

Account of practice:

Jo Field, middle leader, Ladywood Special School, Bolton

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Jo Field is a class 3 teacher at Ladywood Special School in Bolton, a primary school for 4–11 year olds with complex learning needs, and has worked there for three years. Ladywood was rated outstanding by Ofsted in 2011.

As a middle leader, Jo works with a team including her job-share partner and two teaching assistants and is also responsible for the school's science curriculum. This year, she has participated in the Middle Leadership Development Programme (MLDP), which Ladywood, in its capacity as a national teaching school, offers with the National College. She will shortly be switching from part time to full time.

Leadership roles

This year, Jo has been developing the science curriculum for progression from Key Stage (KS) 1 to KS2, looking at how to incorporate scientific enquiry into the children's learning, how learning is recorded to match assessment statements and how it is moderated. Her findings have been presented to whole-school staff meetings. Her other leadership challenge in school has been the renewal of Ladywood's Quality Mark.

Externally, she was one of the school's lead teachers on a research project with the University of Manchester which explored the application of the principles of outdoor learning at KS1 and KS2.

"Our Foundation Stage children have access to the outdoor learning environment all the time and we wanted to look at whether we could embed the same principles in KS1 and KS2 to improve teaching and learning," she says. "It involved composing an action plan, putting together a working party, organising timetables, writing [observation forms], motivating people, and doing a presentation to the university with colleagues, so [it] used all my leadership skills."

The project has challenged preconceptions about how children with special educational needs (SEN) learn and consequently triggered reflection about teaching practice.

"Usually the preferred method of working would be one-to-one learning with the teacher but we've found the learning outcomes have been outstanding when the children are learning from their peers and also when they've steered their own learning," Jo says. "It means we move to being facilitators of learning, rather than delivering and supporting all of the time. Taking that step back and revising your own practice has been really powerful."

Middle leadership

Ofsted rated Ladywood's leadership and management as outstanding school at its most recent inspection and the senior leadership team provides powerful role models that shape her own approach to leadership, Jo says.

I try to model myself on the leadership that I see around me. So I try 100 per cent to be a good role model; I wouldn't ask someone to do something that I don't already do and do well, for example.

Jo sets great store by detailed planning and ensuring the support she provides is tailored to different members of staff and different teams throughout the school. One example is Jo's approach to developing the use of scientific enquiry with staff, some of whom had more experience of using it than others.

Before delivering a staff meeting on scientific enquiry I met teaching staff to discuss how they were incorporating it into their science planning and lessons. It became clear that staff were at different stages of their understanding of the importance and need for scientific enquiry. I used this information to plan the meeting to meet the needs of all teachers. I produced documents highlighting why scientific enquiry is important and packs for each teacher to take away with all the necessary sheets to scaffold implementation. For those unsure of what it might look like I modelled the use of 'discovery dog', a scientific enquiry resource, and showed how to plan an investigation with the children.

It meant that Jo's aims and expectations were made explicit to all and provided a consistent approach for all teaching staff to use when addressing scientific enquiry in class.

One of the key qualities middle leadership requires is strong interpersonal skills, Jo points out:

Rather than going in all guns blazing, reflection and self-reflection are very important tools to get people on board. You have to demonstrate to people that you are approachable, and that yours is a support role as well as a working role. As a middle leader, you understand the pressures everyone's going through as you're going through the same. But you have to remain positive for the benefit of the children and when you do that, you see people coming on board who are enthused by your enthusiasm.

Something I learned from the MLDP is to be aware of other people's learning styles and that, although some people's learning styles are different from mine, the result can be just as good. It has had a big impact on me this year.

Outstanding teaching

Detailed planning and preparation are crucial to Jo's and Ladywood's approach to, as is prior assessment.

"You need to know where to pitch the lesson," she says. "Some children will switch off if it's too difficult or too easy for them or if it is something they have already covered. The important thing here is that deep knowledge of the whole child, their learning style, their prior learning and their assessment. With that understanding and your own subject knowledge, you can set out what they should be aiming for next, so that they continue to progress in the right way and at the right pace for them.

In subject teaching, differentiation is clearly important but it depends on detailed, regular assessment.

Jo says, "You need that ability to know each individual child in your class, their preferred learning style and what makes them tick. For example, when the pupils come into class each year and each term I assess them on the four areas of scientific learning. With that information, I know instantly to tailor the lesson three ways to meet the needs of the children as identified in their assessment levels."

Jo cites the example of changing materials in science and using sensory learning with Year 1 pupils at three different levels.

We would have some ice in the classroom and the children would be exploring it using all their senses, plus symbols would be on display for them to interact with. The next group up would be perhaps sequencing the changes in the materials, while my top groups would be planning an investigation centred on changing materials.

We would also make ice lollies to taste – which is always popular with the children but also an amazing assessment activity at the end of a unit to question the knowledge and scientific vocabulary they have acquired. I ask them probing questions such as 'How did you make an ice lolly and what changes happened?'

As a leader in the classroom, Jo has to ensure staff have grasped the way of working and outcomes she is aiming for. She shares her aims and expectations for differentiated learning at weekly meetings, and learning objectives are all clearly displayed in the class, as are examples of questions to use with children of different abilities. "I try not to presume they understand everything at once and will often revisit previous conversations so I know for sure my expectations are understood," she says.

For assessment, the staff are fully aware of the school's marking policy and always use it, so Jo can see clearly the judgements teachers have made when she looks at a child's work. The information, together with the assessments the children make themselves (see below), is brought to the next planning meeting to shape the next steps for the children.

Jo says, "Being very clear from the outset and checking for consistency at the start of the academic year ensures we are all marking and conducting assessments consistently. It highlights the need for clear dialogue and regular communication and reflection opportunities as a team."

Evaluation

All of the children have individual education plans (IEPs). These are evaluated weekly to see whether a child can move to the next objective. The plans are evaluated and revised three times a year.

"The culture of Ladywood is assess, evaluate, move on," says Jo. "You are always analysing and evaluating to move the pupils on to the next steps. It is effective for the teachers and practitioners, but also being able to share with the parents even the smallest step in the learning is immense as well."

Besides staff assessments, children are also encouraged to evaluate their own learning with a system of orange and green smiley faces. Orange means 'I can do it' and green means 'More help please'. Jo says: "The children have individual targets and each time they come and learn with me or one of the other staff, they go to their personalised target board and choose their target. I will read it to them at the start of their learning, where appropriate: it might be 'I can find number one', for example. At the end I'll read back the target and they either indicate an orange sticker or a green one."

"It's amazing how even children with a low level of ability and understanding can evaluate whether they can do it or need more help. That then helps me to make sure that everything is appropriate to where their learning journey is at the moment and the next steps in their learning."

Support from senior leaders

Jo can call on the senior leadership of Ladywood if she has a particular challenge in one area. The school's deputy head, for example, is in charge of behaviour management and Jo has sought her help on a number of occasions.

"Often, it's for clarification, about whether the systems I have in place are appropriate or to ask her to evaluate what I've been doing and suggest other things that might work," she says. "For example, we had a child this year whose behaviour was perfect in class but deteriorated once she went out to the yard; she was not listening to adults and was challenging other children. I hadn't seen this pattern of different behaviours for different parts of the school before but the senior staff had, so we talked about strategies that could work on the playground."

At a whole-school staff meeting, Jo told her colleagues that the child was finding being on the yard a challenge, and asked them to support her by modelling 'being a good friend' and 'playing nicely with other children'.

Jo says, "At Ladywood, if you say, 'we need help with this child', the whole school comes on board because everything is centred on the needs of the child. So staff on duty became aware they needed to monitor her and engage with her to give her no opportunities not to be following the rules. And with constant role-modelling of following the rules and our high expectations, her behaviour has improved so she now enjoys playtime."

One of the key aspects of middle leadership is to recognise that you can still ask for help in this way, she adds:

It makes you remember that people can still intervene to support you. Whatever the issue is, somebody will have faced it before and will be able to guide you.

Questions for reflection

- What steps would you take to ensure your staff understand your aims and objectives in the classroom?
- How could you involve children in assessing their own progress?
- How would you ensure other teachers have sufficient understanding of your subject specialism and its methods to deliver the activities you have devised?