Reimagining Middle Leadership in Further Education

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Abstract

During the Re-imagine 2018 conference held at Birmingham City University, one of the several discussion streams was tasked with identifying issues faced by current middle leaders in further education. The purpose of the ongoing discussions was to then re-imagine a future where middle leaders could meet these challenges, develop plans the further education sector they imagined and provide a space to make suggestions for action. This paper distils these extensive conversations and casts a spotlight over several areas of significance. The paper offers an idealised approach towards a utopian goal for middle leaders in Further education while drawing attention to real and current problems. Beyond its utopian goals, the paper further draws attention to pertinent current issues that given appropriate support and autonomy, middle leaders may wish to explore and seek to engage in ongoing discussions for the benefit of learners in the sector.

Keywords: Further Education; middle leaders; leadership, middle leadership, colleges.

Introduction

June, for the last three years (2016, 17&18) has become a noted point in the FE calendar. In addition to the much anticipated approaching summer months, June now also offers the opportunity to spend a day at Re-imagine FE. This year the conference was separated into topics of interest. This article is a summary of the days discussions by the group brought together to consider middle leadership in further education. The group was led by Gary Husband and Catherine Lloyd who both have significant and relevant experience of leadership and teaching in further education covering the sector in England, Wales and Scotland.

The middle leadership group comprised 14 individuals many of whom were currently working in the FE sector in a middle leadership position. Other members of the group represented policy makers, senior leaders, principals and independent researchers as well as current FE teachers.

The initial discussion surrounding the differentiation of terms, middle leader and middle manager, was short but highlighted that this continues to be a vexed topic and worthy of a paper in itself. Given the paucity of space in this piece it has been decided to adopt the term middle leadership with acknowledgment of the ongoing debate in relation to meaning, inference, theoretical positioning and philosophy related to the separate terms.

Every care must be taken in a non-empirical paper such as this to stress that these ideas and discussions stem only from the experiences of those in the room on the day of the conference. The discussants represented a broad and diverse (and highly experienced) cross section of FE focused and engaged individuals, and as such it can be assumed that all suggestions and ideas are presented in faith with the intention of starting broader discussions. The exercise of reimagining invited discussants to idealise situations and theoretically remove barriers to implementation. These ideas are therefore presented with the hope of a shift towards action as opposed to being presented as a fait accomplis.

The discussions

In this brief section we aim to summarise the discussions held within the group and reflect the essence of the highlighted issues whilst not reporting verbatim on several hours of dialogue.

In considering the role of middle leader as it is currently enacted within the FE sector, it is apparent that the middle leader's role is complex, covering a wide span of activities and responsibilities. Many of these are data driven with a focus on measuring performance against targets, evaluating courses, increasing efficiencies and reducing costs. If in charge of a subject area it was identified that middle leaders will largely be responsible for the design and delivery of the curriculum, resource (including human, physical and financial) management, student welfare and quality monitoring. Middle leaders will have line management responsibility for a team and be required to develop people management skills and carry out reviews and appraisals (where appropriate, many FE colleges do not currently operate a system of annual appraisal). Given the identified and discussed focus on management related tasks, it was posited that nature of the role can become reactive rather than proactive. A focus on "firefighting" and being "the fixer" or "go to person" often detracts from the (frequently idealised) role of visionary, strategist and creative leader. These are enduring issues in the literature, for example Briggs (2005) and (Page, 2011) acknowledge the complex nature of the role of middle leaders in further education. Page (2011) noted that the ability to fire fight was seen as an essential skill for managers.

Those in the middle are, as the term suggests, located between the senior team and the body of teaching staff (the term staff is used entirely non pejoratively and intended only as a way of describing a collective). Frequently finding themselves as partial members of both leadership and teaching teams, a foot in each camp but without a permanent chair in either. As Leader (2004) describes, the tensions involved in managing the expectations of both senior managers and teaching staff are a significant part of middle leadership. It was discussed that middle leaders frequently find themselves in the

invidious position of 'poacher turned gamekeeper', and subject to pressures from both (metaphorically) above and below, frequently leading to being positioned within the 'squeezed middle'. Middle leaders therefore seem to juggle the demands and expectations of each stratified group, often not being accepted fully into either.

Given the background and career trajectories, it is very common for middle leaders in FE to be promoted from within the organisation, or from teaching positions in other organisations. Although (in theory) it can be argued that a middle leader in a faculty or curriculum role does not necessarily require a teaching background (contentious, we know), they are often good teachers who have moved into the leadership role, often with little or no specific training. In many cases, the process of starting in a new position requires individuals to pick up where a previous incumbent left off and very quickly assimilate the priorities of the role, this is precisely the time where increased support and advanced induction should be placed but is so frequently lacking as often promoted staff are not seen as 'new'.

Although faculty middle leaders may retain a teaching commitment, generally the majority of the role will focus on managerial tasks. This then highlights the problematic and the tension. Within organisations, faculties, policy documentation and certainly job descriptions there is often a requirement for innovation, creativity and inspirational practice, however, the reality of the role is in fact focused on practical administration, performativity and resource management. There is then indeed little wonder that this can frequently lead to the focus shifting towards outcomes, results and stratified data sets, and away from the business of pedagogy, actual student experience, welfare and indeed, stakeholder interests (industry needs for example). The focus on managing and reporting has led in many instances to a difficult position for middle leaders who undertake these roles with the ambition of enacting positive change and discover a reality of performative cultures dictating agendas and practice (Avis, 2003).

This might seem to paint something of a bleak picture of the role of the middle leader, how it is perceived and understood; however, the purpose of the discussions was to explore tensions, difficulties, problems and assumptions. In so doing there were several opportunities to highlight strengths in practice, opportunities, supportive senior leadership actions and proactive teaching community initiatives. The almost tireless and indomitable spirit of many middle leaders was brought to the fore. Despite the seemingly never ending churn of policy, the discussants reported that there were a great many examples of individuals in middle leadership roles who stayed focused on students. A principal present at the discussions also highlighted that their own college would cease to function overnight if the middle leaders stopped their efforts, they also admitted that they couldn't be quite so sure if the same could be said of the directorate.

The intention in the next section of this paper is to explore the reimagining of the role and discuss creative responses to tensions in practice. In this next section the positives of the role are highlighted, explored and an alternative future discussed.

Reimagining the role…

The discussions in the morning session had brought about the summarised observations that the tensions and expectations associated with meeting the requirements of the middle leadership role had led in some instances to a perceived shift in focus away from teaching, learning and assessment. The day to day minutiae of dealing with management tasks, operating within strict inspection regime driven cultures and meeting the needs of data hungry organisations had, in the experience of the assembled group, frequently led to the middle leaders not being able to fulfil the creative aspects of their role. Decisions were not always student focused and in many cases, centrally controlled systems and processes dictated pedagogic practices leaving middle leaders unable to always deliver the best for students. Therefore, any discussion based on how to reimagine the role of the FE middle leader cannot be had unless a broader context is included. The impact of government, policy, governance, senior leadership, college support services (e.g. Human Resources, Organisation Development, Finance etc.) and stakeholders cannot either be excluded or underestimated. The factors impacting middle leaders and shifting the focus of their role are by and large external to their faculty/department areas and as such any drive for change must take a whole college and even sector approach.

Taking the morning session's main suggestion that too much time is spent by middle leaders on technical administration and firefighting and not enough on developing a focus on learning and student experience, the question was asked, how then would we flip this? What would happen if learning and teaching were the primary focus, what would this look like, how would you achieve it and how would you know?

Reimagining the role as one where teaching, learning and assessment are at the centre of practice and given priority, led to three key recommendations. However, in discussing this assessment has been included as a function of learning and does not exist separately or have its own driving agenda. It was highlighted that where assessment of outcomes are the focus, learning can be narrowed to just meet those ends. Assessment as a part of learning can be a positive driver for that learning and a part of the process by which experience and expertise is gained.

The group identified three areas of focus for potential development:

- Middle leader education (not training, a purposeful distinction is made below)

- Recognition and development of the expertise of many middle leaders, specifically leading to trust and increased autonomy
- Middle leaders as advocates for a focus on teaching and learning

Middle leader education

A clear demarcation between learning and training needs to be drawn here. A programme of middle leader education would offer in depth learning engaged with over extended time periods and driven by the middle leaders themselves. Much of the short bite sized commercial training packages were described as shallow or merely ticking a box to demonstrate that training had been provided. The idea of critically engaged middle leaders empowered to pursue higher level learning opportunities resonated with the group and formed the basis for the first recommendation to emerge from the discussions.

In the first instance, and addressing the broader context, there needs to be investment in learning directed at the body of the organisation, its employees. It was discussed that education and training budgets are the first to be plundered in rounds of cost saving exercises as they are a quick and immediate source of money with little apparent impact. However, it was noted that where opportunities for learning were removed, a cultural shift away from an open learning organisation happens rapidly; and returning from this point may take years and far more than financial investment. In short it is a false economy.

Given then the nod towards a utopian setting for this aim and recommendation, it was discussed that learning should be empowering, individualised and explore both the leadership and management aspects of the role. Instead of only learning about systems and processes, the space to develop thinking, discuss ideas and engage critically with literature, embedded collaboratively and meaningfully within the working week was posited as a defining end goal for middle leader development. This would require space which could only be provided by once again investing in appropriate support for these often very large roles.

Recognition and development of expertise of middle leaders

The second recommendation then leads us to the need for recognition of experience and expertise. Middle leaders are frequently very experienced in working within the teams that they find themselves leading but are yet frequently unable to enact the leadership or change that may have been the deciding factor in their decision to take on the role in the first instance. It was noted that middle leaders are frequently regarded as operational staff, doers or enactors of the vison of senior leaders

and then in turn beholden to those senior leaders for approval. Empowering and trusting middle leaders to act boldly, make important decisions (beyond the operational) and lead with authority was seen as a laudable aim for any organisation. Middle leaders are by definition close to the business of the organisation, in this case learning and teaching. They are therefore, in many instances, best placed to enact positive change and drive the agenda of the organisation forward, an agenda and focus which they have had a real hand in influencing.   None of these recommendations can exist in isolation and as such these first two separate points are in fact very closely linked. This empowerment needs to be directly linked to learning and critical evaluation and reflection. Engaging in honest, open, collaborative and critical evaluation and reflection can lead to an examination of values, assumptions, priorities and underlying personal educational philosophies. It was suggested, that as a collective within an organisation, critically engaged middle leaders offer an opportunity for continual development not only themselves but also curriculum, teaching and learning, culture and even senior leadership practices.

Middle leaders as advocates for change

Third and finally, middle leaders should be empowered to act as advocates for teaching and learning within their organisations. The group felt that ideally middle leaders should be present within teams and within classrooms, with the time to focus and reflect on the teaching, learning and assessment taking place. Whilst it is acknowledged that not all middle leaders will retain or have a teaching role, there was discussion within the group about the possible benefits of this and in particular the opportunities it presented for involvement with learners.

For there to be a shift towards a focus on developing teaching and learning it is important to create opportunities for both formal and informal teaching and learning discussions to take place. This could be through identifying a shared space where staff can come together and requires a collegial approach, establishing a learning community where everybody features as a learner. To achieve this there is a need to establish a common purpose with buy in from staff at all levels within the organisation. The well told adage about NASA and everyone working there having one common mission to put humans in space, was used as a metaphor for FE organisations. If everyone who worked there shared the same goal, to provide learning and good teaching, a cultural shift could be brought about. As with NASA valuing the part played by janitors (for example) in putting humans into space, then FE focused organisations too could benefit from valuing the efforts of all, including middle leaders.

 Senior management teams could support this shift through, as Coffield states, 'providing the necessary structures, resources, dedicated time and opportunities for all staff and learners to become

better at learning' (2008: 18). Having both time and time out to reflect and think about the issues was considered by the group to be beneficial. The desire to create thinking time within the role resonates with earlier discussions on middle leader education and demonstrates how the three areas for development are interlinked. An extension of this idea also highlighted was the importance of creating and participating in networks, both within and external to the organisation for the sharing of practice and ideas. These opportunities to participate in numerous communities of practice, could contribute to what Fuller and Unwin (2004) describe as expansive learning environments, a removal of restriction and a shift towards autonomy and freedom in practice.

To facilitate this shift, conversations need to happen across organisations, to negotiate ways to address the current pressures. One suggestion from the group was to free up time by ensuring there are efficient processes to release middle leaders from administration tasks, which included the effective use of data packages to support the curriculum. This could help to rebalance the focus of the role and reduce the time spent on operational and administrative issues.

At the beginning of this article we were careful to acknowledge the ongoing debates around the terms leader and manager in regard to the roles discussed. The participants in the discussions identified contradictions between the dominant discourse of leadership and the role of middle leader as it is enacted. It was observed then that the role involves both leading and managing at the same time but with a frequent focus on tasks of management and not acts of leadership. Given then that the role requires both, or indeed should, a debate over title and nomenclature runs the risk of missing the important issue. How individuals are perceived and enabled to enact the role is seemingly more important and cuts more accurately to the heart of the discussed issue. A move towards developing the three areas described in this article could in many ways further promote a shift towards empowering individuals to enact all aspects of the role, whether they be perceived as managerial or leadership. This may require a certain level or reimagining of roles, positions and responsibilities and a further blurring of some of the seemingly false demarcations between senior and middle leadership roles. The early stages of this sort of reimagining would involve elements of the development of both the role and individual concurrently.

Summary and reflections…

In summarising the discussions it was identified that middle leaders are well placed to influence the culture within their organisations and act as agents for change. They have a key role to play in shaping their departments and the experiences of the students. To be successful in this they need to be provided with opportunities to continue their education and development as leaders. Middle leaders need to be empowered and encouraged to be bold in their leadership, critical in their thinking and

clear on their purpose. Instead of this important group of individuals just managing to manage, they should be supported to embrace the opportunities of the position and keep on learning to lead.

Reimagining 2018 allowed us to draw on the experiences and knowledge of those in the middle of organisations. It highlighted the positive effects of coming together and sharing practice and ideas, and creating time and space for discussion. The contributions from the participants enrich our thinking about middle leadership in FE and provide valuable suggestions for future development.

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