

SCEL Fellowship Programme
Area of Enquiry

Growing our own leaders in Argyll and Bute – Systems Leadership Enquiry into the Development of a Middle Leader Network

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SCEL

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Introduction

This paper examines the need for supporting middle leaders in Education and identifies steps taken in Argyll and Bute to develop a Middle Leadership Network. The paper describes the initial impact and explores future possibilities for the group. It is useful to frame the paper around the following questions:

Why develop a Network for middle leaders in Argyll and Bute?

How did we start to develop a Network for middle leaders in Argyll and Bute?

What would be in a framework for middle leaders in Argyll and Bute?

What has been the impact of the Argyll and Bute Middle Leadership Network?

What are the recommendations for the future?

Why develop a Network for Middle Leaders in Argyll and Bute?

As a leader whose predominant experience was in England for 15 years and a Head Teacher in Argyll and Bute for 8 years, what struck me by comparison in Scotland was the lack of opportunities for middle leaders to develop theory and practice which would have a direct impact on school improvement and pupil learning. There is a wealth of opportunities to develop senior leaders for Headship internationally and while there is improving provision for middle leadership, more needs to be done to develop high quality leaders at all levels (Dimmock, 2012). Talent spotting and supporting future leaders is a key role the local authority can play in ensuring quality leaders of tomorrow (NCSL, 2012). I had been part of a Senior and Middle Leadership Network in Cheshire, known as CHILL Network, for a number of years and in consultation with the local authority, during the session 2015-16, I proposed developing a Middle Leadership Network. The Network would offer participants the opportunity to study leadership theory, develop skills in critical thinking, support a school based enquiry and link directly to leadership standards. As part of the SCEL Fellowship programme area of enquiry, it would also give me an opportunity to develop systems leadership skills and knowledge. The Middle Leadership Network would be part of an authority framework dedicated to supporting leadership.

Research has indicated that middle leaders can be at the heart of driving forward school improvement and are indeed well placed to have the desired impact. The National College for School Leadership in England (NCSL, 2012) identified the importance of supporting 'the rising stars' in terms of sustainability of high quality leadership at all levels and recognised that talented leaders needed to be supported throughout their continued professional development

to gain skills, knowledge and understanding that will enable them to support school improvement. It stated,

Middle leaders are the key driving forces in leading and maintaining school improvement, investment in their development ensures growth of capacity and influence on the next generation of leaders.

(NCSL, 2012: 5)

It has been recognised internationally that networking and collaboration have a key role to play in developing effective school improvement as they enhance the organisational capacity and improve student learning rather than schools working in isolation (Muijs, *et al*, 2010, Chapman and Hadfield, 2010; Fullan 2014). In education, the term, 'network' has been applied to professional networks of individuals that can span a local area or whole country (Little, 1993, Liberman and Grolnick, 1996, cited in Hadfield and Chapman, 2009). Crucially, Chapman and Hadfield (2010) cite OECD as identifying Networked Learning Communities in England as supporting an emphasis on knowledge transfer, professional learning, dissemination of good practice and enhancing the development of teachers. The need to broaden leader preparation and development across all levels of leadership, away from an in-service model and move towards an ongoing model of support is highlighted by Dimmock (2012). There is also evidence to suggest that there are significant benefits to successful schools working with schools in challenging circumstances (Muijs *et al* 2010; Chapman and Hadfield, 2010).

It is within this context that in Scotland, Donaldson (2010) identified the need to develop leadership pathways for teachers which would ultimately lead to successful school improvement. He added that account needed to be taken regarding the relationship between theory and practical preparation. This would form the basis of our work in Argyll and Bute.

How has Argyll and Bute started to develop a network for middle leaders?

Dimmock (2012) states that there needs to be careful rigour in selection of future leaders and when planning with the authority, ten participants were carefully selected to pilot the Middle Leadership Network. Applications (format is in Appendix) were invited from teachers with a minimum of 3 years classroom experience who were supported by their Head Teacher, and deemed to have the potential to succeed in school leadership. Participants needed to be willing to take an area of responsibility as identified in the School Improvement Plan and move it on with pace and enthusiasm throughout the academic year. This school based approach as part of a long term leadership programme is beneficial (Goldring *et al*, 2010, cited in Dimmock, 2012). Cross phase working was encouraged in terms of forming a team of

colleagues working with students aged from 3 – 18 years of age. A balance of internal and external resources along with contributions from talented practitioners within and out with the community was also important.

A possible framework for middle leaders in Argyll and Bute

Hadfield and Chapman (2009) advise that all networks have structure, with professional interactions that will involve shared learning experiences, planning together, undertaking collaborative change and processes such as leadership and management activities that ensure there is an impact on the classroom. This was reflected in our work and the initial plan had identified 4 day sessions for the participants to attend the Network, and would support participants completing a school based enquiry. The intention was that each session would follow the same format, namely:

- Looking at current theory behind an agreed focus (leadership skills, leadership heroes, what makes a good leader?)
- Self evaluation/critical thinking focus
- Network support – structured session to enable a critical friend approach
- School based planning for leadership/self evaluation

Research indicates the importance of aims, goals, timescales and expectations being shared from the beginning (Hadfield and Chapman, 2009; Muijs *et al* 2010, Dimmock, 2012) and this was reflected in the Network pilot. Aims for the Network and a summary of proposed programme content can be found in Appendix.

The beneficial use of standards as providing a common language for professionals (Kennedy, 2005) was reflected as participants identified two key standards they wished to develop in consultation with the Head Teacher for the duration of the Network. It is intended that these would be reviewed throughout the process.

With the focus on self-evaluation, participants would complete their own project reflecting school improvement using two frameworks. Participants could choose to use 'How Good is Our School?' Edition 4 (2015) or the CHiLL model for improvement, in consultation with their Head Teacher. The majority of schools chose to follow the CHiLL model.

While the content of each session was carefully planned, it was important to build on the concept that one size did not fit all, and recognise that context is highly important (Southworth, 2004; Goffee and Jones, 2006, Dimmock, 2012). Participants discussed individual needs and those of their own school and the focus for each session was agreed beforehand and a flexible

programme has evolved, meaning they had influence and control over their own learning, mirroring advice from NCSL (2012) and Dimmock (2012).

In considering that context was important, we also recognised the need to expand beyond the boundaries of the geography of Argyll and Bute. Fullan (2014) writes extensively within the Canadian context of going 'Beyond the District', focussing on professionals learning to develop effective practice together. Fullan identifies the advantages of providing professionals from 'the middle' to lead with others laterally as being a highly effective model. Taking this into consideration, another SCEL Fellowship participant, George Cooper, who was completing a similar enquiry and we decided to offer a joint session for respective participants. The joint session offered participants further theory, practical advice in terms of developing CPD and an opportunity to 'bring and brag' about areas of significant development within their area. Visiting another educational establishment out with the authority was also seen as advantageous by NCSL middle leadership group (2012). We agreed that there needed to be a definite purpose to the visit, reflecting Fullan's (2008) belief that it important that peers are connected with purpose. He refers to 'lateral capacity building' when there are planned opportunities for teachers to learn from each other, in professional learning communities, which then leads to improved outcomes for learners.

The feedback received from the joint event was extremely positive and it is intended to build on this success by having another joint event in the Summer term 2016.

Impact to date of the Argyll and Bute Middle Leadership

The impact made from such leadership development opportunities can be very difficult to measure and often evidence is given in terms of the impressions from participants (Dimmock, 2012). The middle leadership network is still work in progress, there are still another two sessions to be completed. Interim feedback from participants has been positive as highlighted below and in Appendix.

Table 1 Feedback from participants

	Useful for my own practice	Helpful	Extremely helpful
How helpful was the following in terms of your development/understanding of leadership?			
Reading theory	1	3	4
Critical thinking exercise – problem solving (supporting colleagues with a specific problem)	1		7
Sharing thoughts and experiences as a group			8
Self evaluation focus – theory		2	6
Self evaluation focus (CHILL/HGIOS) – at school – your own project		1	7

Table 2 Feedback from participants in relation to impact in school

	Still at planning & development stage	Starting to have impact	Considerable impact
What impact has your attendance (so far) at the Middle Leadership Network on :			
Pupil learning	3	4	1
The staff as team	3	4	1
The school	2	5	1
Your personal development			8

In considering feedback from participants and relation to the SCEL fellowship programme, it can be seen that there has been parallel learning paths. The participants experience has unintentionally but definitely reflected my own learning curve as a systems leader. Similarities can be outlined as follows:

- Opportunity to engage in current theory relating to educational leadership;
- Expectation of impact in terms of school/systems leadership;

- Strong focus on peers learning from each other;
- Opportunity to plan and implement change in school/across authority;
- Structure to support reflection on awareness of self as a leader and focus for improvement;
- Some evidence of impact collated but greatest gains currently are own personal development.

It could be identified that Hadfield and Chapman (2009) conclude that it would be difficult to see how the impact could have been made without a Network approach.

Recommendations for the future – Benefits, Challenges and Sustainability

The authority have committed to a continuation of the programme next year. At the end of the Network timescale there will be a full review to identify how successful the evaluation focus has been applied in schools which will inform practice for the next session. An account from each participant relating to the impact of their own professional development will be beneficial and feedback will also be sought from Head Teachers, staff and pupils as appropriate. However, evidencing the impact on pupil learning through the participant enquiry will be crucial to this whole process. Some may argue that future success could also be measured by tracking how many of the participants go on to promoted posts and the quality of their work.

Planning has been taking place with the authority to identify how the Network will continue. There is an indication that the current participants may continue to be part of the Network and new middle leaders invited to join. Currently it is felt that the focus may be an emphasis on the inclusion of schools that need specific support in terms of school improvement. This would mean that next year the more successful schools would be supporting those schools in more challenging circumstances, reflecting what Muijs *et al* (2010) were indicating as being of potential value by local authorities. However, care needs to be taken that there is not a perceived imbalance between parties participating in the network (Muijs *et al* 2010). There is also an argument to be made regarding the action of members of staff volunteering for such work as they have this year and the act of coercion of potential participants, which may happen next year, and could change the dynamic of the group considerably, however the benefits to school improvement could be substantial (Muijs *et al* 2010).

Throughout the enquiry the quality of the materials used by participants was paramount; it would also be useful to have a suitably qualified 'external' organisation to endorse the materials for the Network. This is an action Argyll and Bute as an authority are pursuing.

In considering the sustainability of the Network, schools need to support participants in terms of their development of their enquiry and release them for two days over a period of a year. Implications relating to supply cover, funding for CPD and workload are challenges in terms of the reality of the current educational climate. Also key would be a commitment from Argyll and Bute as an authority to the delivery of the Network in supporting a systems leadership model to enable me to continue to plan and deliver the programme.

Participants will be encouraged to apply for Professional recognition from GTCS on completion of their enquiry. One of the attractions of the Network currently for participants is its semi-informal nature, and that there was no pressure to complete a formal piece of writing. The focus was on the process of considering and sharing thoughts on theory and establishing a meaningful network of support, it has been felt that this remains for next year.

A substantial barrier around future development could centre on funding. While costs of the Network are relatively low, Argyll and Bute faces a financially uncertain future in education and there would need to be some commitment from the authority should they wish the Network to continue. This would mean recognising the future support for Middle Leaders as being of importance to the sustainability of quality leaders in Argyll and Bute and funding accordingly.

Personal reflections – SCEL Fellowship Programme

In the course of my enquiry, focusing on systems leadership, I have been taken out of my comfort zone, learned from experienced colleagues and led in a way that was completely new to me. In terms of leading the Middle Leadership Network, I adopted the role of facilitator, which was a positive learning experience; primarily I needed to build the soft skills needed to support adult learning. I needed strong background knowledge of leadership theory and extensive experience of the self-evaluation tools being used by participants. Coaching offered to me from SCEL was of an advantage, along with authority support and planning very carefully what I was going to do. I continue to grow and learn in this area and feedback has been positive.

The SCEL fellowship programme has made me re-evaluate my leadership strategies, and as a result I carefully planned to change my approach to certain aspects of my leadership style and practice. On reflection with authority officers, we have identified that it has been beneficial to me personally as a leader, to my school and to the authority. The exposure to quality speakers, academics and texts is motivating in itself but there has been considerable new learning for me; particularly relating to a deeper understanding of the social justice agenda and the concept of leading beyond authority. It is of advantage that I can bring my new learning to the Middle Leadership Network. Having previously been involved in leading authority wide

initiatives, the ideology of systems leadership was new to me and I am continuing to learn, adapt, and evaluate where I am in terms of my skills and knowledge.

The opportunity Argyll and Bute gave me to lead the Middle leadership Network was invaluable and it is my belief that good leadership habits can be born at this level and it is important that experience at this stage is supported and valued. The Network could take a number of years to establish, develop and grow, but it will be time and effort well invested. Those involved in the Middle Leadership Network have a strong sense of commitment; it has been a personally uplifting experience and a privilege to work with such talented professionals.

The challenge of developing my own systems leadership skills along with leading a busy primary school has been considerable but extremely worthwhile. Priorities have needed to be considered and time has been of the essence and there are many things I feel I could write about from my SCEL experience in the future. SCEL have invested in me as a professional and I need to repay that investment back. I cannot begin to list what I have personally gained from the SCEL fellowship programme but would welcome the opportunity to represent them and become an advocate of the College.

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APPENDIX

Application for candidates to fill in as expression of interest:

Argyll and Bute Middle Leadership Network (Pilot)

Name: _____ School: _____

Position: _____ Number of years teaching : _____

Please outline briefly your thoughts (no more than 200 words in total, please)

Why are you interested in joining the group?	Leadership experience
Do you have an idea of an area of improvement related to learning you would like to focus on? (Eg literacy, assessment etc?)	What do you think are the key skills of an effective educational leader?
Head Teacher's statement of support	

Aims and summary of proposed content to be covered as part of Middle Leadership Network

Middle Leadership Network Aims

- For participants to reflect on own experience of leadership and current thinking.
- To develop own knowledge of leadership theory and develop leadership skills and plan own focus of development area in school.
- To share thoughts and ideas with each other and support each other as part of the Network.
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Proposed Content

In considering other national leadership programmes, including Glasgow University Masters Leadership and Management programme (2015), Resources about Preparing for Leadership, materials from the National College for Teaching (2014) and Lessons from Tim Brighouse, materials from the National Collage for Teaching and Leadership (2015) and Building the New Leader (Leadership challenges of the future revealed) (2011) The Hay Group, possible themes for the Argyll and Bute network were:

Self awareness: leading others, 'becoming a leader', emotional intelligence, developing resilience, making decisions, taking responsibility, negotiating agreement and dealing with conflict.

Social justice and ethics: developing vision, values and aims, building shared understandings; integrity; policies and practice; teachers and pupils rights and responsibilities.

Learning and Teaching: Developing a peer learning Network; promoting collaboration; disseminating and using current research and using current research.

Leadership: leading 'the team'; understanding leadership approaches and styles; making connections and building networks.

Communication: effective communication towards pupils, staff, community and wider.

Comments from participants - Interim Evaluation from Middle Leadership Network – December 2015

If the work is having little or no impact, is there a particular reason for this?

I feel that this course has had a very positive impact, not only on my own teaching practice, but also across the whole school. It has allowed me to have discussions with other colleagues and staff. Other teachers are very interested to hear about the Middle Leadership Network course, as it is something they would also be interested in doing themselves in the future.

The most valuable aspect of the Middle Leadership Network is :

Liaising with colleagues and discussing the challenges and successes they have experienced in their setting. This has led me to reflect on my own practice and identify areas for development. I also found all of the reading purposeful; however it was the opportunity to reflect on theory within the group that was extremely valuable in developing my understanding of leadership.

Encouraging confidence and self-belief through the opportunities to discuss leading practices and share others experiences.

The most valuable aspect of the Middle Leadership Network is meeting together as a group and sharing our experiences and ideas and being given the opportunity and resources to; carry out self evaluation, plan and implement a project that supports the school improvement plan and undertake academic reading.

Being able to share and discuss ideas with colleagues from other schools, both primary and secondary, from across the authority. This is something that is not done enough throughout the authority and I feel that I have been able to pick up a vast amount of ideas that I have been able to bring back to my school and implement already. It has also allowed me to establish a 'critical friend', who I am able to communicate with regularly to discuss the project that I am working on.

Using the Middle Leadership Network as a platform to identify areas of development within my own school and begin work on a project that will benefit the whole school community.

Being part of this network has allowed me to work closely with the head teacher to identify areas of development within the school and collaborate further with colleagues and staff. It has also allowed me to lead sessions and meetings within my own school to talk about the project.

Sharing ideas and Critical thinking strategies has helped me greatly. Also gaining a perspective from the primary side of practice has been invaluable and inspired much reflection.

The introduction to leadership theory, and the opportunity to explore theory and practice with teachers who have similar aspirations and experience to me.

Meeting with colleagues and having professional dialogue and my own personal development.

Is too hard to choose! I have found it very interesting investigating different styles of leadership and how these can be applied. In particular I have found the idea of situational leadership very appropriate for me to consider. For me, having recently moved to my first promoted post, I have also enjoyed exploring different methods of self-evaluation.

The least valuable aspect of the Middle Leadership Network is :

Frustration caused by weather and ferries limiting travel and missing out on opportunities (unable to attend Bearsden joint session)

I have enjoyed both sessions so far and have come away with vast amounts of ideas and knowledge that have developed my own teaching practice further. Sandra is so enthusiastic about the Middle Leadership Network and I feel that this positivity has rubbed off on myself, as I always feel driven to continue developing as a professional after the meetings.

Some of the theory reading has not been applicable to own practice, but has still aided my understanding and given context to concepts I had formally disregarded.

I would have to say all aspects of the Middle Leadership Network is valuable.

The fact that we are all so busy in between sessions and therefore find it tricky to keep in regular contact. In order to be a 'network' I think we should all make better use of our EDMODO group to provide each other with support, advice and encouragement.