

SCEL Fellowship Programme  
Area of Enquiry

# Developing Middle Leadership Capacity in a Scottish Local Authority

George Cooper  
*December 2015*



**SCEL**

Scottish College for  
Educational Leadership

As a reflective teacher, I have benefitted greatly from numerous opportunities to develop my leadership skills; as a head teacher my philosophy has been to enable teachers to develop their skills through challenging and rewarding experiences.

Assuming “The most powerful professional development is often undertaken locally...in a school or cluster of schools” (Donaldson, 2010: 96), in East Dunbartonshire and nationally, it can be problematic finding suitable development opportunities for all future school leaders in a school, regardless of sector and size. This acts as a barrier, causing shortages of suitable applicants for senior and head teacher positions. Indeed, there may be a need to provide an “external stimulus” (Donaldson, 2010: 96) to develop colleagues. However, there is the tension nationally through rationalisation of reduced numbers of middle and senior leadership posts. With shrinking senior leadership teams, savings designed to avoid impact on teacher numbers and moratoria on substantive, promoted posts, the need to unblock the leadership “pipeline” (Dimmock, 2012), to provide “a clear, progressive educational leadership pathway” (Donaldson, 2010: 100) and, thus, to ensure future, highly effective school leaders may be seen as a significant challenge. Sir Andrew Cubie, suggests middle leaders should take responsibility for change and see the present funding crisis an “opportunity (to) deliver at school level” (Cubie, 2015). This view was complemented by Graham Donaldson at the inaugural SCEL event noting that success was achieved “most effectively through leadership” (Donaldson, 2015) and that money was not the most impactful driver of quality. Given the present financial climate, we require innovative solutions to the issues noted.

Within my education authority there is an identified need to free up the system, enable middle leaders to experience meaningful development opportunities and thus, prepare them for school leadership. There is also a long-standing commitment to improve succession planning and grow senior leaders from within, to build capacity in both people and the system.

It has been argued that middle leadership provides a sustainable recruitment pathway for head teachers (Hammersley-Fletcher & Strain 2011/Dimmock 2012). My chosen area of enquiry focused on how we may remove barriers to developing leadership in middle leaders and, thus, enable this vital group to contribute most

effectively within, between and beyond schools (Chapman, 2015) to benefit young people. I was mindful of the notion that, “without the proactive involvement (of the education authority) school capacity will always be in the minority and will be ephemeral.” (Fullan, 2004). Acknowledging my local authority’s aim to develop “capability, capacity and leadership to support the practice of learning” (East Dunbartonshire Council, 2012) and noting the view that the leadership capacity of a school is directly proportionate to the quality of leadership therein (Donaldson, 2010), through working in partnership with the LEA, I established that there was a need for middle leaders to be empowered to look beyond their context. Ultimately, the aim is to ensure coherent middle to senior leadership succession planning (Dimmock, 2012).

As a contributor to the system, a middle leader should display several attributes: being involved in meaningful networking beyond school; effective partnership working; sharing impactful resources; and building trust in colleagues at local authority level (Dimmock, 2015). Ultimately, the aim would be to value collaboration beyond competition (Ainscow, 2015), support the work of other schools and ensure improvements in key areas, without this being at the expense of others.

If it is the case that we should provide “continuing professional development that supports teachers... to realise their ambitions... (and promote) collaboration – not competition” (Constance, 2015), then it is vital we develop effective middle leaders who understand this and have capacity to improve the system.

### **Developing Middle Leadership within a Local Authority Context**

East Dunbartonshire Council features many high-performing schools, a significant number of pupils from SIMD deciles 7-10 and regularly has the highest rate of pupils progressing to positive and sustained destinations in Scotland. There is a strong culture of expectation and success at national level. Funding for education has remained a priority. Like other LEA’s, it relies on middle leaders to deliver significant objectives and to take on senior leadership responsibilities. However, it is a small LEA and the pool of potential senior leaders is limited. As nationally and internationally, there remain barriers to developing future effective school leaders including perceived lack of encouragement, interest, skills, infrastructure and time.

Like other authorities, such as Cornwall and Guernsey, EDC seeks to tackle these barriers through developing a bespoke, accredited programme.

My aim was to develop a cost-effective programme for middle leaders in order to build capacity in an LEA system, address issues of succession and, thus, improve outcomes for young people. This linked directly to the Local Authority Education Business and Improvement Plan with its clear focus on quality improvement, “leadership and continuous professional development” (East Dunbartonshire Council, 2012). I recognised the potential to enable middle leaders to develop their skills as “scholar practitioners” (Walker, 2013, cited by McMahon, 2015) within and out with schools, to experience challenge and to work together to benefit the LEA’s provision.

## **Programme Design**

Tying a programme into the GTCS standards for Middle Leadership (GTCS, 2012), I noted the context of Teaching Scotland’s Future where embedding leadership networks and providing research-led, practice focused development opportunities are considered most impactful (Donaldson, 2010). I was conscious that leadership programmes can have “little influence” (Spillane, 2006: 103) and that “front-end training is insufficient” (Fullan, 2009: 11). The programme required elements of on-site learning through the identification of bespoke development within schools. Indeed, the drive to provide “appropriate preparation and development opportunities” (Dimmock, 2012: 132) within participants’ establishments was deemed a pre-requisite. I was mindful to balance the “rigour of university programme” (Dimmock, 2012:133) learning with planned “organisational socialization” (Dimmock 2012: 134) and the participants having “some control over programme design and content” (Dimmock, 2012: 135).

Through discussion with the LEA, we decided to use “analytical or diagnostic tools” (Spillane, 2006:104) to enable us to think more carefully and innovatively about developing leadership. I secured the support of the Educational Psychologist Service to enable the participants to analyse and benchmark their developmental needs before setting individual targets for improvement through school-based

projects and programmed sessions. The coordination of key partnerships was agreed as an essential factor in planning; the support of the LEA in securing funding for accreditation was crucial. Indeed, the initial stages of harmonizing LEA/university timescales and expectations provided me with a challenge familiar to system leaders working out with their normal sphere of influence. The local authority shared the view that “high quality professional development of leaders and aspirant leaders” was the goal (Dimmock, 2012: 133).

I was aware of the potentially significant commitment of participants to twilight/weekend sessions and of time to complete study; sustaining motivation could be a barrier (Fullan, 2001). Additionally, there would be the expectation of participant ownership of the project within the context of the school’s improvement planning agenda. The need for professional accreditation seemed crucial in order to acknowledge the significant efforts of all.

There was also the requirement of sustainability by providing added system value through potentially supporting other middle leaders not participating in the programme.

I was keen to avoid the notion of disconnect between the self-referring applicants and the aspirations of the LEA (Dimmock, 2015). The process required a formal application with a justifying statement; candidates were screened by members of the quality improvement team with a view to potential for delivery of school and LEA improvement priorities.

Finally, the need for support out with school, via a mentor who could “enable much more effective dialogue and learning to take place” (Donaldson, 2010: 73) was factored in.

## **The Programme**

The leadership development programme has a cohort of 18 participants. With the LEA, we designed two network groups (9 in each) to best provide for middle leaders who were focused on developing skills as Principal Teachers and for those who were aspiring or acting Depute Heads. The numbers provided financial and time-

commitment economies of scale and enabled adequate funding to be agreed with the university.

Features:

1. Regular networking opportunities between participants combine structured input with informal discussion of common issues.
2. Mentoring of all participants by a senior leader, mutually chosen - where possible.
3. School-based leading of an improvement through agreement with participants' head teachers.
4. Masters level study supported by University input; credits to be gained progressively through the programme, culminating in dissertation and full Masters accreditation.

The LEA committed to the partnership with the university and the authority-based programme, now in place, will run for 3-4 school sessions.

### **Participant Motivation**

To establish motivation for participation, and to help shape network activities, participants were sampled during a meeting early in the programme (Appendix 1). It became clear that there was an intrinsic motivation to improve outcomes for pupils. Interestingly, those openly aspiring to senior leadership were more focused on raising attainment, whereas the other group favoured a more general theme of improving pupil experiences. For some, career ambition had been a factor.

### **Inter-Authority Working**

During planning, I agreed to work closely with another SCEL Fellowship participant with a view to cross-authority partnership-working. We exchanged ideas, resources and experiences to benefit our respective cohorts.

By way of developing relationships and maximizing resources available, a conference was held some 5 months into the programme. Four LEAs were represented.

Feedback to the conference was positive (Appendix 2), reflecting appetite to work across LEA's, to engage with research-based speakers and to exchange experiences. A further event is planned and participants' views (Appendix 2) will shape the programme. Qualitative data will be gathered to show impact of the programme and which activities have been most effective for participants to bring about positive school and system change. The combined views of participants supported the plan to engage across education authorities.

### **Next Steps**

Due to the Masters level aspect, the programme is planned to last 3-4 years and should deliver the acquisition of high level skills and knowledge. In-school research and experiential learning is designed to provide opportunities for participants to experience challenge within their environment, thus providing valuable outcomes for both themselves and for their schools/pupils. Notwithstanding the barrier of harmonizing university deadlines with school terms, the cooperation between sectors has proved positive and minor issues were overcome but there remains the need to plan a school session ahead for university- taught input and for this to be supported through structured mentoring and network meetings; this will be improved in light of our experience. These sessions will aim to provide opportunities for participants to engage in challenging discussions, all with a view to stimulating self-awareness and system leadership.

Finally, the establishment of exchange and engagement opportunities with other local authorities should enable a broadening of horizons for professional learning, access to ideas and sharing of experiences.

## **System-wide Perspective: Potential Platforms**

Assuming middle leaders' attributes can be built upon and changed (Dimmock, 2012), there are opportunities open to education authorities to impact on middle leaders with the aim of developing traits associated with high performing leaders. Given that many middle leaders already display a positive disposition and are keen to improve their skills and knowledge through in-school experiences, there is clear potential for improvement.

Middle leaders perceive barriers such as, organisational culture, limited opportunity, budget limitations and time (Appendix 2{d}); LEA's face the challenge of persuading them to embrace development whilst ensuring wide-ranging impact through best value programmes at a time of financial constraint.

When asked about types of learning that would enhance capacity to develop, a network meeting revealed that participants would favour a Teacher Learning Community model involving middle leadership peers. This could be broadened across an LEA using the experience of previous TLC models and participants. The programme participants agreed that there remained the need for structured meetings, in-school projects and sessions focused on leadership skills, with peers leading these. There was an agreement that the process required LEA and school leaders to be committed to developing middle leaders.

The suggestion of employer recognition of middle leaders assuming of voluntary leadership responsibilities was favoured. There could be, for example, increased motivation through a trainee, senior leadership programme with a guarantee of interview where an equivalent post was advertised within the LEA. Participants agree there is a need to unblock the supply line of head teacher candidates to remove barriers to the progression of middle leaders (Dimmock, 2012).

Networking through digital exchange and video conference platforms to overcome limitations/geographical issues could also provide a low-cost solution. The example of the Professional Learning and Network for Computing was cited as a successful model. Indeed, cognizance of the growing numbers of middle leaders, performing as "digital natives", able to "forge large numbers of loose connections" (Hay Group,



2011) should provide education authorities with opportunities for relatively low cost facilitation of development activities.

At the same time, there is much potential for wider partnership working with universities. Masters level programmes, tied into local networks, could provide a resonance with Donaldson's vision of "significant potential for greater collaboration in supporting inquiry-based improvement and a more fluid exchange of learning between the sectors" (Donaldson, 2010: 70).

Middle leaders may perceive significant barriers to their development: organisational culture, limited opportunity, budget limitations and time (Appendix 2(d)); LEA's face the challenge of first persuading middle leaders to embrace high-yield development activities, encouraging those with capacity to volunteer for opportunities whilst the employer ensures wide-ranging impact through best value programmes. It is vital the activities and approaches adopted ensure measurable improvements in outcomes for children and young people across Scotland.

## **Conclusions**

If we are to help produce middle leader "educational connoisseurs" (MacBeth in OECD 2013: 85) who develop the ability to recognise what is most important in our system, it will be important to continue to develop them in preparation for both head teacher and wider system leadership. We require first to "understand the barriers and fix them" (Ainscow, 2015). A combination of approaches will be vital to ensure middle leaders are given experiential learning opportunities in order to gain appropriate skills and knowledge required for the roles ahead. Indeed, "tacit knowledge is by definition hard to get at" (Fullan 2001: 80). It is important to recognise that not all such knowledge is of benefit and that the challenge is to use it to benefit the system (Fullan, 2001). Within this context, local education authorities could develop programmes that combine a variety of learning opportunities and contexts. The programmes should reflect the quality we expect of our best middle leaders. We need them to buy in to sharing experiences when appropriately motivated (see diagram, appendix 3), with a view to contributing to a wider vision (Fullan, 2001). We should continue to ask why we do what we do (Dimmock, 2015)

and find innovative ways of delivering quality development, “offering intellectual stimulation” (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003) for middle leaders especially at a time of financial constraint. We need to promote middle leaders’ career progression and achieve economies of scale, working between and beyond school boundaries (Appendix 4). Indeed, within the present context and drive for equity, we have an opportunity to “rid the system of competition between schools and LEA’s to free people to invest in each other’s success” (Ainscow, 2015). To help enable such an outcome, effective middle leadership, both within schools and the wider educational system, offers an invaluable resource that should be nurtured to develop it to full capacity: “unleashing the power of people, system-wide” (McKinsey & Co. 2009: 27).

### **Fellowship Programme: Reflection**

For me, there have been significant positives from participation. When I began the programme, like many busy head teachers, I was focused on my school and delivering outcomes for the young people in its community. My commitment to my school has not wavered. However, through the programme, the exposure to national/international speakers of significant influence has re-defined my perspective in relation to my potential as a school and system leader. The enthusiasm and development of ideas through the network meetings and inspiring speaker-led sessions have all provided me with opportunities to question my own practice, that of my senior and middle managers and the need to influence the wider system. Working closely with the LEA in developing colleagues out with my own school has been rewarding for me professionally and personally. I feel that my leadership perspective within school has developed and I now refer to national and international contexts more readily. Importantly, the programme has given me insight into how my leadership of change may potentially impact on a wider scale. The fellowship programme has meant that I have reflected on my professional values and reminded me that, notwithstanding pressure for such measurable aspects (such as exam results), school leaders have significant influence and should be united in developing educational provision to benefit all pupils.

## SCEL ENQUIRY REFERENCE LIST

Constance, A. (2015) *Scotland, Education and Training*

at <http://news.scotland.gov.uk/Speeches-Briefings/Education-Secretary-Angela-Constance-speech-at-Robert-Owen-Centre-1900.aspx> (last accessed 1/12/15)

Dimmock, C. (2012) *Leadership, Capacity Building and School Improvement*. London: Routledge.

East Dunbartonshire Council Education Business and Improvement plan (2012-2015)

Fullan, M. (2001) *Leading in a Culture of Change*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Fullan, M. (2009) "Introduction to the Challenge of Change – Purposeful Action at Work" in M. Fullan (ed) *The Challenge of Change: Start School Improvement Now!* California: Corwin.

Fullan, M. (2009) "8 Forces for Leaders of Change" in M. Fullan (ed) *The Challenge of Change: Start School Improvement Now!* California: Corwin.

Fullan, M. (2004) *Leadership Across the System* at <http://www.michaelfullan.ca/media/13396061760.pdf> (last accessed 1/12/15)

Hay Group. (2011) *Building the new leader: leadership challenges of the future revealed* at [http://www.haygroup.com/downloads/sg/Hay\\_Group\\_Leadership\\_2030\\_whitepaper.pdf](http://www.haygroup.com/downloads/sg/Hay_Group_Leadership_2030_whitepaper.pdf) (last accessed 02.12.15)

HMIE. (2007) *Leadership for Learning: The Challenge of Leadership in times of change and improvement*. Edinburgh: HMSO

Leithwood, K. & Riehl, C. (2003) *What We Know about Successful School Leadership* at <http://dcbsimpson.com/randd-leithwood-successful-leadership.pdf> (last accessed 01.12.15)

Linsky, M. & Lawrence, J. (2011) *Adaptive Challenges for School Leadership* at [http://www.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/upm-binaries/39881\\_9780857023964.pdf](http://www.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/upm-binaries/39881_9780857023964.pdf) (last accessed 01.12.15)

Linsky, M (2011) *Adaptive Leadership – Leading Change* at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=af-cSvnEExM> (last accessed 01.12.15)

McKinsey & Co. (2009) *Shaping the future: how good education systems can become great in the decade ahead* at [http://www.eurekanet.ru/res\\_ru/0\\_hfile\\_1906\\_1.pdf](http://www.eurekanet.ru/res_ru/0_hfile_1906_1.pdf) (last accessed 30.11.15)

Middleton, J. (2007) *Beyond Authority: Leadership in a Changing World*. Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan.

Hammersley-Flecher, L. & Strain, M. (2013) “Power, agency and middle leadership in English primary schools”. *British Educational Research Journal*, 37 (5), 871-884.

OECD. (2013) “Leading learning in a world of change”, in *Leadership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning*. OECD Publishing at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264205406-5-en> (last accessed 11.12.15)

GTCS. (2012) *The Standards for Leadership and Management: supporting leadership and management development* at <http://www.gtcs.org.uk/web/FILES/the-standards/standards-for-leadership-and-management-1212.pdf> (last accessed 01.12.15)

## **ADDITIONAL READING**

Busher, H. (2006) *Understanding Educational Leadership*. Berkshire: Open University Press.

Knight, J. (2009) “Coaches as Leaders of Change” in M. Fullan (ed) *The Challenge of Change: Start School Improvement Now!* California: Corwin.

## PRESENTATIONS/LECTURES

- G Donaldson            Presentation - *Followership, Fellowship, Leadership*.  
  
SCEL Inaugural Event Meeting 1, Stirling, March 2015.
- M. McMahon            Presentation – *Developing System-Level Leadership*. SCEL  
Fellowship Programme; SCEL inaugural event, Stirling, March  
2015.
- C Dimmock            Presentation – *What are the distinguishing qualities demanded  
of high performance leaders?* SCEL network meeting 4,  
Glasgow, September, 2015
- J. Spillane            Lecture - *Distributed Leadership*. Robert Owen Centre,  
Glasgow University, September 2015.
- M. Ainscow            Presentation - *Moving Knowledge Around: a strategy for  
improving the achievement of all pupils*.  
  
SCEL Network Meeting 4, Glasgow, September 2015.
- Sir A. Cubie            Presentation/Workshop – SCEL Network Meeting 6, Edinburgh,  
December 2015.
- C. Chapman            Presentation – Joint LEA Leadership Event, Bearsden  
Academy, November 2015.