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Research Associate Report

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Ringing the changes

The middle leader's role in leading change

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Our schools can be wonderful places of enchantment and creativity, opening doorways to new ways of perceiving, new ways of being; but they are most of all places of exquisite hope in the possibility of the future, in the possibility of people.
(Clarke 2000, p38)

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Introduction

How do middle leaders lead an initiative to secure lasting change?

Change is a recurrent theme in the life of education in the UK and teachers' anecdotal comments express weariness and at times frustration at the regularity and extensiveness of changes imposed on the profession. While there is much literature on senior leaders and how they manage change (West-Burnham and O'Sullivan 1998; Sergiovanni 2001; Fullan 2003), there is less available on how middle managers manage change, even though middle managers are pivotal to the successful implementation of any change in a school. This research addresses how middle leaders address the school improvement agenda.

Teachers cannot be expected to take sole responsibility for promoting any change agenda in their classrooms; they need help and support, largely from within their own schools (MacBeath et al 2007). Direct guidance and support for most teachers mainly comes from their immediate line manager, their subject or faculty leader. Since the middle leader's role is a pivotal link between senior leaders and classroom colleagues, they are often both the conduit as well as the interpreters of either discussions with or dictates from senior leaders. Middle leaders are expected to embrace, lead and monitor the huge number of change initiatives initiated by senior leaders. This case study investigated the role of middle leaders in implementing a particular change initiative with the aim of identifying effective leadership strategies that helped in this process. The initiative undertaken was the implementation of assessment for learning (AfL) within each faculty area of a large suburban secondary school; the principles examined, however, are applicable to any change initiative.

This case study's consideration of the implementation of one particular change initiative, AfL, was one among many change initiatives confronting staff at the time of the research. There is copious literature that provides evidence of how schools have successfully implemented AfL in schools and where the desired outcomes of raising achievement and engaging students in their learning were shown to be secured (Black 1993; Black and Wiliam 1998a, 1998b; Black et al 2002; Black et al 2003b; Assessment Reform Group 1999, 2002). However, given that this was one of many change initiatives driven down from above – for example, either by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), the Local Education Authority (LEA), Ofsted, or closer to home, by senior management – I was interested to explore if, and how, a particular initiative – in this instance, AfL – was securely embedded amidst the many other changes being undertaken in the school at the time. Moreover, I wished to determine what principles of leading change could be extrapolated and applied to any change initiative undertaken by school leaders. James et al (2006) pose questions arising from the Learning How To Learn (LHTL) project (which also examined the implementation of AfL) that were the starting point for this research:

> Claims for the effectiveness of AfL raise a number of further questions for research, which go beyond the classroom. For example, how does one spread knowledge and promote changes in these specific practices across teachers and schools? How can one achieve leverage using minimum resources for maximum impact? (p 102)

Literature review

Embedding change

An initiative needs to be 'embedded' to ensure lasting and deep-seated change. Embedding is 'a concept applied to a vision, a set of procedures which become integral to the structure and culture of an organisation' (Swaffield and MacBeath 2006: 2). Conversely surface change is neither long lasting nor deeply entrenched, usually because of teachers' lack of understanding of the principles, rationale or implications of the change for their own practice. Embedding is the result of concerted leadership choices.

Leadership style and approach

Interactions with staff were central in middle leaders' endeavours to secure change and each middle leader adopted leadership styles and approaches that they deemed appropriate to achieve the desired outcomes. Leadership style describes the *type of interaction* between leaders and followers. Leadership approach, on the other hand, outlines the leadership *strategies* utilised to secure change. Both are closely linked to each other.

Leadership style

Leadership style includes the way an individual expresses leadership, uses power and authority, arrives at decisions and interacts with teachers and others. The National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH), a qualification explicitly for the British educational context, identifies six leadership styles:

- Coercive – uses many sanctions and few rewards – directives rather than direction
- Authoritative – has clear vision; justifies and takes responsibility for long-term direction
- Affiliative – aims to avoid conflict/confrontation and develop harmony
- Democratic – encourages participation and collaboration; seeks consensus and aims to seek commitment through ownership
- Pace-setting – focuses on task accomplishment to high level of excellence; takes lead
- Coaching – encourages development of others; identifies strengths and weaknesses. (DfEE 2001: 6)

Much of literature emphasises that effective leaders do not operate in one style only but use a range of styles and are able to understand how to match and adapt these styles to the context and the people being led (Hersey and Blanchard 1969; Earley and Fletcher-Campbell 1992; DfEE 2001).

Adoptive and adaptive leadership approaches to managing change

There are two approaches (Minzberg 1979; Barth 1990; Hopkins et al 1994) that outline the different strategies in securing change. The adoptive (or dominant/rational) approach is top-down while the adaptive (or community of learners/emergent) approach is bottom-up.

The adoptive approach emphasises pre-planning and the predictable nature of change in school development planning and embodies a rational attitude towards implementing

change; strategies utilised to manage change are linear and top-down, motivated by an authority figure. External pressure generally provides the motivation for change.

The adaptive approach, on the other hand, emphasises change as continuous, open ended and unpredictable because of the dynamic nature of the organisation itself that constantly undergoes flux. The adaptive approach commences with problem identification, is strongly rooted in reality and involves the move from analysis to practice. It places a strong emphasis on people as part of the change. It allows for all stakeholders' skills, aspirations and energies to be rallied to improve themselves according to their *own* organisational culture and identified needs (Barth 1990).

Structures and culture

Swaffield and MacBeath (2006) put a case forward for schools to be versatile enough to embrace both adoptive and adaptive approaches of change simultaneously. They suggest that the embedding of change by means of the adoptive approach can be secured through 'structures' while an adaptive approach means working within or changing the 'culture' of an organisation. Structures are procedural mechanisms that define the locus of control, internal accountability and are related to specific tasks with explicit lines of authority. There is a top-down flow of information from management to teachers and others (Weber 1961). Culture, on the other hand, refers to norms, values, beliefs, traditions and rituals of people that are built up over time within a particular context (Carmichael et al 2006). It comprises the informal expectations and values that shape people's thoughts, feelings and actions (Deal and Peterson 1998).

The adaptive approach utilises coaching, democratic or affiliative leadership styles, 'leading by example, modelling behaviour, and encouraging a permeation of ideas through developing and sharing understandings' (Swaffield and MacBeath 2006: 210). As a result of shared understanding, individuals become champions for the new cause, gradually sharing it with other willing volunteers. Eventually, however, structures need to be introduced to ensure more permanent and extensive change. Coercive, pace-setting or authoritative leadership styles are more readily applied to the adoptive approach with structures used to secure change. In it the leader may use these leadership styles to move straight to adopt new practices by creating and enforcing new structures and procedures – particularly when there is an external imperative. Structures or management mechanisms can shape the culture within an organisation; conversely cultural changes will eventually need to be underpinned by structures. There is therefore a symbiotic relationship between structure and culture where one affects or leads to the other.

Continuing professional development

Research indicates that effective continuing professional development (CPD) should focus on classroom change and development of new patterns of teaching behaviour, secured through learning communities and professional learning. These are critical for reform implementation and are an essential component of how a school is managed if *lasting* change is to be secured.

For CPD to change classroom practice, there needs to be a commitment by teachers to review their performance to allow for development. A combination of teachers working together utilising presentation modelling, practice, feedback and coaching is more effective than teachers simply hearing a presentation that generally only raises

awareness but has little impact on changing or even affecting classroom practice itself (Joyce and Showers 1991).

In order to determine whether and how embedded change was achieved the focus of this research was on the complex interrelationship between leadership approach and style, structures and culture and CPD.

Methods

This research was a case study undertaken by myself as the inside researcher. It examined change within the context of the school as a whole organisation, but also looked at how each of the seven faculty heads implemented change. The research, undertaken over three years from 2004-2007, investigated and measured if/how change had taken place. A combination of qualitative and quantitative methods was used to ensure more robust data, thereby improving reliability and validity:

Qualitative

- Interviews of middle leaders, students, consultants and Ofsted
- Lesson observations.

Quantitative

- LHTL questionnaire
- Student questionnaire.

The seven faculty leaders were interviewed at the end of each of the three years to determine if/what changes had taken place, and how the initiative had been led. Senior and middle leaders undertook lesson observations so that practice changes could be monitored and evaluated. As a means of triangulating faculty leaders' perspectives, staff in 2004 and then again in 2006 answered a questionnaire devised and used by the LHTL national research project (see Pedder 2006). This questionnaire, which had an 88%+ return in each of the years, evaluated changes both in colleagues' assessment values and their practices. A small sample of five Year 8 students was interviewed at the end of the first year to glean their perspectives on general assessment practices. By the third year all students had been introduced to and made aware of the principles of AfL and a questionnaire was issued to evaluate their experience of the initiative and how extensively it had been implemented. Fifteen students in each of the Years 7–12 answered the questionnaire. There was an opportunity for open responses as well as the closed questions. Areas of interest and anomalies arising from the questionnaire were then explored in interviews with members of the student council representing each Key Stage.

Over the three years various consultants worked with the teams and team leaders, and they provided INSET and training to middle leaders, the whole staff and to faculties. Consultants provided insights into the extent of the beliefs and practice changes; they were also able to highlight areas of misconception. They were useful in triangulating middle leaders' judgements on the extent of the changes and their approaches in leading; Ofsted judgements provided further triangulation in the evaluation of the extensiveness of the implementation.

Findings

While the focus of this research is very much focused on the role middle leaders play in securing change, it is important to evaluate the evidence there was for the extent of the change. Very brief consideration is therefore given to the data that supported middle leaders' evaluations that change had indeed taken place. Subsequent paragraphs consider the role of middle leaders in securing these changes.

Evidence of outcomes: LHTL questionnaire and student, consultant and Ofsted perspectives

LHTL questionnaire

The results of the LHTL questionnaire, administered after the end of the first year of the project and again after the third year in order to measure progress, confirmed middle leaders' judgements of changing beliefs and practice. The 'Making learning explicit' category evaluated the extent to which teachers used measures to draw, clarify and respond to evidence of learning as it occurred during lessons (in particular learning objectives, comments using *s and Ts on students' work, teachers' questioning skills). There was a pleasing improvement on the practice scores although there had been no improvement in the value teachers placed on these strategies. The 'Promoting learning autonomy' category, which evaluates the extent to which students take on greater independence over important aspects of their learning (including utilising the learning objectives and peer and self-assessment), returned the greatest practice improvement of the entire questionnaire. The scores showed that staff had also come to value 'Promoting learning autonomy' much more.

Students

The data collected indicated that over the three years there had been a shift in teachers' practice, and there was clear evidence of the change strategies being used in classrooms.

At the end of Year 1, students noted a change in the way their teachers were marking and praised their improved efforts:

> "Teachers use little reminders this year more. They didn't do it last year."

> "Teachers … just gave marks and ticks last year. Ticks weren't very helpful because you know where you've got it right but you want to know improvements." (Year 1)

> "Last year they just looked at your work and put a tick on it. This year most teachers actually take in the books and mark them and I feel they are looking at the work more than going around the class and ticking it every month." (Year 1)

Questionnaire and interview data in the third year provided more detailed insights into the specifics of the AfL changes. Evidence across all year groups indicated that students were aware of AfL changes in classroom practice. In the main students noted that AfL strategies were being practised in their classrooms and had a positive impact on their learning. Interviews showed that practice inevitably varied between faculty, year group and from teacher to teacher but nonetheless that change was evident and had had an impact. They observed that objectives were set by staff and were helpful in providing clear guidance as to what they should be learning; they also helped in the assessment of their work. They found the comments provided by staff, including targets and stars,

useful where advice was specific and where it could be applied in subsequent work. Peer assessment was less widespread and they felt uncomfortable in its usage; they felt it was not effective, mainly because it was difficult to be honest with peers and because they felt they lacked confidence in making assessment judgements about other's work. Self-assessment did have some benefits in providing immediate feedback, however, and in highlighting areas for improvement.

Consultants and Ofsted

Direct feedback was requested from the Ofsted inspectors about their observations of AfL in the school in the third year of the pilot. Ofsted commented that teachers had a strong command of AfL and that it was well integrated into the teaching in the school. They noted that "there is a strong focus on AfL – teachers handle it well", and detailed and accurate assessment provided very good information to improve. Similarly, whole-school consultants' comments about staff progress in embracing and applying AfL supports and triangulates middle leaders' own judgements and staff responses in the LHTL questionnaire. Having delivered a voluntary after-school INSET that was attended by almost two third's of staff a consultant commented that "the quality of conversation was a couple of notches above other schools. All were asking how can I get better rather than why should I do this?". On the middle leaders he noted that "you have a lot of middle leaders who are up with teaching and learning…. I have seen in every single case that middle leaders are wanting to lead in learning and want to get better in teaching and learning. They lead by example in that way. They don't see themselves solely as managers".

There was therefore tangible evidence supporting middle leaders' evaluation of the implementation of the change in their subject areas. How the middle leaders secured these changes is the subject of the following paragraphs.

How middle leaders' lead change

Choosing adoptive and adaptive approaches

Middle leaders used one of two strategies to secure change – either an adoptive (top-down) or adaptive (bottom-up) leadership approach. The corresponding leadership styles also altered, to marry with the approach chosen. Over the course of the pilot three clear themes emerged that influenced the approach used to secure change, and interviews gave insights into why there was a change of approach:

- staff beliefs and understanding of the initiative
- team composition
- similarity of previous practice to the change initiative.

Beliefs and understanding: in the three faculties where the adaptive approach was initially utilised, each commented that this was because the middle leader wanted to *encourage* people into the new initiative using a more collaborative style. However, all but one middle leader switched to the adoptive approach within the first year because there was limited evidence of colleagues' changing practice. Middle leaders commented that colleagues' lack of understanding of the initiative was a major barrier. At the end of the first year of the pilot, evidence from middle leader interviews showed that their management style adopted was authoritative/coercive rather than affiliative/democratic even though they intimated that affiliative/democratic was often their preferred style.

This was linked to the amount of resistance shown by colleagues and the chequered adoption of the agreed strategies of AfL by staff. Two explanations for the resistance and variable adoption emerged clearly at the end of both the first and the second year middle leader interviews:

- colleagues did not always *understand* the initiative
- they did not wish to embrace the initiative because they did not *believe* it and they often lacked confidence as it challenged the comfort of their current practice.

Year 1: six of the seven middle leaders said in their interviews that they embraced a top-down leadership style approximating an adoptive-type approach at some point in the first year because of the initial reaction of their teams. Responses from middle leaders and their colleagues included:

> "Whatever you may think, I'm afraid we'll just have to get on with it … because it is going to happen." (Year 2)

> "… [the] only strategy that seems to have worked to ensure adherence to required policy is … a telling approach [and] I will have to state: 'These are the things you must do; these are the things you've got flexibility over'." (Year 3)

> "… there was a lot of resistance. People said 'We've got enough to do. We don't know why we're doing it'. People thought they were doing things all right and didn't need to change." (Year 3)

As the research proceeded it became apparent that some middle leaders themselves did not feel confident in their understanding of the initiative and it may be that they therefore found it difficult to 'sell' or explain to their faculties. In some instances responsibility was deflected on to senior leadership for the implementation of the initiative. For example a middle leader (Year 1) stated to the faculty that "Whether we like it or not, we're asked to do this", and staff needed to be "cajoled and persuaded" to embrace the principles.

Year 2: as the pilot progressed in the second year with increased training and consultant support, middle leaders made reference to progress in shifting both colleagues' practice and beliefs. However, five of the seven middle leaders commented that while the leadership of the initiative had become easier, they still adhered to the adoptive approach, displaying an authoritative/coercive style. Change was still managed in a linear, top-down manner and was motivated by the middle leader as the authority figure. However, there were more prolific references in interviews to discussion and collaboration than there had been in the first year. For instance, in one faculty it was noted that the critical mass of staff opinion had changed and that as the middle leader "pushed forward" she was able "to demonstrate the value of the strategy". However, she still needed to be coercive since "that was the nature of the department". She recognised that there was "greater flexibility, collaboration and cooperation", which she attributed to staff now "seeing the purpose of AfL". Similarly another middle leader noted that "people are positive … they see the benefits", while a third noted changing attitudes and that "for some people it's changing their culture of teaching"; to do so, she admitted that she was "a bit bossy" and that one "needs to be bossy to get things done. I don't think we'd get anywhere at all if I were otherwise".

Year 3: over the three years, staff training was provided to address areas of uncertainty and shaky understanding; Middle leaders reflected on how this had changed the management of their teams because there was more open discussion. Most middle

leaders noted in their third year interviews that they became more inclusive and collaborative and were using a combination of adaptive and adoptive approaches or solely an adaptive approach:

> "I found a way that would work for us in the faculty…. People do it more willingly – I know this because of the discussions." (Year 3)

> "People were quite happy to try out the pilot – that was fairly successful. Then it transpired through various meetings that people found it very successful and actually enjoyed considering questioning and things like wait time." (Year 3)

> "We had a number of discussions of what was going on in different subjects in faculty meetings…. The discussions were leading us into the normal adaptive approach we normally go into." (Year 3)

Team composition: the composition of the team made a significant difference to the approach they embraced and to how middle leaders were able to move the initiative on. In some instances middle leaders changed their approach in response to their team members' reactions and in other instances new members were pivotal in changing the culture and shifting attitudes within the team; the advent of just one new member often provided the necessary critical mass to shape, if not shift, beliefs of the rest of the team. Colleagues' experience, age, length of time in the team, personal qualities and attitude were all aspects of team composition that shaped the middle leaders' leadership:

> "Three new staff have come in living and breathing AfL: that's the way they work. That has altered the critical mass of the faculty and that has changed the culture because they're talking the talk and colleagues who've been here a while need to catch up." (Year 3)

And newcomers' contributions were viewed positively:

> "Newcomers are more open to new beliefs. It's been helpful having the trainee who has been extremely diligent and has been able to show people good practice – to the people who have been willing to take on board ideas." (Year 3)

Similarity of previous practice to the change initiative: a less widespread theme that emerged was that middle leaders' prior experience of AfL strategies had some bearing on their management of the change. One middle leader reiterated that her colleagues were able to embrace AfL principles more readily because they approximated the current practice; as a result the middle leader's management of change was more collaborative. Another middle leader had been implementing target and objective setting for many years. She commented that "we were already setting objectives because they had learning goals … old lesson plans had learning objectives/outcomes but they weren't being flagged up", and she noted that "you haven't had to force people to do AfL" (Year 3). She observed that her faculty comprised practical subjects where "it is easier to question effectively" (Year 3). The fact that both faculty areas comprised subjects that were predominantly practical seems to be the reason for the greater ease in making the adaptations to this particular change. Leaders need to be mindful that different subjects have different needs and tensions that enable them to more (or less) readily embrace an initiative.

Summary and conclusions

From the discussion about their leadership middle leaders indicated that they were more likely to use an adoptive approach where they met resistance – even from one or two members – because of colleagues' uncertainty or ambivalence to change. Middle leaders were thus more authoritative/coercive and less collaborative when they met

more resistance. However, as understanding grew, resistance lessened and middle leaders gradually used an adaptive approach and a more collaborative style. The personnel within the team shaped how middle leaders led the initiative, their leadership style and approach and the ongoing success of AfL implementation. Where the AfL principles generated sufficient appeal and value for staff, and where they most closely approximated previous practice, the greater the receptiveness to the changes to be introduced; as a result leadership was more collaborative and the teams were more cooperative in driving the initiative forward. Similarity of previous practice to the changed practice made it easier for the middle leaders to introduce and implement the AfL changes particularly because of the practical nature of some of the subjects.

The impact that each of the three elements of beliefs, composition of team and nature of subject has on leadership style and approach is complex; there is no direct link between how one element may have greater bearing on the style and approach chosen by the middle leader than another. Marshall and Drummond's (2006) own research observations note that there are few neat correspondences between teachers' beliefs and their practice and that relating what occurs in lessons to the teachers' beliefs about learning is messy. Since teacher beliefs and understandings are particularly difficult to assess and quantify, the task of the leader trying to induct a large group of colleagues into new ways becomes exceptionally hard. Add to that the dynamic of individuals with their own idiosyncrasies and educational histories, and subjects that lend themselves more or less to a change initiative, it is surprising that any change across an organisation is effected at all! Nonetheless, it is understandable how embracing an adoptive approach and a more coercive leadership style may be preferable in the early stages of a change to secure a measure of consistency and stability when the leader is trying to counteract the complexities of these three variables.

Using structures and culture to support change

Swaffield and MacBeath (2006), cited in the literature review, suggest that embedding change (transforming beliefs and practice to a new 'system' of doing things) by means of the adoptive approach can be secured through 'structures', while an adaptive approach means working within or changing the 'culture' of an organisation. In this research structures and culture were mutually symbiotic and each eventually drew on the other in trying to embed change. This was borne out in the interviews with middle leaders; each used structures in order to support change and most middle leaders also noted some change in the culture within their teams that aided moving the change agenda forward.

Structure change

Over the course of the three years various structures to support change were identified by middle leaders in their interviews. Those cited included schemes of work with clear learning objectives (cited in Years 1, 2, 3); stipulated faculty expectations (Years 1, 2, 3); 'book looks' (Years 1, 2, 3); performance management observations (Years 1, 2, 3); assessment guideline sheets for students (Years 1, 2, 3); laminated signs on 'learning objectives for this lesson' (Years 1, 2); additional pages in the students' organisers used to record targets (Year 2); drop-in observations (Year 3); AfL performance management targets (Years 2, 3); and more rigorous requirements of the area development plans (Year 3). It emerged from the middle leader interviews that the structures in the main fulfilled two linked purposes – as a measure of coercion to monitor and enforce practice, and to evaluate the extent of the agreed practice. There were far more references to structures in the final year than in the first and second years. This is significant because it reflects the movement of the pilot from being experimental to being mandatory – the

structures in the third year underpinned the expectation and imperative that colleagues adopted the AfL strategies, bringing with it a shift in teaching and learning culture. Also significant in the third year is the advent of a new headteacher who instituted clearly defined whole-school structures (simultaneously leading to an altered culture) to both monitor and evaluate all teaching and learning.

It became clear that senior leader-initiated monitoring structures had to be driven, constantly revisited and profiled by the senior leadership team (SLT). Certainly where senior leadership did drive and monitor closely any introduced structural change, there were notable changes, as demonstrated in the most frequently cited structural change in the third year – the drop-in lesson observations. When prior-agreed lesson observations in the first two years were informally agreed by middle leaders, as part of a professional review programme to encourage professional dialogue and development with colleagues, only some middle leaders undertook them. This changed in Year 3 when regular drop-in lesson observations were made mandatory and were monitored as part of the whole-school strategic plan to improve teaching and learning. Performance management observations – in place from Year 1 – as well as generic performance management targets for all middle leaders' management of the implementation of AfL in Years 2 and 3 were also effective structures in that they were measurable and there was tangible evidence of outcomes. They were used particularly to monitor and evaluate practice and to hold people to account.

In most instances the middle leaders welcomed the structures, often with some sense of relief as it provided them with the support for the AfL agenda in their own areas:

> "Structures are being requested – they see the sense in it and feel safer in the structure…. This year where we've become much more accountable, it has meant that colleagues feel safer as we're all doing the same thing and we all feel accountable together." (middle leader, Year 3)

> "I think the links into performance management has been a big issue. Prior to that performance management was this thing that was added on and didn't necessarily link into whole-school issues – or didn't have to." (Year 3)

> "As long as 'bulldozing' is done with support … I don't think even if they [staff] might complain it's a lot of work, that there hasn't been a supportive environment…. And then on top of that because we've had to do it, they've also seen it actually working in their own classrooms." (middle leader, Year 3)

Middle leaders also introduced their own structures in order to secure the desired changes. Effective middle leader-introduced structures included laminated 'learning objective' reminders for teachers at the beginning of the lesson; the inclusion of learning objectives in students' booklets in practical lessons; more regular moderation; and examination board exemplar material. If middle leaders had greater ownership over structures they devised for monitoring and evaluation, they were often more effectively implemented. For example, the introduction of more regular moderation of students' work to monitor teachers' marking led to a middle leader's observations that "[the outcomes are] tangible – we can see them through teachers' mark books and children's books. We have had moderations to support this where we've sat down together to look across the board". In some faculty areas the structure of standardised schemes of work was pivotal in shaping practice. Staff were involved in working on the new schemes of work to ensure that all "have objectives, key questions, differentiation … very clear structures are shown in schemes of work" (middle leader, Year 3). Qualifications, Curriculum and Assessment (QCA) guidelines and exemplar material for marking were used as faculty policy and were "very useful structures and staff were happy to move to that" (Year 3). Structures and expectations were provided and were completed by

colleagues working together that cultivated a more collaborative culture – reflected in the quotations above – demonstrating the symbiotic nature of structure and culture in securing change.

Culture change

Structures introduced also had an impact on the culture of the organisation and faculties and middle leaders in their interviews identified these two very distinct changes in culture – one within the whole school and the other within their own faculties. In the third year in particular some middle leaders observed how a new headteacher had brought structures that translated into a whole-school culture of much greater accountability:

> "The structures have led to the change of culture. The structures had made people accountable so they have to get on with it, and then having got on with it they start to see the benefits of collaboration and working with me. I shifted practice first and beliefs have followed." (middle leader, Year 3)

> "Ofsted and observations have shifted to a greater culture of school accountability. The whole-school culture has changed." (middle leader, Year 3)

> "There is far greater accountability as their lessons are being seen … because people know their lessons are going to be scrutinised. And because of all of the observations this year, people know they've got to and they can beat on their chests and say they don't want to but at the end of the day they have to." (middle leader, Year 3)

These whole-school structures were not seen in a negative light, but rather as potentially liberating in assisting the middle leadership to encourage a change of practice – if not beliefs. Middle leaders' insights are particularly illuminating and support Swaffield and MacBeath's (2006) assertion that structures may initially lead to initial antagonism but through persuasion, demonstration and intervention people may come to embrace the new ways and indeed a new culture may emerge:

> "Expectation and ways of working have become habitual. The structures have led to the change of culture." (middle leader, Year 3)

> "One particular thing that has worked for me is that it has been part of a whole-school process and that it's had to happen. That's very different to trying to move something forward which doesn't have to happen." (middle leader, Year 3)

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

Culture change: the importance of discussions

Faculty discussions about assessment generated lively debate about teaching and learning – a significant cultural shift within the school. Discussions were seen as being important in addressing the change agenda for a number of reasons. They were used as a means for debate about how the AfL strategies could or should be incorporated into individual faculties; for providing a forum for colleagues to articulate their concerns; for allowing middle leaders to gauge their colleagues' understanding – or lack – of AfL strategies; and for monitoring colleagues' application of AfL strategies. In Year 1, comments about the usefulness of discussions included:

> "Discussion in meeting time was used to assess the progress of agreed AfL strategies." (middle leader, Year 1)

> "Initial discussion indicated an interest in questioning techniques which built on KS3 [Key Stage 3] Science Strategy AfL input." (middle leader, Year 1)

> "AfL has come up at most faculty meetings – we've constantly revisited concepts." (middle leader, Year 1)

In the second year middle leaders commented extensively on the good faculty discussions in faculty meetings that helped to refine colleagues' understanding of the initiative:

> "More discussion to continue to reinforce formative assessment marking … there is discussion at break, lunch and faculty meetings. People talk about it [AfL] a lot and bounce ideas off each other." (Year 2)

> "AfL is a standing item in meetings for discussion." (Year 2)

> "There is more discussion – staff are more interested in initiatives (Year 2) [… and there was a…] raised level of debate in the summer faculty meetings [… and an…] improvement on the dialogue." (Year 2)

By the third year resistance to change was tempered as middle leaders encouraged debate and as understanding improved:

> "People have become more confident in objectives – we used to have a lot of discussion and argument." (Year 3)

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

> "We discussed the benefits of particular AfL strategies; [we] shared practice [that is to say, through discussion] at informal meetings." (Year 3)

> "Redoing the booklets meant we all got together to talk about what the objectives/outcomes will be…. Discussion at faculty meetings has moved away from purely administrative issues to aspects of pupil learning." (Year 3)

Management of change: transformation of beliefs and practice through CPD

Recognising that teacher development is also a process of personal development is important when driving the school improvement agenda forward and is an imperative for securing change in both beliefs and practice. The need for CPD was another emerging theme in interviews with middle leaders throughout the course of the three-year pilot. CPD straddles both structural and cultural organisational change and was seen by middle leaders as an essential support in embedding AfL.

At the end of the first year, most middle leaders noted in their interviews the need for training in order to develop understanding and practice in their teams: "The faculty needs INSET/training"; "[We] need more background information about AfL"; "… but a lot of training yet to do"; "Staff want specific guidelines". In some faculties professional development provided the means to both support their own and colleagues' endeavours, and in others it assisted in embedding a new learning culture within the faculty. At times it fulfilled both functions. Although an authoritative style – typifying the adoptive approach – was apparent in most middle leaders in the first year of the pilot, in their future plans for leading the change into Year 2 of the pilot, most of the middle leaders mentioned their intention to pursue some form of coaching or individual one-to-one sessions with their staff, as well as the need for more discussion and sharing of ideas, which is more reminiscent of a democratic/coaching style of an adaptive approach.

In the third and final year interviews, middle leaders reflected on the importance of professional development and cited the most effective means for their faculty in assisting in the shift in both colleagues' practice and values. These included peer observation, external consultants (working with middle leaders individually or with their faculties, as well as with the middle leader team), directed time whole-school training, voluntary after-school training, visitors from other schools and shared practice and faculty discussions (already cited). Nonetheless the staff LHTL questionnaire results for the 'Supporting professional development' category shows a large 13.1 point gap between practice and values, not dissimilar to that in the national LHTL project (15.6 points), showing that in spite of an encouraging improvement there is still significant work to be done by leaders in supporting teachers' CPD in practice.

Whole-school staff training and consultant support

A great responsibility rests with the organisation's leadership to support teacher learning and understanding of any change initiative (Elmore 2002). Organisational structure, policy, and indeed culture need to reflect the imperative of supporting staff learning and understanding to secure successful change. This is reiterated in Pedder's (2006) research paper, the findings of which "… point to the importance of organisational approaches for promoting, supporting and sustaining innovatory classroom practice..." (p 196). Senior leaders made a commitment to profiling AfL as the teaching and learning focus and prioritised AfL whole-staff training; this was reflected in the staff LHTL questionnaire scores that showed a significant improvement in the practice scores evaluating 'Supporting professional development' (5.0 points) and 'Developing a sense of where we are going' (5.6 points) in Section C (Management). "Senior leadership team's vision and drive to support middle leaders and reinforcement through good quality INSET" (middle leader, Year 3) were also noted as being effective supports for supporting change. The external speakers and consultants' input at these INSET opportunities were viewed very positively by staff:

> "The combination of the whole-school pilot fuelled by ideas from the Black Box and the staff INSET day on AFL … triggered staff cooperation because they could see it was such a sensible and logical set of strategies." (middle leader, Year 3)

> "Visiting speakers and the consultant was very good. He worked just with me and also whole-school after-school input." (middle leader, Year 3)

> "What it has done is made me avoid closed questions which seem now 'out of the ark'. This has come as a direct result out of AfL discussions and attendance at consultants' sessions /input. We came away from the consultants' sessions very impressed." (middle leader, Year 3)

> "Whole-school INSET has been very successful. The introduction to the Black Box with Christine Harrison – people could see that it was a lot of common sense…. Some of the INSET done between ourselves within the faculty and within the department has been very successful … the consultant worked individually with me and in departments. And the middle leader session was helpful: you haven't felt it was a complete waste of time." (middle leader, Year 3)

> "INSET led to a big change in people's practice as it was a public event which raised its profile…. [Senior management] supported it hugely by constantly having a constant high profile." (middle leader, Year 3)

Coaching

Coaching and discussions were citied as important to understand concerns that colleagues were experiencing. They were also useful as a reflective tool for individual teachers to evaluate themselves as well as to monitor the effectiveness of practice. In Year 1 a subject consultant in one faculty, used extensively in coaching, helped staff through having paired observations while the middle leader would "monitor the implementation through teaching pairs and observation" (Year 3). Another middle leader in Year 1 asserted that she would "… be involved in coaching with individual Key Stage coordinators", and would "encourage one-to-one coaching", establishing pairings of teachers to team-teach and share good practice. By Year 3, this middle leader was enthusiastic about the role of coaching: "The most helpful INSET has been giving people time to team-teach and to review it together in a coaching relationship".

The support that a consultant provided to individual faculties – particularly through paired observations – to assist teachers in assessing students' learning was viewed very differently by different faculties. One faculty had been provided with consultants and numerous opportunities for colleagues to observe one another with consultant support and advice. However, the middle leader noted that most of her colleagues did not perceive the paired observations as being used for the intended developmental training but rather that they were used to collect evidence to judge staff and justify further imperatives for forcing change because the faculty was under the microscope for under-performance. Nonetheless, other hand-paired observations were undertaken in another two faculties very successfully and the LHTL questionnaire responses for the category/factor inquiry and 'Critical and responsive learning' indicates this very aptly; the categories/factors, which evaluate joint staff evaluation and reflection of classroom practice, showed the highest practice and value scores for these two faculties. The paired observations in the one faculty were seen by colleagues as a significant factor in moving staff practice and understanding on, and in shifting the teaching/learning culture because colleagues "got to see AfL in practice":

> "Being observed helps as you make an effort to do it properly and then colleagues realise it works…. Lesson observations did pull the whole thing up." (middle leader, Year 3)

In the other faculty that used observations in pairs, peer support provided opportunities for staff to develop skills to observe learning in the classroom:

> "In the middle of the second year we had a project which was … peer assessment of each other's lessons and we team taught lessons and reviewed them and fed back to the faculty. This was a significant change in the thinking of the faculty about AfL. I had structures and I was working alongside colleagues.... [The most effective strategy] was working in twos and threes in a non-threatening/non-judgemental way supported by structures that make them do it and make them accountable…. People need to feel safe in their own teaching and so when they are trying out new ideas they mustn't be judged. They must be allowed to make mistakes within reason and they must have the backing of the hierarchy to do that." (middle leader, Year 3)

With coaching, hierarchies of expertise were shattered with the least experienced offering support and expertise to those more experienced; even trainee teachers had a role to play in coaching experienced staff. For instance two middle leaders (Year 3) said that "The trainee who has been extremely diligent has been able to show people good practice … she would write comments on children's work using comment banks" (Year 3) and "In addition teacher trainees are talking the talk too. They want to work that way. I've paired them up with people who aren't used to this – indirectly they're teaching them" (middle leader, Year 3). Staff modified their practice following feedback from other

colleagues, or the middle leader, and experimented with their practices as a conscious strategy for improving classroom teaching and learning. The consultants' coaching roles were particularly important as they observed with a teacher creating a three-way dialogue with the observed colleague. Coaching and collaborative CPD facilitated reflection, self-evaluation, experimentation and response to feedback and were all means by which practice could be sharpened.

Conclusion

The role of the middle leader is both under-researched and it would appear under-valued. Middle leaders undertake an immensely complex task of being attentive to both senior leaders as well as to their faculty colleagues. They have to play the dual role of often being compatriots with senior leaders while on other occasions they are the conduits of imperatives from these same senior colleagues. At the same time they are expected to both lead their teams assertively while also cultivating a collegiate team spirit. They need to attend sensitively to individuals' needs while concurrently safeguarding the learning experiences of the students in their care. The management of change is one of the most pressing and difficult tasks that middle leaders have to undertake and there is much yielded in this research that gives insight into the complexity of this task.

How middle leaders undertake leading change is dependent on a myriad of factors, but in this case study individual colleagues' understanding of the initiative and the composition of the team were particularly salient concerns. Where *previous practice closely approximates the new practice*, adaptations are correspondingly easier and beliefs and practice is noted by middle leaders as easier to shift. However, the introduction of clear structures to monitor and support the implementation of the new strategies is as important as it is where practice is significantly different. *Assumptions should not be made that all colleagues will automatically adopt new strategies, even if the changes are more nuances than significant variations in practice. The team composition is critical to how successful or unsuccessful a middle leader will be in implementing change.* While a whole-school initiative may be successfully launched by senior leaders with middle leaders, the real challenge lies with the middle leader selling the initiative to their faculty colleagues, some of whom may be resistant to *any* change. Some individuals may be instrumental in shaping the culture of the team in which change is to take place –for better or for worse – and some team members' resistance to change may have a detrimental effect on the whole team's receptiveness to the change's strategies. It is important for senior leaders to be conscious of resistors within teams, since individuals and composition of teams make a critical difference to how change is embraced; they need to support middle leaders in their endeavours by providing time and resources to secure the desired changes.

Leadership styles and approaches do not remain static and throughout the course of an initiative's implementation middle leaders have to read the climate of their team, being sensitive to individuals' responses; they need to make the adjustments intuitively in response to individuals and their team's reactions. In the main, *the more resistant colleagues are to the change initiative, the more reliant the middle manager becomes on the adoptive approach and structures*, particularly externally imposed structures, to secure change. *Whole-school structures for monitoring and evaluation imposed from outside of the faculty area seem to accelerate the change of practice within a faculty and school*, although it must be noted that beliefs do not necessarily follow. Monitoring and evaluation by means of structures brings a greater measure of accountability that will change the culture within the school and faculty areas.

In introducing an initiative, senior leaders *need to be mindful that middle leaders will encounter different problems in embracing a change initiative depending on the nature and demands of their subjects*. It is helpful therefore to allow middle leaders some flexibility to customise if appropriate the strategies to address their subjects' needs and to introduce the change strategies at their own pace where possible. However, there needs to be a balance between middle leaders customising the pace of the

implementation and the change initiative itself to the needs of the faculty and team composition, while being mindful of senior leaders' desire for uniformity of delivery and student entitlement set within parameters of a limited time span.

The importance of professional development cannot be emphasised too highly. It is seen by middle leaders as critical for a change initiative's successful embedding and is an essential tool for securing both a change in staff practice and beliefs. Whole-school INSET is necessary to lay the foundations and induct staff into the change initiative that must be a school development priority. However, it is not sufficient to secure either lasting belief or practice shifts. *The most effective follow-through CPD is in-classroom development.* Consultant in-classroom observation and support is extremely helpful in moving practice and understanding forward, certainly initially, but needs to be developed and sustained by the middle leaders developing in-classroom coaching and support among colleagues so that there is continual development of practice by self-evaluation of and reflection on teaching. *Extensive whole-school /in-faculty discussion is also important for all colleagues' sharpening of understanding* but especially if the reticent colleague is to be encouraged to embrace a change initiative. A culture of trust and openness allowing for discussion is a means for and a precursor of change, enabling structures to support change. *Senior leaders need to support middle leaders' in-classroom CPD endeavours* by building opportunities for coaching, and supportive classroom observation into the CPD programme and the daily life of the school – while being mindful of the resource and time costs.

A resounding theme from middle leaders is that it is imperative that a senior leader drives and leads relentlessly the change and that there is a need for prolonged and dedicated commitment to seeing a change initiative through. This includes the provision of structures to both support and to monitor and evaluate the change. Senior leaders need to sustain these over a lengthy period of time since both literature and the evidence shown in this case study emphasises that change takes years, rather than months. This is because it should not be under-estimated how long it may take to bring colleagues to a reasonable understanding of the principles of an initiative; often it is only through continual CPD, regular discussions, input and training that staff may come to a deeper understanding of what a change entails with the attendant belief shifts. Even then there will be uncertainty about whether practice is merely mechanical rather than reflecting the initiative's essence. Inevitably there will also be some colleagues who are resistant to change and who will not shift their beliefs to embrace the new initiative. If the changes are to be sustained three years and beyond, the initiative needs to be profiled well beyond the initial stages of implementation. Structures need to be securely embedded within the organisation to support the ongoing initiative's practices and to keep alive colleagues' beliefs in the benefits. This includes the change initiative being written into the school's development plan, whole-school and faculty discussions and in policy documentation. Culture change is almost certain as a result.

A note of caution needs to be raised, however. Much of the literature asserts that collaboration and a culture of openness leads to the most effective embedding of practice and this to some extent was borne out in this research in the latter months of the study. In this current climate of extreme accountability (especially on delivering data-driven results) leaders at any level do not have the luxury of adopting a collaborative style in the *hopes* that their followers will deliver – eventually or perhaps. The middle leader's role is becoming increasingly responsible and they are being held more and more to account for the delivery of results within their areas (namely, the performance management regulations in 2007). They must ensure that colleagues deliver in the classroom to secure summative results by which the school will be judged. Rather

leaders need to ensure, and if necessary enforce, practice and initiatives that will lead to the delivery of results and this means, certainly initially, applying an adoptive approach and more coercive style. This does not mean that teachers become automatons, blindly following the dictates of school leaders. Those teachers who are progressive about what transpires in their classroom can transcend the supposed 'strait-jacketing' that is imposed within and on schools. Leaders in schools have an obligation to ensure that the students in their care have the best possible teaching to secure their potential, for these students pass their way but once. Leaders cannot take the risk of not enforcing what AfL research has proven is good practice if it means the possibility of less than satisfactory or maverick practice not being addressed and amended, with the attendant compromise of students' attainment and life chances.

Finally, the potential for organisational change is great if the middle leaders, these unsung heroes in a school, are provided with the time, understanding and support in undertaking their complex task of leading their teams.

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