

Middle Level Leaders Thinkpiece - Dr Tony Bush

Research findings on middle level leadership

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1. The significance of middle level leaders for school improvement

Middle level leaders are central to the improvement of educational standards. They carry out a wide range of responsibilities critical to the effective operation of schools. In the secondary phase, middle leaders include not only heads of academic departments but also pastoral heads, key stage co-ordinators, special educational needs co-ordinators (SENCOs) and IT coordinators. Wilkinson (2002, p.17) estimates that there are 250,000 teachers with middle leader roles in England and some 60,000 of these are in secondary schools.

As middle leader Del Planter stresses, "Middle managers are very important people. It's clear that you need a head who is a leader with a clear vision but ultimately it's the people in the middle who implement the vision" (cited in Harvey 2002, p.32).

Planter uses the term 'manager*' rather than 'leader' and this has been the traditional conception of those key people who occupy the middle ground between senior management and classroom teachers. Leadership has become an increasingly important notion in recent years and it is now that middle level leaders do need to lead as well as manage.

The importance of middle leaders in school development was highlighted by the research of Earley and Fletcher-Campbell (1989, p.99), conducted before the extra demands imposed by the National Curriculum:

Department heads have a central role to play in facilitating and managing educational changes.

More recently, a team from Keele University carried out a major investigation of 24 secondary schools and emphasised that, "The real work of the school, delivering the curriculum, is organised and managed through... departments and teams". (Glover et al 1998a, p.3)

This paper focuses mainly on the work of subject leaders and heads of department. This is because the main research evidence relates to their work. The more limited research on pastoral leaders (eg Lodge 1999, Harper and Barry 1999) suggests that heads of year, for example, are increasingly taking on curriculum co-ordination roles as well as responsibility for pupil welfare.

Question: To what extent do pastoral leaders adopt curriculum co-ordination roles in your school?

The traditional role of middle managers

During the 1980s and into the 1990s, the traditional role of academic middle managers was that of subject leader. They were often the most experienced teachers in the department and led by example. Middle managers also took on the routine administration of the department or unit, managing resources but with only a limited 'people management' role. The following extracts from research evidence illustrate this point:

Many department heads did not conceive of themselves as managers having responsibilities for others and being in positions of leadership. (Earley and Fletcher-Campbell 1989, p. 103)

Many subject leaders confuse administration with leadership and take refuge in their administrative work to avoid some of the inevitable problems arising, for example, from enhanced monitoring and evaluation of the work of professional colleagues. (Glover et al 1998a, p.7)

Most people appointed to HoD posts... were appointed because they were successful teachers, not because they displayed any managerial expertise or recognised managerial potential... The HoD saw his/her role as that of a subject specialist. (Adey 2000, p.425)

Middle managers... have often been good administrators but not always good at learning or management. (Planter, cited in Harvey 2002, p.33)

Question: What are the limitations of the traditional middle management role in secondary schools?

Middle level leaders and senior management

Middle leaders are often in the uncomfortable position of being sandwiched between the conflicting requirements of the senior leadership team and their departmental colleagues. The expectations of heads and senior staff have changed during the past decade in two ways:

- middle leaders are expected to adopt a 'whole school' view in managing their departments and units. Departmental policies are expected to be consistent with those of the school expressed, for example, through the school development plan. "Middle management allows for the promotion of senior management's vision in the specialist subject and provides a vehicle for control and direction" (Bennett 1995, p.141)
- middle leaders are being asked to take on many 'whole school' responsibilities that were previously the domain of the senior management team. There is evidence of significant growth in these responsibilities being undertaken by middle level leaders (Brown et al 2000a, p.249)

Middle level leaders also face pressures from their colleagues and are often in the uncomfortable position of being a 'buffer' between senior management and classroom teachers. Turner and Bolam (1998, p381), however, point out that middle leaders do have room for manoeuvre. They "will conceptualise their role in a proactive fashion and not merely act as a conduit through which the decisions of the SMT will be communicated".

Question: How can senior managers help or hinder the performance of middle level leaders?

4. The importance of the departmental team

Much of the research shows that most middle level leaders see their primary accountability as being to their teacher colleagues rather than to the senior management team. "The department was the key section of the school to which secondary teachers felt an allegiance" (Bennett 1995, p. 102). Research by Wise (2001) shows that middle managers' subject team was the most influential in respect of decisions on curriculum, resources, professional development and pupil discipline. Of her respondents, 58.8 per cent indicated that departmental staff were most important while only 21.7 per cent identified the head and senior management.

This emphasis on the views of the subject or unit team is sensible because of the persuasive evidence that departmental effectiveness depends critically on the cohesiveness of the team or group. Harris' (1998, p.273) review of ineffective departments showed that this was a vital factor. "The major problem was that the teachers in the less effective departments taught in relative isolation from each other and did not function as a teaching team".

Question: How can middle level leaders build an effective departmental or unit team?

5. Problems facing middle level leaders

All the research evidence shows that the major problem facing middle leaders is a *lack of time* to carry out the work required of the role. Typically, they receive only one or two hours per week for this work, over and above the non-contact time available to other teachers. This is widely regarded as inadequate, as the following extracts suggest:

This was a key issue for everybody, with particular concern expressed about finding the time to complete the tasks that can only be done during 'in-school time'. Monitoring and evaluating... were often neglected because sufficient time was not allocated. (Brown et al 2000a, p.250)

The subject leaders... referred to the problems of gaining sufficient time for their enhanced role, particularly time off timetable so that they could 'increase the level of observation and support', 'work with other staff to secure improvement' and 'develop opportunities to talk and reflect on what we are doing'. (Glover et al 1998a, p.29).

This limited 'management time' is wholly inadequate to fulfil the diverse tasks which now form part of the academic middle manager's role. (Wise and Bush 1999, p.194)

As long ago as the 1980s, Earley and Fletcher-Campbell (1989, p.104) were urging that "additional commitments should be avoided as they are likely to impinge upon the effective performance of the department head's role". However, the evidence is that there have been extra demands placed on middle leaders. Senior managers researched by Glover et al (1998a, p. 15), for example, "recognise that administrative tasks take up a disproportionate amount of a subject leader's time and include SATs, target setting, examination entries, report writing, writing schemes of work, the department handbook [and] development planning".

The second main problem facing middle level leaders may be categorised as 'role conflict'. The demands from both senior managers and teacher colleagues put them under great pressure. Wise (1999, p.340) notes that "some groups within the role set might find their expectations of the middle manager not being enacted" because other expectations are given a higher priority. Earley and Fletcher-Campbell's (1989, p. 106) research also identified role conflict, "between the department head's leadership and management function, and the notion of developing collegiality and team spirit".

A related point concerns the notion of 'vision', increasingly regarded as central to effective school leadership. Brown et al's (2000a) research shows that middle leaders are frustrated at having to subordinate their own vision to that of senior staff:

There was insufficient quality of vision from the headteacher and the rest of the senior management team and such 'Vision' was too often 'handed down' without consultation ... the head of department's vision was often under-valued and their professional judgement insufficiently recognised by senior managers, governors and external bodies. (p.250)

Question: How can middle level leaders make the most effective use of their limited management time?

Question: How can middle level leaders manage conflicting demands from senior staff and departmental colleagues?

6. The need for a change in role

The pressures on schools to produce year-on-year improvements in examination performance leads to inevitable demands on middle level leaders to ensure that their section of the school contributes to the achievement of school objectives and externally imposed targets. Glover et al (1998a) show that OFSTED and the Teacher Training Agency are setting out their expectations of middle leaders while Wilkinson (2002, p.17) notes that, "Government initiatives, such as performance management and drives to improve literacy and numeracy, are highly dependent on middle level leaders". Brown et al (2000b) also comment on the legislative, societal and cultural changes which have occurred since the late 1980s and point to their implications for the role of the middle manager.

The other major pressure for a change in role arises from the research on school effectiveness. Sammons et al's (1997) much quoted study shows that there are major differences between departments in analysing school performance. Departments are differentially effective with pupils of different abilities and from different social and ethnic backgrounds. Bushier and Harris (1999, p.305) argue that such evidence points to the need to "re-conceptualise school leadership more broadly to include leadership at middle manager level". Turner and Bolam (1998, p.373) also refer to Sammons et al's work and suggest that this leads to a requirement for "a central focus on teaching and learning, high expectations, clear leadership by the HoD and a pupil-centred approach to the delivery of the curriculum".

Brown et al (2000a, p.238) argue that "strategies for school improvement are increasingly focused

on teaching and learning of the subject, hence our claim that the department is the most appropriate 'unit of change', rather than the whole-school or even the individual classroom". Wise (2001) also notes the importance of the subject department in any discussion of secondary school effectiveness while Bennett's (1999, p.292) review of middle managers in secondary schools concludes with the need to develop "thinking about the ways in which the middle management function might be developed, and demonstrate how it operates as the power-house of school development".

A further consideration is the role of the National College for School Leadership (NCSL) in promoting leadership development in schools. NCSL's ten leadership propositions included two of particular significance for middle level leaders:

- "leadership should be instructional[^] focused" (NCSL 2001, p.5). This suggests that middle level leaders should place the emphasis on teaching and learning.
- "leadership should be dispersed throughout the school community" (NCSL 2001, p.5). This suggests that middle level leadership is a vital part of the wider framework for leadership in the school.

In summary, then, the combination of external pressure, the research evidence on differential departmental effectiveness, and the promotional role of NCSL, all point to a review of the ways in which middle level leaders operate in secondary schools.

Question: To what extent do these pressures manifest themselves at school level? 7.

Towards middle level leadership

The development of the middle leaders' role during the past 15 years has seen a gradual shift from a focus on heads of department as senior teachers, acting as role models for their colleagues, through an acceptance of the requirement to undertake often routine administrative or managerial responsibilities, then to a wider recognition of the need to lead a professional team of subject specialists. Busher and Harris (1999, p.306) show that there is now a "notion of shared or devolved leadership activity where leadership activity is not chiefly the preserve of the headteacher". Similarly, Wilkinson (2002, p.18) refers to "a tremendous swing towards leading people rather than managing resources".

Glover et al (1998a, p.42) say that "subject leaders recognise that their role is changing and that traditional and hierarchical organisation is incompatible with the achievement of educational improvement". They add that "the most forward looking subject leaders appear to use the department development plan as a visionary process and some used their department meetings as a time of sharing good practice whilst others work through target setting to achieve their aims for the department".

The most controversial and difficult aspect of the middle leader role relates to monitoring and evaluation.

8. The monitoring and evaluation role of middle level leaders

There is widespread recognition of the need for middle level leaders to engage in monitoring and evaluation if the external pressure, and the research evidence on school effectiveness, are to produce significant improvements in teaching and learning. "External expectations... appear to have produced a transformation in the attitudes and practice of middle managers" (Wise and Bush 1999, p. 190). Glover et al (1998a, p.26) report that "there are defined and formalised systems [of monitoring and evaluation] in eight of the twenty schools" in their sample. The formal processes in these eight schools include the following:

- checking of pupils' work on a planned basis.
- checking of staff record books on a regular basis.
- timetabled and recorded observation of staff teaching.
- target setting and subsequent review.
- standardisation and moderation of marking.
- annual action plan in response to perceived development needs.

The most controversial of these processes is that of observation of teaching but Copland et al (2002) argue, from an American perspective, that this is an essential dimension of school leadership:

Leaders... are making the effort to observe and see instruction in practice, and provide their observations as feedback to teachers. They are also letting it be known more widely that

they are doing so, thereby signalling to a larger number of individuals ... [that they] care about instruction, know something about good instruction, take time to see what is going on, and wish to support efforts to improve it. A further message - one of professional accountability - is conveyed as well: what goes on behind the classroom door is everyone's business, not the private concern of that teacher and her or his students. By regularly observing instruction, leader can model and enact the constructive scrutiny of professional practice, (p.23)

There is increasing evidence that middle level leaders in England are recognising the need to undertake classroom observation and other forms of monitoring and evaluating the work of colleagues. However, this does not necessarily mean that these processes actually occur. The following extracts from research reports illustrate the trend:

Whereas previously, heads of department and other academic middle managers were not accepting their staff management role, there is evidence that this has changed. The middle managers in both the survey and the case studies indicated the need for monitoring and observing their team members and gave it a high priority. However, this does not mean that it actually happens... such monitoring of performance was not welcome by team members. (Wise 2001, p. 340)

The questionnaire returns illustrate clearly the middle manager's increasing acceptance of responsibility and accountability for the quality of teaching and learning within his/her department but it is a responsibility which they feel ill-equipped to bear effectively... In particular, their acceptance for the quality of teaching and learning within their subject area is leading to an acceptance of the need to monitor and evaluate the work of teaching staff within their department... Acceptance of additional responsibilities does not of course indicate that such responsibilities are being carried out successfully. (Adey 2000, pp.424 & 428)

Senior management... have expressed concern at [middle level leaders'] lack of involvement in the process of monitoring and evaluation. This arises from the nature of professionalism and a reticence by some middle managers to 'get myself into a position where I appear to be judging the work of a colleague'. (Glover et al 1998b, pp.288-9)

Question: How, and to what extent, are you involved in monitoring and evaluating the work of colleagues?

9. Conclusion: Middle level leadership in transition

Middle level leadership in English secondary schools is in a process of transition. For many years, up to and including the 1990s, the role of department and unit heads was conceived as that of senior teacher who also engaged in routine administrative processes, such as ordering stock and managing capitation budgets. Latterly, there has been external pressure for middle leaders to focus more on the quality of teaching and learning and to intervene as appropriate to encourage and cajole their colleagues to improve their work with pupils. This has led to a widespread recognition by middle level leaders of the need to observe, monitor and evaluate the work of their teams.

In practice, however, this acceptance has not led to a sea-change in the actions, as opposed to the attitudes, of middle level leaders. The next stage, to bring action in line with expectations, will need three major changes in schools:

1. Middle level leaders should be able to focus on teaching and learning, and not on routine administration or other school-wide tasks, in the limited non-contact time available for their leadership role. This may be facilitated by the government's stated intention to employ additional staff to undertake administration, but will also require the co-operation of heads and senior staff
2. All professionals should acknowledge that middle level leaders are expected to monitor and evaluate the work of colleagues and that this is not construed as threatening or unprofessional. This will require the development of collegial relationships within teams to enable such work to be undertaken without rancour or anxiety.
3. Both middle level leaders, and their senior colleagues, should recognise the need for a programme of continuing professional development to enable the former to remain at the cutting edge, in respect of both subject knowledge and team leadership.

If schools are able to facilitate these two significant but achievable changes, there is scope for a

powerful re-definition of the role of middle level leaders. The transformation from routine manager to educational leader will be well under way.

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