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Effective support mechanisms for those in the formative stages of middle leadership: A case study in the secondary independent education sector.

# Background

- Full time teacher until summer 2016

- Merchant Taylors' School (Liverpool) Single sex (boys), selective, independent

- Part time PGR (PhD) Liverpool John Moores University

- NQT Induction Tutor

- Discernible gap between support given to NQTs and support given to newly appointed middle leaders

- Middle leaders – Head of Department; Head of Year; Head of Extra curricular

- Case study based within the school

# Research design

- Lit review bounded by study title
- Led to a series of 5 propositions or 'temporary conceptual tools' (Thomas, 2011)
- Propositions formed foundation for interview schedule
- Interviews over 22 month period
- Three groups: Mostly recently appointed middle leaders; experienced middle leaders; SMT (Total 25 participants)
- Interviews semi structured
- All interviews fully transcribed by researcher
- Constant comparative coding

# Coding

- Initial coding set against the propositions
- Propositions largely substantiated
- Patterns began to emerge
- Subsequent interviews informed by the coding
- 750 items of data
- 40 codes
- 6 main themes
- Coding appeared 'saturated'

# Key points

- Few real surprises
- Step change from leading/managing children to adults
- Leaders in this case never lose sight of primacy of pupils
- Significant clarity to the challenges of middle leader role

# Key findings

- Aha! Experience (Thornbeg and Charmaz, 2011)
- Aspects of middle leadership that appear to make it difficult (challenging factors)
- Aspects of middle leadership that appear to make it possible (enabling factors)
- Challenging factors tend to be external to middle leader
- Enabling factors tend to be internal to middle leader

# Challenging factors

- Job descriptions
- Culture
- Alignment with the aims of the organisation
- Team members:  <u>who</u> they are and <u>where</u> they are
- Piggy in the middle
- 'The web' (priorities elsewhere)
- Time
- Preparation for the role

- Challenging factors appear to be external to the middle leader, and largely outside their sphere of influence

# Enabling factors

- Having a clear, well articulated vision
- Being the dominant practitioner
- Self reflection
- Knowing yourself (integrity)
- Knowing your team members in order to build your team
- A particularly interesting theme is <u>experience</u>  which can be prior, parallel or referred

- Enabling factors tend to be internal to the middle leader and would appear to be components that can be taught or developed

# Leadership & management

- Management is linked to systems and paper whereas leadership is about the development of people. (Day, 2011)

- Management is seen as a maintenance activity while leadership is linked with change. (Cuban 1998)

- Managers organise operational implementation, short term planning, rule operation; leaders need creativity, vision, purpose and tolerance of ambiguity.

- Both set goals, are trustworthy, formulate timelines and make decisions: co-dimensionality. (Simonet and Tett, 2012)

- Leadership is underpinned by management.

# Leadership capabilities

- Dispositions; Skills and Perspectives (Conger, 2003; Leithwood et al., 2003; Church 2013)
- Dispositions – deeply embedded character traits influenced through genes/ early upbringing
- Skills – Those things easily learned e.g. writing an agenda, chairing a meeting
- Perspectives – Experiences we draw on to inform our decision making
- Skills tend toward management
- Perspectives lean towards leadership

# Skills acquisition

- 5 levels of skills acquisition (Dreyfus and Dreyfus, 1980)
- Novice
- Competent
- Proficient
- Expert
- Master
- Move from analytical and reasoning (novice) to pattern making and intuitive (master) (Carraccio et al., 2008)
- Development of mental maps (Sergiovani, 1985; West-Burnham and Koren, 2004)

# Experience

- Where does experience come from?

1. Previous school experience connected to role
2. Previous school experience not connected to role
3. Experiences unconnected with school
4. Tapping into others (good and bad)
5. Learning on the job

# So what?

- Leadership is important
- Leading requires different capabilities to teaching.
- We lead through an amalgam of our dispositions, our skills and our perspective.
- Management requires skills, leadership requires perspective
- Perspective is drawn from experience.
- Experience should form a key role in leadership development
- Experience can come from different places.
- Coaching can help newly appointed leaders identify and relate to experience they already have.
- Senior leaders can provide opportunities for experiences.

# In summary

- 2 blank spots in research:
  - Middle leadership in schools  (Spillane, 1999; Thorpe & Bennett-Powell, 2014)
  - Independent sector (Harvey, 2007; 2015)
- Middle leadership in the school appears not to be so different from other contexts that wider leadership theories don't apply.
- However the variation in individual contexts is such that an all embracing theory is unlikely to exist.

**Further areas for study?**

- Look for ways in which enabling factors can specifically help overcome  challenging factors
- Interviews beyond the case boundaries to help contextualise it

# Questions?