Developing the leadership skills of senior and middle managers to promote risk taking

Project focus
Our school is located on an estate where the large majority of our pupils come from white British working class families. There have been generations of unemployment in the area and for many this has led to low aspirations and a lack of belief that education can make a difference. The children tended to give up when faced with learning challenges, although they were usually keen to take part in challenge days and competitions. At the same time, whilst staff enjoyed trying new ideas and approaches, I noticed that during observations, they tended to play things safe. I was keen that they would develop the confidence to take more risks and show creativity and flair. Our project involved creating a collaborative inquiry-based approach across the school focused on enhancing the children's ability and confidence to solve problems and challenges, and take risks.

What we did
To begin with, a senior leader met with the middle leaders to discuss what risk taking in teaching involves, the skills teachers need to take risks in learning and how risk taking can lead to outstanding teaching and learning. Following this discussion, the senior leader led a full staff meeting on the same theme, facilitated by the middle leaders. Between them, the staff identified a number of risk taking activities in different areas of learning, such as paired work, group work, creative activities and ICT.

A risk map was created at a subsequent leadership meeting which the leaders used at a staff meeting to ask staff about the skills they felt they needed pupils to develop in order to take risks and accept challenges and how these skills could be developed.

The next stage involved the senior leader teaching a high risk, challenging lesson which he invited the leadership team to observe. Afterwards, they discussed how the risk was managed, the impact on pupils' learning, and any major issues etc. Then the middle leaders similarly invited the staff in their team to observe them deliver lessons that were out of their comfort zone and discussed the lessons with them afterwards.

The final stage involved middle leaders leading a discussion with their inquiry groups during a staff meeting on which part of the lessons had the most impact on learning. Following a training session on inquiry methods by Professor Christopher Day, the middle leaders launched their team off on inquiries in which they were required to measure the impact on the pupils.

New academic knowledge gained
A key area of learning has been the ‘inquiry’ process and how this can be achieved in a school setting. The discussion and support from the university has allowed us to think more deeply about how we know what is or is not working. Developing my knowledge of research, in particular, about Carol Dweck’s research on fixed and growth mindsets has led me to think more deeply about how we develop higher expectations and aspirations for our pupils. In addition the research by Rupert Wegerif and colleagues about developing pupils’ problem-solving skills through developing their group work skills was particularly useful. Group work and collaboration has been at the heart of the project.

What has changed
Previously, for consistency’s sake, I had used a fairly didactic approach for bringing about change, but with this project:

- another member of the school’s Senior Leadership Team had the opportunity to lead a whole school development project
- the middle leaders had the opportunity to develop their leadership skills through receiving focused support from the senior leader for supporting groups of staff in developing their practice, and
- the class teachers had the opportunity to experiment with their practice, design an inquiry and see the impact of it on their teaching and pupil learning.

I have seen a real change in the culture of the school; teachers are more likely to try something new and their expectations and knowledge of what children can do has changed. Common themes from staff about how it will impact on their future teaching include:

“I'll offer more open-ended tasks.”
“I'll allow children to become more independent learners.”
“I'll ask children to evaluate their learning more.”

The children enjoyed the learning and there has been an impact on the pupils’ collaborative work and on their ability to work together and solve problems, as these comments show:

“I have learnt to keep on trying.”
“I got ideas from other people.”
“It has been an adventure.”

There’s been a real shift in our school - that actually, if we want to change practice then we need to investigate if there is evidence that shows it’s effective, then try it in our school and see the impact. Staff are now beginning to question what we are doing, why we are doing it and what impact it’s having. We’ve also now started looking at more research that can inform our practice such as Dweck’s work on growth mind-set and Hattie’s work around visible learning.

University partnership role
Coaching, prompting, refining, questioning, mentoring, supporting have been just a few of the ways the school, the Senior Leader, the Inquiry Leaders and myself have been supported through this process by our partner from The University of Nottingham. This support allowed us to furrow our own path but be steered gently back on course by enabling us to analyse our own thoughts and ideas.

Evidence of impact?