CATALYST

An evidence-informed, collaborative professional learning resource for teacher leaders and other leaders working within and across schools

Louise Stoll, Carol Taylor,
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Facilitator guide

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Contents

What is *Catalyst*?

Catalyst is designed to support and promote the change, professional learning and development of groups of teacher leaders, including middle and team leaders – and the senior leaders who support them – both within and across schools. It consists of two sets of evidence-informed resource cards.

Research Findings cards

These cards are informed by a collaborative research and development project, Middle Leaders as Catalysts for Improving Teacher Practice,[1] carried out between researchers at the UCL Institute of Education (IOE) and Challenge Partners,[2] an informal network of 475+ schools (see Annex 1). Here are the four project questions.

1. What do we know about effective middle leadership within and across schools that changes teachers' practice?

2. What are powerful ways to share knowledge about excellent middle leadership practice within and across schools?

3. What is important to consider in designing evidence-based tools to track changes in teachers' practice as a result of middle leaders' interventions?

4. What leadership conditions in schools help to develop and embed cultures of shared outstanding practice?

Professional Learning cards

These cards are informed both by our own and others' research and by our experience of facilitating professional learning (see Annex 2). *Catalyst* is a professional learning tool intended to animate or 'bring to life' the project findings.[3] In line with the project questions that focus on powerful ways of sharing knowledge, we want to share our findings to help colleagues to learn from them, rather than just 'disseminating' outcomes.

What are *Catalyst*'s aims?

• To help develop better understanding of and skills in teacher/middle leadership.

• To stimulate evidence-informed conversations about teacher/middle leadership which lead to deep and meaningful learning.

• To support skilled facilitation of these conversations.

• To encourage inquiry, improve problem-solving and enrich decision-making through collaboration.

• To enhance leadership within schools and across networks and school partnerships.

Who is *Catalyst* for?

Catalyst is designed for schools in all contexts and across all student age groups. It is for use by and with middle leaders and other teacher leaders within and across schools, and the senior leaders who support teacher/middle leaders. Middle leaders have a formal role, with responsibilities for a subject, cross-curricular aspect of teaching and learning, social development of students, or for a stage or phase of schooling. Teacher leaders are informal leaders. Teaching is central for them, but they also choose to play a collaborative role in leading change and supporting the professional learning of colleagues in their school and other schools. *Catalyst* can also be used by:

- Senior leaders, for refreshment, reinvigoration and to further develop their capabilities.
- Senior leadership teams, to audit their own situation.
- Headteachers/principals interested in creating a supportive culture.
- Leaders supporting all colleagues across/in other schools.
- Colleagues involved in specific improvement programmes with an interest in change.
- Facilitators of leadership development, especially teacher/middle leadership.

What's in the *Catalyst* cards?

Research Findings cards

Four different coloured sets of small cards. Each set corresponds to a research question – *Catalyst*'s four research themes.

- GREAT TEACHER LEADERS
  – 7 blue cards and a summary card

- TRACKING IMPACT
  – 7 gold cards and a summary card

SUMMARY RESEARCH FINDINGS

GREAT TEACHER LEADERS

Great teacher leaders

Are catalysts for change
Have vision, purpose and goals
Communicate clearly
Use research and school-based evidence
Facilitate sustained professional learning
Are critical friends
Build trust

Stoll et al. (2021)

SUMMARY RESEARCH FINDINGS

TRACKING IMPACT

Tracking impact

Start with the end in mind
Know what and how you're measuring
Plan clear action
Share ownership
Work towards sustainability
Provide opportunities for reflection
Treat it as an ongoing cycle

Stoll et al. (2021)

- SHARING KNOWLEDGE WITHIN AND ACROSS SCHOOLS
  – 7 green cards and a summary card

- LEADERSHIP FOR CULTURES OF SHARED PRACTICE
  – 7 red cards and a summary card

SUMMARY RESEARCH FINDINGS

SHARING KNOWLEDGE WITHIN AND ACROSS SCHOOLS

Sharing knowledge within and across schools

Create a culture for learning
Understand others' contexts and realities
Nurture positive relationships
Grow champions and advocates
Design systems and processes for collaboration
Ensure equal participation and inclusion
Share evidence of success

Stoll et al. (2021)

SUMMARY RESEARCH FINDINGS

LEADERSHIP FOR CULTURES OF SHARED PRACTICE

Leadership for cultures of shared practice

Believe it's important
Communicate the vision for change
Model collaborative practices
Nurture critical friendship
Encourage risk-taking
Provide opportunities for exchange
Celebrate success

Stoll et al. (2021)

The reference for the findings on this set of cards is: Stoll, L., Taylor, C., Spence-Thomas, K. and Brown, C. (2021) *Catalyst: An Evidence-Informed Collaborative Professional Learning Resource for Teacher Leaders and Other Leaders Working Within and Across Schools* (Carmarthen: Crown House Publishing).[4]

Professional Learning cards

These honeycomb colour cards contain processes to support colleagues to use and learn from the research findings.

- FAMILIARISING YOURSELVES WITH THE RESEARCH FINDINGS
- IDENTIFYING YOUR PROFESSIONAL LEARNING NEEDS
- AUDITING PROFESSIONAL LEARNING NEEDS
- ENGAGING IN AN INQUIRY
- RESOLVING SCENARIO PROBLEMS (PLUS SEVEN ASSOCIATED SCENARIO PROBLEM CARDS)
- EXPLORING YOUR PROBLEM
- ARTICULATING PRACTICE
- SUPPORTING OTHERS TO GROW IN LEADERSHIP
- PRIORITISING
- MOVING TO ACTION

The front of each card states the purpose of the activity, whom it is suitable for and the resources you might need. On the back, you will find ideas for getting started, alternative uses and prompt questions for critical friends.

How do you facilitate *Catalyst*?

You can facilitate *Catalyst* yourselves or an external facilitator might introduce it. We encourage external facilitators to help colleagues develop the skills and confidence to facilitate their own learning. If it is self-facilitated, ideally you will share the facilitation around group members.

There are many ways to use *Catalyst*. The **Professional Learning** cards help you to get started, use *Catalyst* with different groups and vary activities for leaders at different stages of readiness. Once you have decided which theme(s) you will focus on, we suggest that you start with FAMILIARISING YOURSELVES WITH THE RESEARCH FINDINGS before using other professional learning processes. As professional learning needs to make a difference, MOVING TO ACTION is a useful way to end the session so that participants, individually and as a group, are clear about how they will apply their learning. We encourage you to adapt the processes as appropriate to your context, situation and the needs of the group. Be as creative as you feel you can be.

Other resources can be downloaded from: (sample version: link not available). If you want to make reflective notes and plan next steps, a range of resource sheets – including associated research references – can be found there to support you.

Before you facilitate *Catalyst*, here are some points to consider:

- *Catalyst* works best when participants share openly and in confidence, so include everyone and make sure the learning environment is supportive and mutually respectful.

- Think about how well your group members know each other. It may have implications for your choice of professional learning processes.

- It is worth exploring with a new group how you will work together effectively and ensure everyone can participate in different ways – for example, listening to each other and providing feedback, as well as speaking.

- It is important to ensure that the professional learning processes are powerful and provide challenge for all participants.[5] Encourage them to use open-ended questions and offer each other critical friendship to support deeper learning.

- Participants will find some professional learning processes easier than others. Some prompts are provided on the **Professional Learning** cards to help move things along if people are struggling.

- It will be helpful if group members are clear upfront that the resource encourages participants to work collaboratively, engage in inquiry and use a problem-solving approach.

- We hope that you have chosen to use this resource because it is evidence-informed. We also hope that you will follow up on the research references and encourage colleagues to do so too.

- Encourage participants to keep notes/a record of their activity, learning and its impact, and offer resources that they can use for this (see above).

- Consider the purpose of group members, individually and collectively, keeping notes on their learning, and whether and how you want to feed this into school or network/ partnership plans and strategies.

What was the project?

Middle Leaders as Catalysts for Improving Teacher Practice: Developing a Knowledge Exchange and Impact Network with Challenge Partner Schools was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). It focused on knowledge exchange, viewed by the ESRC as social scientists and research users engaging in two-way dialogue and collaboration.

The project's focus was to explore and learn about establishing an effective network with a 'catalyst' group of middle leaders across a number of Challenge Partner schools. These catalysts would then extend their learning to colleagues in their hub partner schools. Middle leaders are fundamental to successful school improvement and improved teacher practice. They lead teaching and learning, and are the key bridge between senior leaders and teachers. Middle leaders are often outstanding teachers charged with supporting colleagues' development in their own and other schools, but can become frustrated in their attempts to connect and share their own expert knowledge with other middle leaders and teachers, especially in other schools. They also frequently do not know the best ways to track their interventions' impact through to changes in teachers' practice. The project partners jointly agreed the four research questions (see page 3).

To answer these questions, researchers and catalysts engaged collaboratively in:

- Workshops to share research findings and best practice, and where the middle leaders used their new learning to create and refine processes and tools to help them lead more effectively and track their impact.

- Activities where the middle leaders tested the new ideas and trialled tools in their own and other schools.

- Evaluating experiences and impact on the catalysts and their colleagues.

- Developing processes to embed the notion of sharing high-quality research-informed practice between schools in catalysts' networks and for practitioners in other networks.

Researchers also collected information about catalysts' starting knowledge, beliefs and skills, and their schools' orientation to sharing outstanding practice with others. In addition, they followed project activities and interviewed participants and some headteachers about the process and impact. Literature searches and information gathered during the project and its evaluation were combined to produce answers to the four research questions.

Annex 2

What principles and evidence underpin *Catalyst*'s development?

We were influenced by the aims of the original project funding scheme – the ESRC's Knowledge Exchange scheme – and our project questions that focus on powerful ways of sharing knowledge. Consequently, in sharing the answers to the research questions, we chose to summarise our findings in short paragraphs, which capture the essence, as a way of introducing colleagues to the evidence.

In designing professional learning processes to engage participants with these research findings, we have drawn on our own research, research and development, and facilitation experiences in this project and others, and further research findings on:

• Knowledge mobilisation,[6] knowledge exchange[7] and knowledge animation.[8]
• Professional learning and development.[9]
• Professional learning communities and learning networks.[10]
• Schools as learning organisations.[11]

We encourage you to access both sets of literature sources at (sample version: link not available).

Annex 3

How does *Catalyst* fit in with other initiatives?

In many countries, there is a drive for evidence-informed teaching.[12] Teachers and leaders are increasingly engaged in collaborative activity in schools that are learning organisations, professional learning communities and learning networks. These involve teachers and leaders in impact-focused collaborative inquiry, using data and external research findings as part of the process. Peer-to-peer learning and school-to-school support and review[13] are important strategies to improve learning, teaching and school leadership.

Leaders need to know how to model and lead all these activities. Developing teacher leaders (including middle leaders) is critical to this agenda. *Catalyst* highlights key dispositions, knowledge, behaviours, skills, practices and conditions to support the development of teacher leaders and other leaders.

Notes and references

References cited in this guidance follow. Other project and related references can be found at (sample version: link not available).

1   Middle Leaders as Catalysts for Improving Teacher Practice: Developing a Knowledge Exchange and Impact Network with Challenge Partner Schools. ESRC Knowledge Exchange Opportunities scheme research and development (R&D) project – Grant: ES/I002043/1. For further information on the project's R&D and evaluation activities, see Stoll, L. and Brown, C. (2015) Middle leaders as catalysts for evidence-informed change, in C. Brown (ed.), *Leading Evidence Use in Schools*. London: IOE Press, pp. 65–76.

2   See http://www.challengepartners.org.

3   Stoll, L. (2009) Knowledge animation in policy and practice: making connections. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association as part of the symposium Using Knowledge to Change Policy and Practice, April; Stoll, L. (2010) Connecting learning communities: capacity building for systemic change, in A. Hargreaves, A. Lieberman, M. Fullan and D. Hopkins (eds), *Second International Handbook of Educational Change*. Dordrecht: Springer, pp. 469–484.

4   The content of the research cards is based on findings of work carried out in 2013–2014 (see Stoll and Brown, Middle leaders as catalysts for evidence-informed change). The findings presented in *Catalyst* have been slightly modified after field testing, trials and more recent literature reviews. One set of findings (Tracking Impact) is published in Stoll, L., Brown, C., Spence-Thomas, K. and Taylor, C. (2018) Impact-focused change catalysts: teacher leadership within and across professional learning communities, in A. Harris, M. Jones and J. Huffman (eds), *Teachers Leading Educational Reform: The Power of Professional Learning Communities*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge, pp. 51–71. *Catalyst* is the first full publication of these particular findings. A fuller set of related references that informed the project, its findings and the updates are available at: www.crownhouse.co.uk/featured/catalyst.

5   Ince, A. (2017) Managing risk in complex adult professional learning: the facilitator's role, *Professional Development in Education*, 43(2): 194–211.

6   e.g. Knowledge Network for Applied Education Research (KNAER): https://www.oise.utoronto.ca/knaer and Research Informing Policy, Practice and Leadership in Education (RIPPLE): http://educ.queensu.ca/research/spotlights/knowledge-mobilization.

7   Many UK universities have knowledge exchange sites. The project processes also drew on definitions and ideas from the Canadian Mental Health Association, where, 'A true knowledge exchange process would involve opportunities for dynamic information sharing and exchange amongst all stakeholders, with those traditionally considered the users of information as active participants rather than just passive recipients of knowledge': https://cmha.ca/documents/knowledge-exchange-a-framework-for-action-by-the-canadian-mental-health-association.

8   See note 4.

9   Timperley, H. (2011) *Realising the Power of Professional Learning*. Maidenhead: Open University Press; Higgins, S., Cordingley, P., Greany, T. and Coe, R. (2015) *Developing Great Teaching: Lessons from the International Reviews into Effective Professional Development*. London: Teacher Development Trust; Stoll, L., Harris, A. and Handscomb, G. (2012) *Great Professional Development Which Leads to Great Pedagogy: Nine Claims from Research*. Nottingham: National College for School Leadership; Porritt, V., Spence-Thomas, K. and Taylor, C. (2021) Leading professional learning and development, in P. Earley and T. Greany (eds), *School Leadership and Education System Reform*, 2nd edition. London: Bloomsbury, pp. 121–130.

10 Stoll, L., Bolam, R., McMahon, A., Wallace, M. and Thomas, S. (2006) Professional learning communities: a review of the literature, *Journal of Educational Change*, 7(4): 221–258; Vescio, V., Ross, D. and Adams, A. (2008) A review of research on the impact of professional learning communities on teaching practice and student learning, *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 24(1): 80–91; Katz, S., Earl, L. M. and Ben Jaafar, S. (2009) *Building and Connecting Learning Communities: The Power of Networks for School Improvement*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press; OECD (2013) Fostering learning communities among teachers, *Teaching in Focus*, 04 (June); Brown, C. and Poortman, C. (eds) (2018) *Networks for Learning: Effective Collaboration for Teacher, School and System Improvement*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge; Kaser, L. and Halbert, J. (2018) Teachers leading reform through inquiry learning networks, in A. Harris, M. Jones and J. B. Huffman (eds), *Teachers Leading Educational Reform: The Power of Professional Learning Communities*. London and New York: Routledge, pp. 32–50; Timperley, H., Ell, F. and Le Fevre, D. (2018) Developing adaptive expertise through professional learning communities, in A. Harris, M. Jones and J. B. Huffman (eds), *Teachers Leading Educational Reform: The Power of Professional Learning Communities*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge, pp. 175–189.

11 OECD (2016) What Makes a School a Learning Organisation: A Guide for Policy Makers, School Leaders and Teachers. Paris: OECD Publishing. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/education/school/school-learning-organisation.pdf.

12 Schleicher, A. (2012, ed.) *Preparing Teachers and Developing School Leaders for the 21st Century: Lessons from Around the World*. Paris: OECD Publishing. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/site/eduistp2012/49850576.pdf; Stoll, L., Brown, C., Spence-Thomas, K. and Taylor, C. (2015) Perspectives on teacher leadership for evidence-informed improvement in England, *Leading and Managing*, 21(2): 76–91.

13 e.g. Matthews, P. and Headon, M. (2016) *Multiple Gains: An Independent Evaluation of Challenge Partners Peer Reviews of Schools*. London: IOE Press. Available at: http://www.challengepartners.org/sites/default/files/files/Multiple%20Gains.pdf.

About the authors

Dr Louise Stoll is Professor of Professional Learning at the UCL Institute of Education (IOE) and an international consultant. Her research, evaluation and R&D activity focuses on how schools, local and national systems create capacity for learning and improvement, with an emphasis on professional learning communities and learning networks, creative leadership, leadership development, and connecting research and practice. She directed the ESRC-funded Middle Leaders as Catalysts for Change project. Louise is an expert to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) on its Schools as Learning Organisations initiative. The author of many publications, translated into six languages, she has also developed professional learning and leadership resources based on her research. She is a former President of the International Congress for School Effectiveness and Improvement, a Fellow of the Academy for the Social Sciences and was listed as one of the *Sunday Times* 500 most influential people in Britain in 2016.

Carol Taylor, MA is a former Associate Professor (Teaching) at the UCL Centre for Educational Leadership at the IOE where she supported schools to embed practitioner research and inquiry into organisation and individual practice. She co-led the National College for Teaching and Leadership's Teaching Schools R&D project involving 60+ schools across England, and worked on the ESRC-funded Middle Leaders as Catalysts for Change project. Carol was co-designer and lead facilitator on a national accredited professional development programme for middle leaders working in independent schools, and supported the development of the National Professional Qualification programme for executive leaders. She worked with and designed bespoke leadership programmes for national and international contexts, working in Europe and Asia. Among her publications is 'Understanding impact and the cycle of enquiry' with Karen Spence-Thomas in C. Brown (2015, ed.) Leading the Use of Research and Evidence in Schools (London: IOE Press).

Karen Spence-Thomas, MMus is a former Associate Professor (Teaching) at the UCL Centre for Educational Leadership at the IOE. She has held teaching and leadership roles in London schools and specialised in designing and facilitating tailored professional development programmes within and across schools and other public sector organisations. She also co-led the IOE R&D Network of schools. Recent projects included: the Education Endowment Foundation-funded Research Learning Communities (with Chris Brown); ESRC-funded Middle Leaders as Catalysts for Change (with Louise Stoll); the National College for Teaching and Leadership's (NCTL) Research Themes Project (which she co-led with Carol Taylor); and an NCTL-funded leadership programme for women with Mulberry School for Girls. Among her most recent publications is 'Leading professional learning and development' with Vivienne Porritt and Carol Taylor in P. Earley and T. Greany (eds, 2021) *School Leadership and Education System Reform, 2nd Edition* (London: Bloomsbury).

Dr Chris Brown is Professor in Education and Director of Research in the School of Education at Durham University. He has a long-standing interest in how evidence can aid education policy and practice. Chris has led and been involved in a range of projects that seek to help practitioners identify and scale up best practice. These include an Education Endowment Foundation-funded project working with 100+ primary schools in England

to increase their use of research and the ESRC-funded Middle Leaders as Catalysts for Change project. He was also involved in an evaluation of England's progress towards an evidence-informed teaching profession for the Department for Education. Among his books and other publications, he has edited *Leading the Use of Research and Evidence in Schools* (London: IOE Press). Chris was awarded the 2016 American Educational Research Association Excellence in Research to Practice Award.

What leaders have said about *Catalyst*:

Thought-provoking prompts allow you to look at strategies in depth.

The Research Findings cards are useful to reflect on and build confidence.

They stimulate discussion at a deep level, focused on aspects of leadership that really matter.

Our discussion about tracking impact was brilliant.

They're great!

These ingenious game-like yet evidence-informed professional conversation-starters will help both challenge and deepen leaders' thinking and develop their strategies, while making the business of becoming a better leader playful rather than pompous or ponderous.

Dr Andy Hargreaves, Research Professor, Lynch School of Education, Boston College

Original, eye-catching, mind-engaging, practice-improving and brimming with professional learning practices which we know work well. The cards are the perfect catalyst for professional growth and, in turn, the development of more capable learners. This resource underscores the power of learning for all teachers and school leaders.

Professor Bill Lucas, Director, Centre for Real-World Learning, University of Winchester

An innovative professional learning resource that supports and enables leaders to engage school leaders with evidence-informed practice, and which provides a means for colleagues to stimulate their thinking about a wide range of leadership scenarios and challenges. Highly recommended!

Professor Dame Alison Peacock, Chief Executive, Chartered College of Teaching

This unique resource will be highly useful to every professional learning educator. The research findings are insightful and the format of the materials allows users in many parts of the world to place important and evidence-informed ideas into their school change practices.

Dr Judy Halbert and Dr Linda Kaser, co-authors of *The Spiral Playbook*