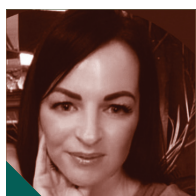


Mobilising Teacher Leaders as Policy Translators



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This article explores the experience of a middle leader as policy translator and showcases how teacher leaders can agitate for change in schools. The article has a focus on policy change in literacy, but the process remains essentially the same for any teacher or middle leader looking to mediate change and to translate national policy to meet local needs.

Introduction

This article explores the experience of a middle leader as policy translator in St Oliver Post Primary School, Oldcastle, County Meath, and showcases how teacher leaders can agitate for change in schools. While the article has a focus on policy change in literacy, the process remains essentially the same for any teacher or middle leader looking to mediate change and to translate national policy to meet local needs.

School self-evaluation was made mandatory in Ireland in 2012. This dovetailed with the publication in 2011 of the National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People. It is then that I began to look at literacy. I was an English teacher, but my motivation to look at literacy was not money or prestige; it was personal curiosity, albeit a curiosity fuelled by the publication of the national strategy.

It's at this juncture that my journey began: collating hard data, generating soft data, analysing statistics, and identifying underperformance. Although there was no formalisation of the role, the school supported my endeavour, allowing me to conduct a scoping exercise and generating discourse about literacy. The scoping exercise gave us greater clarity on the school's needs. In 2018 there was a restoration of posts at middle management level, and I was appointed to assistant principal II, with curricular responsibility for literacy.

School leader autonomy

The appointment of a middle leader with strategic responsibility for literacy represented a significant systemic change. While the change was informed by national priorities, autonomy is given to schools on the prioritisation of strategic areas for middle leadership positions. Schools must engage in a review to consider their leadership needs

and strategic priorities. The scoping exercise ensured that all staff were making informed decisions when prioritising literacy as an area of strategic responsibility, warranting a middle leadership position.

Harris and Jones (2012) explore the extent to which middle leaders are given the autonomy and responsibility to shape their position. Senior leadership trusted me to make decisions about how best to apply my own, specialist expertise to deliver a customised fit for our school. This type of autonomy requires a shift in power: senior leaders must be willing to 'let go', place their trust in their middle leaders, and be willing to authentically distribute leadership (Preedy, 2016). When this happens, we have a synergy, and middle leaders can make a 'powerful contribution to secondary-school improvement' (Gurr, 2019, p.136).

In my school, senior leadership gave me the autonomy to broker a role and mediate systemic change. There is vast potential to contribute beyond the school. Moving from one who studies policy to one who seeks to influence its practice is an emergent area for me. The Centre for School Leadership and my regional Junior Cycle Implementation Support (JCIS) have been integral to supporting the mobilisation and helping me to share the practice.

Using classroom data

My middle leadership role is very much connected to my classroom. It is this that has given integrity to the process, because it's here that I began profiling students and assessing their levels of literacy to establish baseline data. This data has informed our literacy plan of tiered supports across primary, secondary, and tertiary levels.

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Firstly, our primary level of supports. Upon a pupil's entry to the school, and each term thereafter, I use screening software to gather their reading attainment levels. Computer screening systems report student scores, comparing them to national norms, but I wanted to translate the data to compare our students against our school's norms and to measure scores against our class norms. All learners and parents get their child's reading score, the class average score, and the year group's average. Reporting in this way gives reassurance to students and parents and helps them make sense of the data.

Learning about learning

Integral to the learning is engaging in discourse about the data, acknowledging the diversity of our students, and normalising it. Reporting on results has been informed by our students: they want to see their results and be able to compare them to their class's average. The reporting is very much scaffolded in positivity and endorses the principles of the Junior Cycle, of managing oneself. Examining the data helps learners explore their attitudes to their own attainment and that of others, acknowledging there

are many challenges and barriers to learning. Students begin to learn why they might be struggling with other subjects, and it helps them make sense of their frustrations.

I show learners how to improve and set realistic targets for themselves. This is informed by the Matthew effect (Stanovich, 1986). The theory is shared with students: that good readers read more, causing them to become even better readers. Conversely, poor readers are less likely to read for pleasure, so it is more difficult for them to improve. This helps all learners understand that rates of improvement are relative.

Reassessment takes place each term, and the results are discussed individually with students, alongside data from their reading records, word counts, and time spent reading outside of school and in school. This helps students make sense of their results and see the symbiotic relationship between participation and progress. The learning about literacy takes place during class time in Literacy. This course is a locally devised Junior Cycle 100-hour short course studied by all our Junior Cycle students.

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I used the screening data to inform the development of Literacy for Life and Learning. It was approved by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) as a Junior Cycle level 3 course in 2018. Central to the course is the balancing of knowledge and skill. Students learn that while literacy is a skill, and reading is a skill for life, they need the knowledge to understand how to improve. Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (ZPD) (Lynch, 2021) is used to teach students that when they stretch their reading just a little beyond their capabilities, they are at a point of maximised progression. Implementing this concept relies on the school's graded library, because students need to be able to select a book within their ZPD to maximise their growth.

Applying the strategy

Staff participate in bespoke, annual in-school training to review the literacy data, record it, and use it to inform teaching and learning. Sharing scores with staff helps us keep up to date with the school's changing needs and to differentiate our practices. For example, when I'm in English class, I know that the reading range spans nine years from weakest to strongest. When I use questioning, I tailor the language of the question and higher-order requirement to suit the student's ability. When I report on learning, I use the screening data to give a more accurate reflection on a student's progress relative to their ability. It is invaluable when reporting to parents and setting realistic targets.

Moving the data to shape secondary-level supports involves filtering it to see the 1st and 2nd years who have a reading age below eight, between eight and ten, and then making referrals to the special education needs (SEN)

department. The SEN coordinator uses the data to shape interventions for all students referred.

To further screen, I use the literacy class to administer the English standardisation test PPAD-E, a screening and diagnostic tool that assesses literacy skills across five subtests: word reading, spelling, reading speed, reading comprehension, and writing samples. I aggregate the scores to ensure that the tests are identifying the same at-risk students. The combined scores allow the SEN department to plan a more tailored response to student need; for example, where a student is identified as being a weak reader, they may also need a spelling intervention. The data also informs the requirements for more specialist staff training in evidence-based programmes to deal with the broader components of literacy.

In the last year, the strategy has moved to looking at tertiary levels of support. Interventions at tertiary level address multiple issues that affect student success. Central to this has been generating an integrated model of data presentation. The model helps us to look further at how we use cross-sectoral screening reports to track longitudinally and measure individual performance from 1st year through to 6th year.

Our data profiling system for each student shows scores for literacy, general ability, specialised diagnostic tests, and house exam and state exam results. The aggregated data set is helping us now to look at student progression, but in the future it should inform us on the adequacy of the core curriculum, and on the effectiveness of instructional and behavioural strategies in a school when we combine it with attendance data and other risk factors.

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