful personally. As one middle leader said: "It enabled me to be more reflective; I've never had a chance to that before. It was really good." The same person also said how useful they had found it to have several staff together on the course, as it provided an opportunity for mutual support and collaborative working. Within individual institutions there was no correlation between the benefits felt by those who attended the course and the views of the headteachers who were watching and waiting for any significant impact. One middle leader summed this up with the comment: “Leading from the Middle was useful: I got something from it, but doing the job was a bigger learning curve. I learnt a lot more then.”

A number of people referred to the initial lack of ownership in the action planning and implementation process. In terms of direct input, at the time this did not seem to be a major issue as they acknowledged that their own experience of such matters was limited. However, they did feel excluded from the consultation processes, even where headteachers stated that they had presented the plans to the rest of the school. This did not seem to affect their willingness to follow the plans, but they hoped to be more involved in the future.

Feeling valued

There was a split in views about how well supported and how valued the middle leaders felt. Comments varied and included the following:

> "We sometimes felt that middle leaders are not part of the school, that SLT [the senior leadership team] wanted it all for themselves."
>
> "They [the senior leadership team] could not have done it without the middle leaders – no. It needed direction and they gave that and then they [the middle leaders] directed their teams."
>
> "When we went into special measures, we had more contact with the headteacher; we felt that they felt the middle leaders were going to make a difference, that all the middle leaders together were going to push up standards."
>
> "The headteacher made you feel supported, that you were all in it together."

There was a clear consensus, however, for the need to value middle leaders and to recognise that it was they, the middle leaders, who were going to change things after the initial training had been completed.

What did middle leaders actually do, or not do, in the process of school improvement?

There was a general agreement amongst all concerned that middle managers grew into leaders during this phase of the life of the school. Prior to going into a failing category, the vast majority were not carrying out their expected roles of bringing in and sustaining developments and initiatives. Currently, however, they are playing quite a key role in each of the schools, either within their own subject area or sometimes across the school.

Central to the learning process was understanding that they were not just employed to teach their own groups, but that they were also expected to carry out a monitoring role, to support and to develop their colleagues, and generally to enhance the work of their team. By so doing, they were able to bring about improvements in teaching and learning and, thereby, to raise achievement in the subject. This in turn brought about better behaviour and resulted in greater consistency amongst the staff when it came to following school procedures.

More specifically, subject leaders, through meeting time, lesson observation and book scrutiny (checking a sample of student books to ascertain the quality of the work and the feedback given to students), agreed to ensure that:

- schemes of work and lesson planning were of such a quality that they challenged and engaged the students with a variety tasks, and were of a standard to match the ability of the students in the group
- subject knowledge and knowledge of the assessment processes were developed in everyone who had an input into the teaching of that subject
- all of their team understood the basics of a good lesson and were coached and encouraged to perform at that level. However, not all middle leaders recognised their role in this coaching process
- data was carefully analysed to identify progress and to assess and review teaching where necessary
- students were provided with adequate feedback to ensure they not only understood where they were, but also how to move forward
- the environment for learning was stimulating and orderly
- all staff in their team were encouraged to work together, supporting one another and sharing good practice
- all staff in their team were encouraged to reflect on their own skills, strengths and weaknesses and, from this, to plan an appropriate programme of professional development
- the senior leadership was kept regularly updated on the progress and work of the department, with an accurate account of standards and plans to address shortfalls

Although not all middle leaders in the schools had reached this level of competence, there was nevertheless a common acknowledgment that these areas were their responsibility, and that these were areas they themselves felt they were moving forward on. Several of the headteachers recognised there was still a rather limited perception of leadership activity, as well as an overreliance on senior leadership, but they saw this as an area for future development.

In the early stages, middle leaders did not really input into the development of policy or planning but merely followed guidance distributed to them. However, in all the schools, this was beginning to change, while in several schools, Teaching and

Learning Responsibility allowance changes were being used as a tool to restructure roles in which, for example, middle leaders would play a far more strategic role in self-evaluation, writing their own Self Evaluation Form (SEF) and associated action plans, in line with overall school policy and priorities.

Several middle leaders and headteachers referred to moving on to greater involvement in leadership by leading Inset sessions, working groups and forums, and by providing a greater input into agendas for meetings with senior leadership.

What were the views of their role in moving the school forward?

The views of the majority of middle leaders interviewed were that their input was vital, making a major contribution to getting the schools out of a category. However, they also recognised the limitations that they had and the importance of the school collectively doing it together. Comments which supported this view included:

> "There was a fantastic atmosphere, working together to get out."
>
> "The school has improved teaching and learning through the middle leaders; the middle leaders have done it with the help of [the] SLT [senior leadership team], their guidance, support and initiatives."
>
> "It could not have been done without middle leaders, no, but it needs direction, [from senior leaders] and then they [middle leaders] direct their team."

However, there were those who saw things differently, as summed up by the comments of one middle leader:

> "It has been said many times that the middle leaders will make a difference – but this just puts pressure on the middle leaders as everyone is aware of what has been said. Having come out of special measures, I don't consider I am any part of that [getting out of special measures]."

Views of headteachers

Overall, the views of the headteachers were quite similar to those of the middle leaders. There was a general consensus from four of the schools that they could not have done it without the middle leaders. The fifth school felt they had not used their middle leaders sufficiently, although they intended to start doing so in the future. However, even this school mentioned a number of key roles that were left completely to the middle leaders, albeit under the scrutiny and guidance of more senior staff.

The headteachers did reflect carefully on this question and commented further:

> "The middle leaders were the ones who established real consistency on how a lesson was delivered."
>
> "Could I have done it without the middle leaders? No, I don't think so. I needed them to preach the message. They are the missionaries out there selling it to their teams."
>
> "Heads of department are key, always… they are the mainstay of the school, the engine house."

> “Using middle leaders is key; well it is the key in the long term. I suppose I did bypass them to a degree in the short term, but that was because of the weaknesses in the situation. It was a strategy to get out of a situation rather than a principal decision that they shouldn’t have a role.”

> “The people who I think are largely keeping an eye on individuals and whether they are performing, on a day-to-day basis, are the heads of department.”

> “The morale factor? The good middle leader galvanises the faculty and will be an evangelist. They need to believe in what the headteacher says, with passion, and then drive this message on. It’s the ‘we have to do this… we can do this’.”

The headteachers were asked at what point could middle leaders be used most effectively, and several referred to a necessary lull, early on, before it was possible to train them. The mindset, the culture needs to be established first before they can be used effectively in the middle leadership role. One headteacher, when asked if they could have used their middle leaders earlier, said:

> “I might have been able to do more with them then, but I don’t know culturally if staff would have found that acceptable then as they would find it, and are finding it now… It’s to do with being part of the journey.”

Conclusions

To bring this case study to its conclusion, the questions to be considered are:

- What exactly are the findings of this study?
- What lessons were learnt by these schools that could be of value to others in similar situations?

In these five schools, middle leaders were key in performing the workload that was required to meet the rigours of the inspection process and its aftermath. The headteacher was key in directing the strategy, policies and procedures to be followed. The rest of the senior leadership had to play a vital part in observing that these directives were being followed, whilst again the headteacher was key in ensuring this happened. The development of capacity, of building teacher-leaders was crucial, but not before a period of closely directed and structured leadership from the headteacher. Outside consultants and small groups of local authority staff can boost capacity to work with and train individuals and groups of staff. And the overall message was summed up by one interviewee who simply said: “I think we did it together, all of us working together, supporting each other.”

What lessons were learnt by these schools that could be of value to others in similar situations?

- Middle leaders may need support and guidance but they can play a vitally important role in providing capacity to bring about school improvement.
- Headteachers are likely to have to adopt an authoritarian style at some point early on in order to kick-start the improvements.
- There may frequently be a lull at the beginning, immediately after the judgement is announced, before the school is ready to move on.
- Leaders should make sure people are aware of the stages they will face on the way along the journey, particularly the emotions that will rise to the surface. This makes it much easier to manage when it does occur.
- In these schools, establishing a teaching and learning group did not have a major impact – they focused on a small group of staff, who were often good teachers anyway, but who did not have the effect of creating consistency or of raising the standards of others.
- Middle leaders will be expected to cover an enormous workload at this stage and anything practical that can be done to support them in this work is helpful. This could include a lowered teaching load, extra ICT support, exemption from providing cover, doubling up on leadership roles to add capacity, and additional administrative support.
- Grouping middle leaders into threes is a useful strategy to help build consistency, to provide mutual support and to use good middle leaders to bring on less-experienced or newer staff.
- As staff see things getting better, it is a boost to morale. “Other staff are then more prepared to change when they see the impact [the initiatives are having] on student work and results.”
- Lesson observation, coaching and feedback were more significant than just going in and making judgements on the lessons – but the inspectors want to see evidence of how you know things are changing.
- “Planning, sharing, talking – these things are really important. Find time to talk... “
- As a middle leader: “Don’t try to do too much at any one time… Don’t look for massive changes, look at areas you can change and then do that well.”

- As a headteacher: “Don’t try to do too much in one go, chunk the planning carefully, so that each time the inspectors come they can see what you’ve been working on and what you’ve achieved.”

Some last requests

For headteachers

In each of the schools visited, headteachers were more than happy to tell their stories: the good, the bad and the indifferent. They found the experience of talking about the journey a valuable reflection tool. They were all of the opinion that talking things through was an important aspect, but one that was not really available to them at the time. They would like to see a network set up where headteachers of schools who go into an Ofsted category can talk; talk about common experiences and, in particular, talk to people at different stages along the journey. Ideally, the listener should be a headteacher, not connected in any way with the local authority, be independent, and act as sounding-board or a critical friend when needed. The general view was that this was better on a face-to-face basis than at a distance.

For middle leaders

They would like someone to point out the positives, particularly if it was someone who had a role in moving the school forward. They also wanted an opportunity to work together much more, as a group of middle leaders, not on administrative tasks but on the important issues of school improvement and leadership.

And finally

Being placed in an Ofsted category is traumatic and difficult for all concerned. As one of the middle leaders said: “Going into special measures is a disappointment. You question yourself as a teacher, even if you sort of knew you were OK at it really.”

However, there were positive aspects, as illustrated in the following quotes from those involved:

From headteachers

> “It’s a journey worth following as well… the staff here are so much stronger having been through the process. It’s arduous at times, but the people that stuck with the course came to be massively stronger.”
>
> “Special measures can be useful; it’s an opportunity to move a school on quicker than without it.”
>
> “It’s not an easy road.”
>
> “It’s hard, uncomfortable.”
>
> “It’s a good journey.”

From middle leaders

> “It’s a fantastic atmosphere, working together to get out.”

“The job as middle leader has changed enormously. Ofsted is a very good learning curve; you are able to pick up your own strengths and weaknesses. Everyone worked well together.”

“The extra training when we were in special measures was good; it would not have happened otherwise.”

“Everyone has gained at the end of the day. It must have been good!”

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