

Shaping Teaching and Learning Whilst Developing Key Staff

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As an already over-subscribed Academy and with larger cohorts each year, we needed a succession plan, including understudies for subject leaders, to be developed from experienced teachers as lead practitioners (LPs). This would be particularly important in the core subjects and science. Having the LPs in place within these main areas would allow the academy to continue with minimal disruption if, or when, a head of core left. The LP also provides valuable experience and support to their department.

We wanted to retain our aspirational staff within the core subjects – but also in other departments around the academy. Some of these staff are more than qualified and could easily gain promotion elsewhere, so the lead practitioner accreditation would help retain staff. Our hope is that they will continue their research and development within the academy, developing their own experiences so they are ready to move on to the next step of the ladder, whether it is within our academy or elsewhere.

The LPs would also help establish a common theme that would ensure a consistent approach to T&L around the academy. They would provide expertise in coaching, lead T&L development groups and support to staff, and be provided with opportunities to become involved with projects within the academy.

Supporting Our LPs

The headteacher and I met all the successful LP applicants to discuss their new roles. The first full meeting as a cohort of primary and secondary candidates took place with SSAT's Andy Williams, who introduced the LP course. All applicants attended with their coaches and mentors and received a booklet with the key criteria and meeting dates, so everyone knew how to complete the accreditation.

On the calendared evenings our secondary candidates would meet for 30 minutes before primary candidates from our pyramid schools would arrive. Both sets of staff would then meet for a further half-hour, to discuss their projects. The discussions led to lists of strengths and areas of development, for both primary and secondary phases. This enabled applicants from the different key stages to dip into these development areas and share best practice. It worked really well for us, as it enabled our applicants to work beyond their own teams.

An evidence-gathering process at following meetings involved candidates reading through each other's statements and peer-assessing projects. Throughout this time, candidates would communicate with me via emails or speak to me directly when they needed guidance.

Our accreditation project titles were derived from key T&L focus areas in the school development plan. Candidates' projects were based on their areas of strength, as shown in observations or through their enthusiasm for particular aspects and elements of T&L.

Main Outcomes of the LP Cohort

The main benefit we discovered was the personal development of these key staff; they also made a huge impact on research and development within the academy. We run a successful T&L group where ideas have always been shared and T&L practice developed. However, the LP accreditation took this to a whole new level with research groups. Staff were more than happy to share IRIS videos they had created – and indeed become part of a wider academy T&L buzz! The greatest thing is that when more staff buy into the ideas, more use them, and strategies evolve.

Looking back, one thing we think we would have done differently is to ensure a closer eye on candidates' progress, as shown on the computer platform. It is excellent to see the research in action, but we also need to know the statements are up to date – rather than LPs leaving the accreditation statements to the last minute, as kids might!

In addition, I would not set the programme out at such a large scale with relation to the final outcomes. Our projects were discussed in detail and cut down dramatically, but they still they grew immensely. This is hard, even for the LPs for whom time had been dedicated; our associate LPs who had a full teaching timetable had limited time dedicated to the LP project.

All of the applicants have done amazingly well. I'm proud of their achievements: all the projects have had significant impact, not only on the day-to-day running of the school, but also on the results of our students - they achieved 71% A*-C this year. The associate LPs merit special recognition, as they gained the LP accreditation on a limited number of hours to collate evidence and work with others.

Challenge and opportunity

The Lead Practitioners have not only developed their own practice, but helped shape T&L throughout the academy. The accreditation is a challenge, but is also an opportunity for staff to take ownership of the main threads of the school and shape its progress.

The outcomes are exceptionally rewarding; we now have security of professional staff expertise if any of our heads of core subjects were to leave, but, perhaps more importantly, we are retaining some of our most enthusiastic and talented staff even where head of department positions are not available.

The LPs will continue to build on their projects and influence the T&L group within the academy. All the topics addressed have far more scope for development through the projects. Diminishing the disadvantaged gaps, promoting metacognition and pupil independence, promoting pupil engagement, pushing the more able and reducing wasted years in transition from KS2 to KS3 are all still at the heart of our development plan. Projects will evolve and hopefully have even more impact on the achievement of our students at Castleford Academy.