Can behaviourally informed communications increase applications, and appointments, to System Leadership roles?

Research Brief

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Acknowledgements

Introduction

In September 2016, the Department for Education (DfE) commissioned the Behavioural Insights Team (BIT) to investigate how behavioural insights could help to facilitate a school-led improvement system. This investigation led to the trial reported on here. The purpose of this trial was to test the impact of behaviourally-informed messages on applications for, and take up of, the National Leader of Education (NLE) and Teaching School (TS) programmes (collectively but not exclusively, 'system leaders').

This publication provides a summary of:

- The background to the trial, the hypotheses and outcome measures, and methodology

- How the exploratory work informed the development of the interventions

- The nature of the intervention, how it was delivered, and the results.

Key Findings

The effectiveness of the intervention was tested in a Randomised Controlled Trial (RCT). The numbers of applications and appointments for the group that received the intervention were compared to the group that did not receive the intervention (the 'control' group). For the target behaviours, the trial intervention:

- Increased the number of NLE applications, and appointments

- Had no statistically significant effect on the number of applications or appointments to the TS role.

The treatment group (who received the behaviourally informed intervention) were more than twice as likely to be appointed an NLE.[1] If the entire sample (2,051 schools) had received the treatment, an additional 16 NLEs would have been appointed, compared to the entire sample receiving standard (business as usual) communications about the system leader programmes. However, the conversion rate for both NLE and TS (proportion of applications that went on to be successful) was lower for the group that received the intervention compared to the control group. The increase in the number of applications led to additional work for DfE staff in reviewing applications in this application cycle and more schools spending time on applications that were then unsuccessful, an important consideration alongside the results of the trial.

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[1] Please note that this effect is statistically significant at the 10% level.

Background

The DfE is working to further develop a school-led improvement system. The principle behind this is that schools should learn from other schools, drawing on best practice within the sector, with the intention of ensuring effective coverage of school improvement support so that any school in need of support can access it.

System leaders are school leaders who work with schools outside their own, to provide school-to-school support. The DfE operates a designation process for system leader programmes based on meeting eligibility criteria of academic performance, including Ofsted ratings, skills of the applicant and the track record of providing school to school support. Two of the designations which provide school to school support are:

- **National Leaders of Education (NLEs)** are school leaders who have experience in effectively supporting schools in challenging circumstances. The National Leader of Education (NLE) status is held by the headteacher, with their school designated a national support school (NSS).
- **Teaching Schools (TS)** are strong schools led by leaders that work with others to provide high-quality training, development and support to new and experienced school staff.

Methodology

First, exploratory research was completed in the form of (i) policy research and a literature review; and (ii) semi-structured interviews. This exploratory research informed the development of intervention materials.

Second, the intervention materials were then tested in a RCT. The sample in the trial was split into two groups. One group, the 'control' group, received the business as usual communications from DfE. The other group, the 'intervention' group, additionally received the intervention developed by BIT and DfE.

Target Behaviours and Research Hypothesis

The overall hypothesis of the research was that:

> *Behavioural insights, which tailor the communication of opportunities to apply for system leadership programmes and streamline the application process, encourage more headteachers to apply to become designated as a NLE and/or TS, increasing appointments to these roles.*

Interventions were designed to increase two outcomes:

1) Applications for a system leader role - NLE or TS
2) Appointments to a system leader role - NLE or TS

Intervention Exploration and Development

Exploratory research was conducted to inform the development of the intervention materials. The activities included:

- Reviewing existing policy research

- Conducting semi-structured interviews with 6 headteachers, 8 senior leadership team members and 10 classroom teachers across 6 schools in 4 school districts (including 2 Opportunity Areas[2] (OAs))

The policy research and semi-structured interviews highlighted a few key themes which informed the development of interventions that aim to encourage system leader applications.

First, the interviews found that these potential system leaders had some reservations regarding the additional workload the role entails and rarely discussed these reservations with current system leaders. Hearing from another school that had successfully taken on the role may therefore be an effective strategy. If headteachers see that similar schools and heads have navigated such challenges successfully, they might be more inclined to submit an application.

Second, the policy research indicated that some headteachers were concerned by opposition from their governors. Therefore, an encouraging message from a chair of governors at a school currently operating as a system leader may also be an effective strategy.

Third, the interviews revealed that while many headteachers had a strong intrinsic sense of duty to support other schools, the status of a system leader role was also appealing. Receiving encouragement from a trusted and respected figure in the education profession could therefore effectively motivate headteachers to submit an application.

These findings suggested that targeting schools with the potential to undertake system leader roles with messages from (i) another school that had already taken on a system leader role and (ii) a respected figure in the education profession, could be an effective strategy.

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[2] Opportunity areas are identified by the DfE as the most challenged when it comes to social mobility. They have been given access to funding to address the biggest challenges they face.
https://www.gov.uk/government/news/social-mobility-package-unveiled-by-education-secretary

Trial Implementation

This trial tested the impact of behaviourally-informed messaging to headteachers and chairs of governors (that academic performance data suggests are strong candidates) on application to, and take up of, the NLE and TS programmes.

The intervention comprised two letters/emails:

1. **Peer-to-peer**: A letter of encouragement from headteachers currently operating as system leaders. The letters outlined the benefits to the school of taking on a system leadership role (NLE and/or TS) and drew on behavioural research showing that people are more responsive to suggestions that come from messengers who are like them. Concurrently, the chairs of governors at target schools[3] were also sent letters of encouragement from their counterparts at schools operating as system leaders.

2. **Exclusive invitation**: An email and letter from Teaching Schools Council (TSC) representatives or Regional School Commissioners (RSCs) inviting headteachers to put themselves or their schools forward for the NLE and/or TS role. The invitation was designed to convey the exclusivity of the role to appeal to the self-esteem (or 'ego' in behavioural science terms[4]) of the recipient,emphasising that a special effort was being made to recruit them. Pre-filled application forms were also provided to reduce friction in the application process, making it easier to apply.

Conclusion

The results of this trial demonstrate that behavioural insights can be used to help facilitate a school-led system by increasing the number of NLEs. Specifically, providing encouragement from peers and an exclusive invitation from a respected figure in the education system has been shown to increase applications and appointments for the NLE role. However, this intervention did not statistically significantly increase applications and appointments for the TS role.

The results of the trial support consideration of the roll-out of this approach to stimulate the supply of NLEs. Delivery of the trial identified further opportunities to improve the targeting of the intervention and the conversion rate to ensure that DfE staff time is used as efficiently as possible and that schools do not spend time on applications that are unlikely to be successful.

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[3] Target schools are schools targeted by the intervention to apply for a system leader role (NLE or TS).
[4] Please note 'ego' is the commonly used behavioural term in this context, the research team are not making judgements on the personalities of the sample.

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