The Role and Purpose of Middle Leaders in Schools

NCSL

National College for School

Contents

Summary of main findings

The following points emerge consistently from the research reviewed in this study.

1. Middle leaders (subject leaders, middle managers, heads of department, curriculum co-ordinators) play a crucial role in developing and maintaining the nature and quality of the pupils' learning experience, but the ways in which they do this are strongly influenced by the circumstances in which they work.

2. There is a very strong rhetoric of collegiality in how middle leaders describe the culture of their departments or responsibility areas, and the ways they try to discharge their responsibilities. However, this is sometimes more aspired to than real, and it may sometimes be a substitute term for professional autonomy.

3. Middle leaders tend to show great resistance to the idea of monitoring the quality of their colleagues' work, especially by observing them in the classroom. Observation is seen as a challenge to professional norms of equality and privacy, and sometimes as an abrogation of trust. Subject leaders who managed to introduce some sort of classroom observation procedure did so as a collaborative learning activity for the entire department rather than as a management activity for the subject leader.

4. Subject leaders' authority comes not from their position but their competence as teachers and their subject knowledge. Some primary subject co-ordinators doubted if they had sufficient subject knowledge, which made it difficult for them to monitor colleagues' work. However, high professional competence did not appear to carry with it the perceived right to advise other teachers on practice.

5. Subject knowledge provides an important part of professional identity for both subject leaders and their colleagues. This can make the subject department a major barrier to large-scale change.

6. Senior staff expect middle leaders to become involved in the wider whole-school context, but many are reluctant to do so, preferring to see themselves as departmental advocates. This is exacerbated by the tendency of secondary schools, in particular, to operate within hierarchical structures, which also act as a constraint on the degree to which subject leaders can act collegially.

7. Very little empirical work was found that examined:

   - the influence of middle leadership on teaching and learning
   - the effectiveness of middle leaders' professional development

1. Introduction: the purpose and nature of the study

This literature review was commissioned by the National College for School Leadership as part of its development work for the Leading from the Middle programme for teachers in the middle layer of school leadership structures. It was designed to explore the extent to which existing empirical research provides information on the following questions:

- What influences the ways in which middle leaders define their responsibilities and how they should carry them out?
- What are the responsibilities of middle leaders?
- What approaches do middle leaders adopt when carrying out their responsibilities?
- What empirical evidence has been generated on the characteristics of effective middle leadership?
- What training and professional development do middle leaders need?

The review examined research on middle leaders, subject leaders, heads of department and pastoral units and curriculum co-ordinators. We studied research that was carried out in primary and secondary schools and in further education (FE) colleges. Only empirical research was examined: autobiographical reflections and instructional manuals were excluded. The review covered books published between January 1996 and March 2003 and articles and conference papers produced between January 1990 and March 2003. From approximately 3,700 references, 101 items were identified by the project team as needing reading in depth.

Full details of the research methodology can be found in Appendix 1.

2. The structure of the report

The report is organised as follows. In the next section, we comment briefly on the nature and range of the research that was found, before presenting in Section 4 an overview of what has come forward from our review. We then go on in Section 5 to discuss three recurrent themes that emerge from the research about the values and expectations of middle leaders and their colleagues: collegiality; professionality; and authority. Section 6 examines the influences that were identified on how middle leaders and their colleagues perceived their role and carried it out, highlighting influences from within their responsibility area, from the wider school setting, and from outside the school.

In Section 7, we present details of the responsibilities and practices of middle leaders that were reported in the research. First we refer to what we have called the interface between their responsibility area and the wider organisational setting, before examining their responsibilities for teaching and learning, curriculum and record-keeping, administration, links with external agencies and staff development. We then discuss approaches to assessing their effectiveness (Section 8), and examine the nature of their professional development experience (Section 9). In the final section, implications of our findings are identified for future professional development provision and for further research (Section 10).

There are four appendices. The first gives a detailed explanation of the methodology employed in carrying out the research for this report. Appendix 2 gives extended summaries of the publications that we have identified as the key texts in this field. Appendix 3 gives short summaries of other articles that have been influential in our work on preparing the main report. Appendix 4 gives the references of all the other articles and conference papers we read in full as part of the study.

3. Limitations of the research

Three important limitations on the nature of the research must be borne in mind when reading this review.

1. Most of the research that has been carried out in this area has been undertaken in secondary rather than primary schools, though it raises important issues relevant to both sectors. Although some work has been undertaken in Australia, Canada and the Netherlands, and there is a body of work in the United States on teacher leaders, most research on 'middle leadership', as opposed to leadership by headteachers or principals, has been carried out in the United Kingdom.

2. Almost all the research identified related to subject leadership, heads of department or curriculum co-ordinators. There was no significant research on pastoral leadership, and almost none on the work of special educational needs co-ordinators (SENCOs).

3. Most of the articles and conference papers that we read reported on small-scale, free-standing case studies or 'snapshot' surveys. Only three sizeable research projects were found there, all of which focused on heads of department in secondary schools. Each project was reported across a number of papers. Two of these projects were undertaken in England (Brown and Boyle 1999; Brown, Boyle and Boyle 2000; Brown and Rutherford 1999; Brown, Rutherford and Boyle 2000; Brown, Boyle et al 2002; Glover and Miller 1999a, 1999b; Glover et al 1998) and one in Canada (Hannay and Ross 1999; Hannay, Ross and Smeltzer Erb 2001). Two further articles (Wise and Bush 1999; Wise 2001) reported on aspects of a substantial doctoral study. In addition, one book reported on a major study of effective secondary school departments (Sammons et al 1997) and it was possible to deduce some elements of leadership roles and practice from this major project.

4. A considerable amount of the research, including some of the papers from the more substantial research projects listed above, rest largely if not entirely on forms of self-reporting, with little triangulation.

The implications for future research in the final section of this report put forward ways in which we believe these shortcomings can be addressed.

4. An overview of the study

The variety of tasks that middle leaders carry out is a significant and continuing theme in research findings (Bell 1996). They characteristically exercise multiple tasks in small teams, and are experiencing increasing pressure and increasing diversity of role throughout the school (Glover et al 1998). Yet it is notable that relatively little attention has been given to addressing the effectiveness of middle leadership, especially in relation to students' learning experiences, development and attainment. None of the studies reports on the impact of performance management, but this is to be expected as it is early yet for such studies to have had time to report findings.

Middle leaders occupy a pivotal position in relation to change and restructuring in the education system and within their schools and colleges. One of the themes we identify from the research findings is the existence of enduring pressures for continuity of practice. There are capacities at the middle leadership level to resist and/or creatively adapt change, and how this works out in practice is strongly influenced by contextual factors as well as the responses and agency of middle leaders themselves. This question of resistance and adaptation is intimately connected to interrelated issues of accountability, autonomy and professionality. The nature, development,

incidence and impact of a 'new professionality' in changed circumstances is a question that has received some little research attention in schools, but would benefit from further, more focused study.

Changing ideas on the middle leadership role are visible in the changing language used to describe it – from informal subject specialist, through primary school curriculum co-ordinator or secondary school head of department, to middle manager to subject leader to middle leader (Bell 1996; Bell and Ritchie 1999). Despite these changes, reticence by middle leaders to exercise monitoring and evaluation of staff remains an issue. This reluctance to change their traditional view of their role, and their relationship with their colleagues upon which it rests, bring to the fore questions relating to ideas of collegiality and professionality, and how these are differently understood. The changing expectation that middle leaders should act as line managers, which is itself not universally shared by senior managers (Metcalfe and Russell 1997; Glover et al 1998), stands at odds with some middle leaders' belief that their primary obligation is to their department rather than the school, and calls into question the basis of the subject leader's authority within their area of responsibility.

Despite the importance of collegiality and a 'new professionality', limited attention to team leadership is apparent in the studies reviewed. This is an area where more research would be beneficial in informing understanding of the developing middle leadership role, particularly by clarifying the distinction between research which describes what 'is' and discussion that examines what 'ought' to be. It has been suggested that SENCOs, for example, need to adopt a 'clustering' approach to their work, operating collaboratively and recognising the autonomy of those involved and respecting their ideas and opinions (Blandford and Gibson 2000). In a number of studies (Lodge 1999; Powell 2001) there was a feeling that the middle leaders' responsibilities were to a team, and it was this team that should be supported and developed. Powell found that many became simply line managers, whereas he felt that they should be primarily staff developers. Similarly McGarvey and Marriott (1997) found that the headteachers in the primary schools they worked with did not expect co-ordinators to have any staff development role. A team orientation links with the increased interest in distributed leadership[1], and could be more explicitly related to middle leadership According to Briggs (2002), a key transformational leadership function for FE middle managers is creating team expectations, bringing staff together, and generating a collaborative culture that values people, uses their skills and creates empathy within the department.

Studies of all of these issues are necessarily concerned with values. Our review found that 'is' and 'ought' are often mixed, with empirical findings being inextricably bound with value positions on education and the role of middle leaders. Although the 'oughts' are frequently presented as conclusions, as in Blandford and Gibson (2000), they cannot be put forward in this way. The elision of 'is' and 'ought' can be found in both the statements by the subjects of the research and the researchers' discussions of their data. The distinction and relationship between the two kinds of statement need to be more explicitly acknowledged and addressed.

Overall, the investigations reviewed here seem to add up to a rejection by substantial numbers of the middle leaders studied of many of the new expectations that derive from the changing role implicit in the changes in their titles, and some confusion as to what those expectations are. There are some exceptions to this: for example, Sammons et al's (1997) study of effective departments found that the heads of department that the researchers identified as effective

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[1] N. Bennett, J.A. Harvey, C. Wise and P.A. Woods, *Distributed Leadership*, NCSL, Nottingham, 2003; P.A. Woods, N. Bennett, C. Wise and J. Harvey, *Understanding Distributed Leadership*, paper presented at British Educational Research Association Conference, Heriott-Watt University, Edinburgh, September 2003.

against their criteria had adopted and practised many of the tasks that the literature leads us to expect of them when the role is defined as that of a subject leader. It may also be the case that rejection of the new expectations has lessened since 1999/2000, when the fieldwork was carried out for most of the research reported since 2000.

5. Key issues emerging from the research

The research we examined raised some recurrent issues. Two major tensions can be identified that affect how middle leaders define and carry out their responsibilities:

- Between *senior staff expectations* that the middle leader would play a whole-school role and a *common belief among middle leaders* that their loyalty was to their department or subject responsibilities.
- Between a developing *line management culture* within a hierarchical school structure and a belief in *collegiality*.

In exploring these tensions, we identified three key issues that ran through the research findings.

Collegiality

A collegial, team-based approach to leadership and management was preferred in all sectors (primary, secondary, FE). Wise and Bush (1999) found a very strong emphasis on collegiality in teachers' discussion of their departments' culture and practice. Collegiality and team-based management approaches are indicated as the ideal by Brown and Rutherford (1998; 1999), but found to vary considerably between the heads of department they studied. Brown and Rutherford see collegiality as a precondition of effective change. In Metcalfe and Russell's (1997) study monitoring was only acceptable in a culture of collegiality: heads of department would not accept the idea of monitoring for quality control, but would accept the idea of collective learning from one another.

Although collegiality figures prominently in research on middle leadership, it is not always examined in detail. In particular, we would highlight four points.

First, as indicated above, the degree of collegiality and collaborative culture varies. This has been found to be the case in research in England (Brown and Boyle 1999; Brown, Boyle and Boyle 2000). In some jurisdictions, such as the Netherlands, participative cultures in departments are more firmly entrenched than others. In their review of Dutch research, Witziers et al (1999) conclude that research in the Netherlands shows important decisions being made at departmental level and these "primarily relate to the question of *what* to teach rather than *how* to teach" (p300). Departments are cohesive, members meeting frequently formally and informally. But discussion focused around content of teaching, not teacher development, teaching strategies, or problems in the classroom, and there is little observation of other classrooms according to Witziers and colleagues. Consultation with other departments is irregular, so, although there is a strong sense of collaboration, Witziers et al (1999, p296) suggest that "these findings show that most departments can hardly be described as 'learning communities'…" (p296). Harvey (1997, p34) points out that a serious industrial dispute in Western Australia affected the trust on which a collegial culture must rest. "Where departments or teams are characterised by a collective view about purpose, action and even identity among the participants then there is a large potential for STAs (secondary teaching administrators, a role which includes, but is not limited to, heads of academic departments) to harness the creative energies of staff to achieve specific change initiatives. Other departments or teams, however,

may exist as little more than forums for the allocation of a minimal set of responsibilities and duties."

Secondly, there is a need to examine critically how far claimed values of collegiality are actually put into practice. Primary subject leaders aspired to collegial cultures but Fletcher and Bell (1999) found that this was often more an aspiration than an achievement. Sammons et al (1997) indicate considerable variation in levels of collegiality between the departments studied. Further, as Witziers et al (1999) suggest, collegiality may be wide ranging in scope and incorporate profound professional discourse, or operate at a more limited level. Wise (2001) implies that a rhetoric of collegiality often overlays a considerable emphasis on professional autonomy.

Thirdly, there is a dynamic relationship, often characterised by tension and contradiction, between collegiality and a context which is hierarchical and requires line management responsibilities to be exercised. Wise and Bush (1999) found a very strong emphasis on collegiality in teachers' discussions of their department's culture and practice. Heads of department argued that this prevented them from undertaking systematic evaluation: the discharge of line management responsibilities within this collegial climate is described by Wise (2001) as "generally one of informal casual inquiry" (p340). She points out that departmental collegiality is often bounded by its location in a hierarchical school structure, and co-exists with a wider hierarchy. There was much less collegiality among other working groups, such as across heads of department, than within the department. This can create tension between the head of department and senior staff.

Fourthly, there is the question of a 'need' for strong leadership and authority within collegial frameworks (Sammons et al 1997; Harris, Jamieson and Russ 1995): the head of department/subject leader has to have subject expertise and be an expert teacher, which could imply a non-collegial role. Secondary teachers rate subject expertise as a measure of competence for leadership and allow for leadership through acting as a role model (Warren Little 1995). Primary teachers acknowledge that by and large they are not subject experts: instead, they emphasise teaching excellence (Fletcher and Bell 1999).

Professionality, accountability and monitoring

Traditional understandings of teacher professionalism place individual autonomy in situations of equality at the centre of organisational practice. Smylie's (1992) study of elementary school teachers' response to the evolving work of teacher leaders in the United States identified norms of professional equality, professional accountability and privacy, and opposition to peer judgement, and a belief that giving or receiving advice undermines the norm of equality by implying status differences and implies obligation. This creates a climate in which the idea of monitoring individual action as part of the formal accountability of overall departmental/unit/ subject performance tends to be viewed as unacceptable and avoided.

However, the late 1990s saw a move in both primary and secondary schools towards middle leaders becoming accountable to line managers for the quality of the work in their responsibility area (Fletcher and Bell 1999; Glover et al 1998; Metcalfe and Russell 1997). This creates a managerial expectation that they would monitor their colleagues' work (Wise and Bush 1999; Wise 2001; Glover et al 1998). Whilst this was increasingly being recognised by subject co-ordinators and leaders as one of their responsibilities, most studies found that they still saw themselves as subject administrators rather than as managers or leaders (Glover and Miller 1999; Metcalfe and Russell 1997; Fletcher and Bell 1999). McGarvey and Marriott (1997) found co-ordinators had reservations about entering a colleague's classroom even when the nature of the observation was agreed in advance. Flecknoe (2000) found through his two case studies that the lack of line management responsibility for co-ordinators in the primary school led some

to believe that they had little influence over colleagues and therefore viewed classroom observation as pointless. There was evidence in Glover et al's (1999) study that many subject leaders were reluctant to hold members of their team accountable for what happened in the classroom. Middle managers still generally define their role as subject administrators, looking after human and teaching resources (Glover et al 1998): they would, according to some senior staff, use administration as a refuge to avoid the awkwardness of entering the classroom of another to engage in monitoring. Despite this, Glover et al (1998) found that in four of the seven schools they studied, formal monitoring and evaluation of classroom work was evident.

Glover et al (1998) also found that in practice there was a continuing tension between monitoring and evaluation and concepts of professional accountability which had the effect of inhibiting the middle leaders' work in this area. Monitoring is a challenge to collegiality and the professional status of staff if it is seen as a check on their colleagues' competence and the quality of their teaching. In all seven schools they studied, middle leaders were expected to motivate, support and develop staff; and the evidence indicates that this role, with its implicit demand that the middle leader should monitor the work of their staff, is fraught with difficulties. Glover et al (1998) found that middle leaders expressed concern at their involvement in monitoring and evaluation, with cross-curricular monitoring being especially difficult. Wise (2001) suggests that monitoring through classroom observation is seen by many departmental members as demonstrating a failure of trust and to be replacing trust with surveillance.

This tension between monitoring and professionalism has to be acknowledged and resolved by the middle leader. Consequently, informal and other strategies are employed to monitor colleagues' work. Fletcher and Bell (1999) found that subject leaders in primary schools use methods such as looking at assessment results, pupil records and displays of pupils' work. Wise (2001) found similar strategies in secondary schools, although displays of pupils' work are less readily available to the secondary school subject leader than to their primary colleagues. Glover et al (1998) found evidence of much informal monitoring.

However, despite the demand that it is carried out as part of accountability procedures, monitoring the quality of classroom practice is not necessarily a matter that devolves to a middle leader alone, becoming an *individuated responsibility* and generating tension between colleagues. There is the option of approaching the issues involved collectively. That is, they can be dealt with as a *collegial responsibility*, in which it is recognised that there is a duty to evaluate and improve practice and it is seen as part of a collaborative learning exercise. Fletcher and Bell (1999), Wise (2001) and Metcalfe and Russell (1997) all reported occasions where observation was presented as a collective activity within the subject area: all the staff in the area observed each other in such a way that it became the basis for discussions which could deepen the degree of collegiality. The recognition that everyone has something to learn from and something to teach their colleagues has the potential to deepen existing collegial practice and to move departments which do not reveal a culture of collegiality towards creating one. Lunn (1998) found that where the purpose of participating in classroom observation was seen as a mutual learning opportunity much of the awkwardness of monitoring colleagues' work was removed.

The apparent tension between the norms of professionality and professional accountability on the one side and formal accountability to the organisation on the other is not just a problem for the middle leader, although it is at its most acute in that role. Hannay et al (2001) argue that professional accountability alters when the decision-making arrangements in the school are restructured so that the nature of the responsibilities allocated to holders of positions of responsibility change. When the position of responsibility becomes concerned with carrying out tasks which are aimed at putting into practice decisions to which they have been party, professional accountability joins formal accountability to colleagues who have taken decisions which they are expected to implement.

If collegiality is to be embraced as a form of professional development and accountability, and the role of the head of department or teacher leader developed, then the norms of professional behaviour identified by Smylie (1992) have to be addressed. Smylie (1992) states that opportunities for staff to talk are necessary but not sufficient to bring about changes in relations between teachers and teacher leaders. He states that "in all, these findings suggest that if interactions between teachers and teacher leaders are to be encouraged, policy-makers must not only deal with issues concerning the structure of new leadership roles and opportunities for teachers to work and interact. They must consider and address teachers' systems of professional beliefs that may mediate and indeed frustrate the performance and function of these new work roles." (p96)

Authority and expertise

Although the middle leader possesses some sort of formal responsibility for an area of the school's work, it is clear that this formal position is not the basis of their authority. Indeed, Wettersten (1994) found that four exemplary chairs of subject departments in an American school district possessed little formal authority, relying instead on exchange relationships between the chair and the members of the department. As they attempted to fulfil their extensive responsibilities with such limited formal authority, Wettersten (1994) concludes that leadership based on exchange (transactional) relationships not only preserves existing structures and routines but also can stimulate organisational change and teacher-initiated improvements. The complexity of school contexts means that both leadership styles (transactional and transformational) tend to become blended in leaders' approaches.

Two important research studies of effective secondary school subject departments in England suggest that expertise in human relationships is a crucial part of the effective subject leader. Harris et al (1995) argue that many of the functions of the effective leaders were related to their interpersonal skills, the way they trusted colleagues and protected them from too many initiatives. Sammons et al (1997) added to this an emphasis on team building and team work among the heads of "effective" departments.

However, although these interpersonal skills are crucial elements of subject leader practice, they are not sufficient in themselves to give subject leaders the authority needed to underpin them in action. This derives from their subject knowledge and their expertise as a teacher (Warren Little 1995; Fletcher and Bell 1999; Flecknoe 2000). The "relaxed academic federalism" (Metcalfe and Russell 1997 pp5–6) of the traditional, pre-Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education) secondary school, structured around loosely-coupled departments, emphasised this expertise-based authority, which is the basis of the idea that middle leaders should lead by example (Sammons et al 1997; Bell and Ritchie 1997). Thus it is departmental colleagues who accord legitimacy, not formal position, and the subject leader has to have the status of a "leading professional". However, it appears that a high level of expertise and the fact that departmental colleagues expect their subject leaders to lead by example does not accord them the right to observe other teachers in action in the classroom, especially in a department where the staff are stable and experienced and the examination or test scores are good. Hence, Brown and Rutherford (1999) found that heads of department see themselves as managers of the *curriculum* not of *colleagues*. They believed that their work should focus on what was to be taught and monitoring output, rather than examining and managing practice.

The fact that teachers ascribe authority to their colleagues on the basis of professional expertise is especially important in primary schools, where it can be a source of considerable uneasiness among middle leaders. Primary subject leaders often doubted the degree to which their subject knowledge was sufficient to do their job, and this made them reluctant to attempt to monitor

others' work. They doubted if they could undertake any "directive" tasks (Fletcher and Bell 1999) such as ensuring curriculum coverage or setting objectives. Strategic leadership, such as setting a vision for the subject, was considered beyond their subject expertise. Consequently, as Flecknoe (2000) found, the primary subject leaders in his small-scale study were reluctant to attempt to observe colleagues because they doubted their ability to influence practice.

It would appear, then, that subject leaders require a combination of teaching expertise, subject knowledge and good interpersonal skills if they are to obtain and maintain the authority they require to do their job.

6. Key influences on responsibilities and practice

Middle leaders have to address and resolve on a daily basis the tensions inherent in the issues of collegiality, professionality, and authority just outlined. They do this through the ways in which they interpret in practice the formal and informal responsibilities of their role. We have identified from the literature a number of key influences on this work. These derive from both the wider national context and from within the school itself. One approach to analysing these influences is to adopt the open systems model of schools put forward by Turner and Bolam (1998), in which "higher level" conditions of school and departmental culture impact upon "lower level" conditions in classrooms that affect student learning. External factors influence the school and the department. However, there has been little overt use of such a model in the literature we found.

From outside the school

A range of external developments have been found to have impacted upon middle leaders so that they have had to respond to an environment that encourages more competitive and managerial approaches. Many influences – the compulsory appraisal of staff, curriculum changes, Ofsted and the development of the inspection framework, and TTA (Teacher Training Agency) statements about the 'core purpose' of the subject leader – have generated uncertainty and a desire for professional development and training. It is not always clear that these expectations were either fully understood by headteachers or accepted as appropriate (Metcalfe and Russell 1997). The TTA standards for subject leaders, produced in 1998, were seen by Adey (2000) as a major step towards clarifying the role and responsibilities of the subject leader in both primary and secondary schools, but he suggests that they were ahead of middle managers' thinking and practice in the late 1990s. Bell (1996) charts official policy expectations of subject leaders from informal subject specialist to manager. The result is a shift in policy expectations of middle leaders from working in a climate of what Metcalfe and Russell (1997, pp5–6) call "relaxed academic federalism" to "running a tight ship" as a line manager in a hierarchical structure, with monitoring as a quality control issue. In different jurisdictions, external regulations are also an important influence but have a different character, as in the Netherlands (Witziers et al 1999). National curriculum and inspection demands do not take sufficient account of the culture of collaboration and collegiality that typifies primary schools, according to Fletcher and Bell (1999).

For specific areas – resources, curriculum and professional development – LEA advisers are important sources of information, and parents are seen as an influence on matters of pupils' discipline (Wise 2001).

From within the school

Headteachers, senior management teams and the overall school leadership style and degree of collaboration are widely seen as important factors. This could be both positive and negative.

Sammons et al (1997) found that the heads of less effective departments looked to senior management for the creation of a sense of community across the whole school which they saw as absent. Primary subject co-ordinators stated that expectations and responsibilities were not always made clear by headteachers and job descriptions were frequently idealistic rather than realistic (Ritchie 1997). Likewise McGarvey and Marriott (1997) found in their large-scale work with primary schools that the absence of a clear management framework reduced the effectiveness of whole school co-ordination and, once again, the headteacher had an important role in clearly defining the co-ordinator's duties and responsibilities. Their attitude was said to be crucial Lunn (1998), in a smaller study, found that the headteacher was a driving force for more effective co-ordination through the allocation of resources and voiced priorities. Against this, however, Wise and Bush (1999) found that although senior management were seen as an important influence on the heads' of department practice, they were far less important than departmental colleagues.

As we shall see below, the organisational culture and structure within which relationships between the headteacher, senior management staff and subject leaders are played out are significant factors in the degree of influence that the senior teachers have on their middle leader colleagues. In particular, the distance between the perceived "seat of power" in the school and the middle leaders themselves can affect the degree of whole school involvement that middle ranking staff feel able to undertake (Glover and Miller 1999).

Institutional culture

Fletcher and Bell (1999) argue repeatedly that the culture of the primary school is one of collegiality, which makes it difficult for subject leaders to exercise any form of 'directive' leadership However, they also state that some subject leaders talked of this collegiality as more an aspiration than a reality. Metcalfe and Russell (1997) suggest that the traditional culture of secondary schools is one of professional autonomy, which creates hostility to monitoring and quality assessment. However, they also suggest that secondary school teaching can be viewed as a production line, in which students move from specialist classroom to specialist classroom like stations on a conveyor belt, and that this creates demands for quality assurance which militate against the institutional culture of professional autonomy. The result of this tension is what Metcalfe and Russell call (1997, pp5–6) a kind of "relaxed academic federalism" in which departments operate largely autonomously but taking account of wider school demands, and which stands at odds with the stronger line management culture being promoted through the Ofsted inspection framework. One halfway house proposed at one school Metcalfe and Russell researched was for a link manager/liaison officer between the senior staff and individual departments, whose role could be a "kind of hands on approach" which was not interventionist but could look at issues such as pace and differentiation, but "not [as] a threatening process" (p8).

Wise (2001) found that departmental colleagues were far more significant influences than their senior staff on heads of departments' interpretation and implementation of their role. Senior staff had to address departmental colleagues' views as much as those of the heads of departments in order to promote change. Interestingly, this argument reflects that of Smylie (1992) whose work on developing the teacher leader role in the United States was referred to above. Wise (2001) found that collegial cultures were much weaker outside subject departments. For example,

between heads of department, in pastoral units, and between teachers and cross-curriculum co-coordinators such as ICT or SENCOs.

Glover et al (1999) found that in schools where the subject leaders were valued and developed, often through reformed structures, subject staff were more likely to feel well led. They also found that in some schools that had been reorganised to enable more effective subject leadership the role of the subject leader had developed more widely. A determining factor of this seemed to be the culture within the school which if it valued its subject leaders, had a high degree of trust and a collegial atmosphere was more likely to have moved forward. Harvey (1997) also emphasises the centrality of trust in developing a creative role for the department.

Elliott et al (1999) found in their study that there were certain contextual factors that were likely to lead to teachers' participation in curriculum leadership These were a non-threatening atmosphere, an emphasis on learners and learning in the school, budget support for curriculum initiatives, well developed communication networks and administrative support for curriculum initiatives. It was noted in particular that when teachers felt confident, valued and trusted they were more likely to engage in curriculum leadership This aspect of organisational culture is also visible in FE, where the middle managers – heads of department – have much larger units to manage and greater responsibilities than their secondary school colleagues, for example over engaging temporary staff and decisions on what courses to provide. Nevertheless, despite this greater degree of decentralisation, senior management team support for the middle managers is seen as an important facilitator of their effective performance (Briggs 2002). All these studies point to the importance of 'closing the gap' between senior and middle leadership in the school or college.

Institutional structure

The tension between collegiality and hierarchy is found repeatedly here. A hierarchical approach to middle leaders by senior managers is apparent in a number of studies (Brown, Boyle and Boyle 2000; Glover and Miller 1999), possibly making it harder for middle leaders to contribute to whole-school development (Glover and Miller 1999). There has been downward delegation of operational responsibility from senior levels (Glover et al 1998), but these research studies continue to place these developments within a hierarchical framework. Signs of change, moving to more participative regimes, were also found (Brown, Boyle and Boyle 2000).

In a smaller scale study Warren Little (1995) found that subject departments were a central feature of school structure. They were what defined teachers' legitimacy within the larger school structure and as such were strong organisational units. As pointed out above, subject expertise was the basis of legitimacy for subject leadership, although, as Wise (2001) pointed out, this legitimacy does not necessarily extend to monitoring the classroom work of departmental colleagues.

Some studies argue that the more focused around a subject structure the organisation is, the less opportunity there is for middle leaders to engage in cross-curricular work and assume a wider school role. Dimmock and Lee (2000, p354) go further, and describe subject departments as the linchpin of "strong, robust, rigid and bureaucratic organisational structures" which inhibit curriculum change. They suggest that heads of department have to be reconceptualised as team leaders within a more flexible structure for change to be possible. It might be hypothesised that the stronger the subject organisation the more likely it is that the key influences of middle leader practice and perception of role will come from "below" or within the area of responsibility.

Hannay et al (2001) support this contention. They argue that restructuring is a crucial element in the generation of change. Without restructuring, the changes in the role of the departmental chair or middle management will remain a barrier to change. A restructuring that flattened the

school decision-making arrangements and made them more collective would provide the catalyst for the reculturing necessary for substantive change to occur. In this model, structures and responsibilities within the school become much more fluid and dependent on the tasks that relate to the targets set collectively. They state that "the increased involvement in decision making and teacher leadership contributed to a growing sense of empowerment but also the participants reported that they learned the importance of both accepting a divergence of perspective and facilitating dialogue as a means of constructively addressing differences" (p19). Further, a structure creating greater teacher involvement in decision making and policy setting, and a flatter hierarchy, gives staff in positions of responsibility and the colleagues whose work they facilitate a clearer sense of why they carry the duties they do and greater willingness among their colleagues to collaborate. As Hannay and Smeltzer Erb (1999) point out, structures that create task-based positions of responsibility can generate whole-school change by challenging long held assumptions.

Evidence from Warren Little (1995) confirms the arguments of Hannay et al (2001) and Dimmock and Lee (2000) that subject departments are likely to be barriers rather than facilitators of large-scale educational change. Similarly Powell (2001) found in FE colleges that the subject department with its power and resources was highly resistant to change. Glover et al (1999) in their extensive empirical study found that structure influenced what middle leaders perceived and enacted as their role. Those in traditional organisational arrangements tended to play little part in whole-school development despite senior management encouragement to become involved. Heads of department in schools which have developed management structures that have a focus on teaching and learning are more likely to develop a leadership role than those in schools with 'traditional' structures where the head of department is more likely to be seen as an administrator (Glover and Miller 1999). However, the success of arrangements which aimed to empower middle leaders was not universal, indicating that structure alone cannot bring about effectiveness (Glover et al 1999).

Brown and Boyle (1999) whilst looking at models of decision making in schools divided the structures into three conceptual types. These types were related to the structures that the headteacher had in place for facilitating decision making within the school. Those that wanted and actively sought the involvement of middle leaders in whole-school decision-making processes developed a more collegial culture where there was a meshing of departmental and whole-school priorities, along with regular contact between department heads. Other more traditional decision-making organisations limited the input of middle leaders and also the cross-fertilisation between subjects leading to an almost balkanised structure. (See also Brown, Boyle and Boyle 2000.) Hannay (1994) expresses concern at this and sees it as a consequence of organisational structure, and Hannay and Smeltzer Erb (1999) argue that traditional school structures with subject heads of department tended to create departmental subcultures and balkanisation, which protect the status quo and inhibit change.

Elliott et al (1999) also found that the atmosphere that middle leaders perceived to exist in the school, the social dynamics, organisational structures and image of the curriculum had an impact on their willingness to engage in curriculum leadership However, when the focus of the study is effectiveness within the current curriculum and subject structure, Harris, Jamieson and Russ (1995) argue that school structure and culture are not significant influences on departmental effectiveness, and that differential levels of effectiveness can be found within one school. Sammons et al (1997), on the other hand, argue that the school structure and culture do have some influence on departmental effectiveness.

Departmental culture and structure

The corollary of the view reported above that departmental structures are major barriers to change is that departmental colleagues are seen as the major influence on practice. Where heads of department found the expectations of their senior management team clashed with the perceived expectations of their departmental colleagues, they adopted their colleagues' stance rather than that of their line managers (Wise and Bush 1999). Wise (2001) found this to be true in relation to all four elements of the heads of department' work she had identified – academic, administrative, educational and managerial. This reinforces the argument of Dimmock and Lee (2000) that strong departmental structures have led to what they call the "undermanagement" of the curriculum by the school principal.

Busher and Harris (1999) argue that subject leaders have a key role in managing culture at both the departmental and whole-school level. They draw on Glover (1998) to identify shaping and managing departmental culture as an aspect of the subject leaders' work: leadership must empower others and create a collaborative culture. However, Wise and Bush (1999) and Dimmock and Lee (2000) demonstrate that Busher and Harris (1999) are making an exhortation rather than reporting on practice, finding that although the head of department is a crucial influence on the departmental culture, they are also limited by the strength of the existing culture and the importance of the subject identity that departmental members share.

Resources

A number of studies (Glover and Miller 1999; Harvey 1997; Fletcher and Bell 1999) have suggested that acquiring and managing curriculum resources is a key dimension of subject leaders' work, and can sometimes act as a justification for not undertaking more direct curriculum monitoring. When considering the resources available to the subject leaders for carrying out their leadership role, time is clearly the major issue. It was the major issue for secondary heads of department (Wise and Bush 1999) and Fletcher and Bell (1999) found this to be the major problem for primary school subject leaders, whereas money appeared not to be. A study of middle leaders in secondary schools in the United States found that their perceived effectiveness was not influenced by the financial strength of district or local community support (Wettersten 1994).

7. Responsibilities and practice

Within the wider school context

Their position as leaders of a part of the school organisation means that middle leaders operate at the interface between different levels and sources of influence and change. This creates a number of major tasks. The current pressures towards managerialism have required middle leaders to manage the intersection of traditional and new organisational cultures and to try to influence, in their turn, the cultural influences discussed above. They are, therefore, engaged in *managing cultural change*. Glover et al (1998) report that managing cultural change in this way often creates a sense among middle leaders that their role is changing from that of leading professional to that of an administrator, and this can often create ambiguity about the role and position of middle leaders. Middle leadership is also, in consequence, often involved in *managing ambiguity*. Heads of department are simultaneously agents of the senior staff and representatives of their federated department. Metcalfe and Russell (1997) found that headteachers stated that heads of department were often prepared to report problems and inadequacies in their departments but not to deal with them, thus denying themselves a

leadership role. Wise (2001) found that the heads of department' attempts to preserve a culture of collegiality within their departments put them at odds with senior staff when they laid an expectation on the heads of department of some sort of line management duties. Heads of department were not just buffers and bridges (see below), but the preservers of subcultures. Harvey (1997) reported that heads of department in Western Australia often felt "caught in the crossfire" between senior staff and departmental staff expectations.

Tighter managerial control can create an expectation that middle leaders will implement policy directives faithfully and monitor their translation into practice (*an implementing role*). However, there is evidence that instead they interpret their role as *buffer and bridge*, significantly influencing the impact of external pressures on their department. The buffering and bridging role involves several elements which, taken together, also affect their approach to managing cultural change and ambiguity:

- communication upwards to senior management
- communication downwards to departmental members, including a crucial role in interpreting and communicating school aims (Brown and Rutherford 1999)
- more active 'downward work' which is concerned with the management of consent and integrating teachers' interests
- softening the hierarchy
- receiver for communication from departmental members – for example, the latter may tell the head of department what is wrong, but not their colleagues

Glover et al (1998) describe this aspect of the middle leader's work as a "bridging and brokering role". They interpret their findings as showing middle leaders having an important role in communicating and translating school aims and objectives. Glover et al suggest that whilst middle leaders may not be creators of vision, they are *interpreters of vision*. Busher and Harris (1999) reflect Glover's emphasis on this.

Middle leaders thus filter external demands in ways that make them acceptable and practical within their area, and represent departmental needs and expectations to the wider school community so that the whole-school values and expectations take account of departmental values and teachers' interests. Where heads of department were found to share the vision of the headteacher, Abolghasemi et al (1999) found that the subject teachers were more likely to align to it. The heads of department were judged to have a mediating influence and where they were allowed and encouraged to work with other middle leaders they were more likely to develop the shared vision. Creating consent within the department or responsibility area can play a crucial role in aligning departmental or subject values with those of the school as a whole, or can block change. It can also place great pressure on the subject leader's time and interpersonal relationships.

While middle leaders recognise that their departmental planning must take account of whole-school priorities and policies, there was not the same acceptance of the role of *influencing whole-school issues*, which involves contributing to whole-school policy-making, planning and finance. Indeed, Adey (2000) found that subject leaders tended not to feel capable of doing so. Glover et al (1998) and Abolghasemi et al (1999) both found that subject leaders and teachers alike regarded the advocacy role as a fundamental task. Further, subject leaders who actively championed their subject area were more highly regarded by their colleagues than more passive subject leaders, who often 'retired into administration'. Despite this, they frequently played little, if any, part in their school's wider decision-making processes and did not feel that their job was to help frame the wider school policies. They applied pressure and 'defended their territory' rather than take part in decisions. However, Wettersten (1994) found that, as noted above, departmental chairs, whose formal authority in school rests on exchange (transactional)

relationships, not only preserve existing structures and routines but also can stimulate organisational change and teacher-initiated improvements through a blending of transactional and transformational styles.

Within their responsibility area

Ensuring good *teaching and learning* was universally recognised as at the heart of the middle leader's work, but also creates some of their most intractable problems – in particular the rival expectations of monitoring and collegiality as indicated above. The style of leadership of the secondary school heads of department in the study by Harris et al (1995) was found to have a direct effect on the learning outcomes of the students for whom they were responsible. These departments had added value over and above that expected. Heads of departments were very much the 'leading professional' in that their practice was seen as a model to follow. Sammons et al (1997) found similar practice among their effective heads of department. However, middle leaders cannot require colleagues to follow their example. There are, nonetheless, other ways in which subject leaders can enhance the quality of teaching and learning in their area as indicated above. For example, demonstrating a commitment to high quality teaching through their own practice helps to create a culture of high expectations and valuing good performance.

The 'administrative' tasks (*administration*) of enabling teaching and learning to occur, such as management of finances, stock and resources, is the most readily understood function of middle managers according to Glover at al (1998). Whilst for some there are difficulties with a rational approach to planning for which they need help, "there are signs that this approach, following Hargreaves and Hopkins (1991), is actually liberating those middle managers who are prepared to minimise the administrative pressure" (p287/8). Pressure of administration, if not minimised, inhibits "a newer form of professionalism" (p288). Done properly, administrative tasks create an orderly and secure climate for their teaching staff to work within. Some subject leaders, especially in primary schools, saw resource management as an important indirect means of influencing teaching practice within their area of responsibility (Lunn 1998).

Also important is a variety of tasks concerned with *curriculum and records*, which includes drawing up programmes of work, relating materials and approaches to age or stage, keeping up to date in the subject, providing strategic direction and development of subjects, managing the curriculum, assessment, recording and reporting, and monitoring and evaluating the curriculum. Half of the primary school subject leaders interviewed by Fletcher and Bell (1999) were involved in developing arrangements for assessing, recording and reporting on pupil progress. Sammons et al (1997) argue that detailed records of pupil progress are essential for monitoring performance.

Collating the results of assessments and recording and reporting on pupil performance provide forms of indirect monitoring for teaching quality (as opposed to the more contentious form of direct monitoring and observation). It was suggested that, because detailed individual student records allow the subject leader to monitor a student's progress over time and compare it with their progress in other subjects, maintaining them was in fact a crucial element of effective subject leadership (Sammons et al 1997). Creating a departmental handbook that could set benchmarks for departmental practice is another widely recognised task for a subject leader (Brown and Rutherford 1998).

There was little reference in the research to subject leaders having any responsibility for *staff development*. Primary subject leaders acknowledged the importance of auditing colleagues' training needs, but did not appear to take their response further than attempting to lead by example (Fletcher and Bell 1999). Secondary school subject leaders saw staff development in terms of remedial work for poor performance, if they acknowledged it at all.

Little empirical research was found on the role of middle leadership in *external links* with people and agencies outside the school.

8. Effectiveness

Very little research was found that examined the effectiveness of middle leaders, apart from two studies that explored the characteristics of effective departments (Harris et al 1995; Sammons et al 1997). One of these (Harris et al 1995) suggested that the leaders of effective departments created a vision for the department, monitored staff performance by observing their colleagues' classroom practice and used the results of their observation for whole-department discussion of practice. They also kept detailed records of individual student performance which allowed them to track performance over time. However, Wikeley (1998) expressed concern that the characteristics of effective departments identified in the literature should not become absolute measures of effective departmental leadership

It was possible to deduce from one set of studies how different groups assessed subject leaders' effectiveness. Although senior managers stated that they wanted subject leaders to be proactive and play a school-wide role, the criteria of effectiveness they put forward suggested 'systems maintenance' rather than 'creative change' roles (Glover and Miller 1999).

Middle leaders themselves, according to Glover et al's (1998) research, assessed their effectiveness by the extent to which they were able to sustain the 'leading professional' or 'first among equals' role rather than becoming 'line managers'. Their responsibility to ensure effective teaching and learning depended on being able to motivate, inspire and support staff, which was harder in a managerial role. Their approach to these key tasks was, by their own statements, largely intuitive.

In the only study that examined this issue (Glover and Miller 1999), secondary school teachers expressed judgements on the quality of administration, how far they were involved in departmental policy-making, the support they received for professional development and in managing difficult situations, the extent to which good performance was acknowledged, and how far they felt encouraged to achieve the department's visionary goals.

Other research (Sammons et al 1997) suggested that the leaders of effective departments demonstrated high levels of interpersonal, team-building skills, high levels of trust, and the ability to filter external initiatives to prevent overload.

9. Professional development for middle leaders

Only three studies were found that focused specifically on the professional development, leadership or management training needs of middle managers (Harris, Busher and Wise 1999; Adey 2000; Brown, Boyle and Boyle 2002) and none provided robust data on the effectiveness of particular approaches, although Harris, Busher and Wise reported on heads of department judgements of effectiveness. In particular, no empirical data are available on the long-term effectiveness of professional development programmes.

Harris, Busher and Wise (1999) conclude from their study of secondary school subject leaders that the most effective mode of professional development, as reflected in pupil outcomes and changes in middle leaders' practice and values, was when the individual school collaborated with external agencies such as the local authority or a higher education institution on a long programme that resulted in some form of accreditation. "Short courses" were not productive. Some scepticism was evident about traditional models of professional development provision, which were found to be ineffective at changing fundamental attitudes and ways of working.

This study found that very few middle leaders appeared to have received any management or leadership training. Self-directed learning, training that provides opportunities for staff to work together and discuss issues, and observation of practice, were seen as helpful, and there was some evidence that these were more effective at changing beliefs and values (Harris, Busher and Wise 1999). Action research and reflection also appeared to be highly regarded, according to Harris and colleagues. There was some evidence that training which creates a form of learning community would be most popular, particularly where this involved senior staff within the school to provide support.

Adey's (2000) report of research, carried out in 1997, identified that professional development co-ordinators recognised that a priority for middle managers' professional development was to enable them to view developments from a whole-school perspective. Middle managers themselves are reported as accepting responsibility for monitoring, evaluating and taking action on unsatisfactory teaching within their departments as well as recognising that departmental planning needed to take cognisance of whole-school policy and priorities. However, neither they nor members of their senior management teams recognised the potential contribution of middle managers to whole-school policy-making and planning. The middle managers in this survey identified the need for training to enable them to successfully carry out these aspects of their roles, and Adey identifies the TTA national standards for subject leaders (1998) as providing the potential for a framework for professional development.

In reporting the results of their survey of middle manager roles and training/professional development needs, Brown, Boyle and Boyle (2002) also focus on the professional development needs relating to the role of middle managers in whole-school development planning. Three different patterns of styles of decision making in these schools were reflected in their approach to professional development issues. These ranged from the "collaborative" type of school management where members of the senior management team met regularly, often termly, with heads of department to discuss professional development needs, and resources were made available to meet those needs identified, to "authoritarian" type schools which were characterised by an atomised and unplanned approach to professional development.

Despite these noted differences between types of school management and their approach to professional development, the heads of department surveyed identified very similar management training needs which included:

- techniques and concepts of forward planning, in particular budgetary and financial management skills including an awareness of and ability to work within the constraints of whole-school budgets
- grounding in the ability to think and plan short, medium and long term and to be able to relate subject/department aims to wider school aims
- development of corporate planning at subject level
- training in the prioritisation of objectives (Brown et al 2002)

Other key development needs identified relate to the need for heads of department to be able to develop a whole-school perspective in their work, understanding leadership as a process and developing skills of working collaboratively to facilitate and manage change, including the professional development of their staff.

An important point was made about the dissemination of research as a form of professional development. Wikely (1998) found that this is more difficult than had been thought. In her research, what seemed to be a rational process, when participants in research or training made presentations about their work, tended to be seen as a directive and a power-coercive strategy by those attending the presentations.

10. Implications

For professional development

A range of areas in which middle leaders feel they require professional development can be identified from the research literature: some of these are now being addressed. They include classroom management; teaching methods; resource management; assessment; provision for high/low attaining pupils; team building; human resource management; performing a co-ordinating role (rather than being a subject leader); timetabling; ICT; in-service training for SENCOs.

However there are three broad implications for middle leaders' professional development that we identify and emphasise from our review.

- There is a need for professional development that is focused on how middle leaders can contribute more effectively to teaching and learning within their area of responsibility. This must involve a greater understanding of their role in monitoring, and developing more confidence and competence in carrying it out.
- Middle leaders' professional development needs to address the meaning of professionalism in the current climate and the responsibilities as well as the rights of autonomy.
- Imaginative ways of tackling such issues should be encouraged. The most important forms of professional development might benefit from being collectively undertaken, involving, for example, departmental and whole-school debates on issues to do with professionalism and ways of enhancing teaching and learning, and how staff can work together on these matters.

For further research

1. There is almost no research into the work of middle leaders whose responsibility is not primarily concerned with subject leadership Whilst the traditional 'academic/pastoral' split may be breaking down, there are still many staff who have, for example, overall responsibility for students across a key stage. This area urgently needs investigating.

2. There is a need to examine in greater depth the extent to which collegiality exists in practice, its different forms, where its boundaries lie within the school, how tensions with hierarchical contexts and expectations of 'strong' leadership are dealt with, and the factors that enhance or hinder its development.

3. Almost no research was found that examined the process of team building in departments. How middle leadership can effectively contribute to team building is an area of research which links with issues in collegiality.

4. Although their post was created after most of the research examined here had been completed, the roles and responsibilities of advanced skills teachers should be examined. Their role may have reduced the extent to which subject leaders see themselves as retaining responsibility for the development of effective teaching strategies within their responsibility areas.

5. There is little research into the nature of effective subject leadership What research into effectiveness there is has focused more on the characteristics of effective departments: we need to know more about the details of how these are created. Fine-grained studies of middle leaders who are deemed to be effective will help us understand how this is achieved.

6. Research on the effectiveness of middle leaders should include their pivotal role in leading and managing cultural change and the extent to which they are creating a 'new professionalism' that tackles the tensions of managerial and educational aims.

7. Longitudinal studies of middle leaders, as opposed to departmental or school effectiveness, should be undertaken. These would help us to examine both ways in which effectiveness is measured and the wider organisational contexts which may influence the effectiveness of areas of responsibility within them.

8. Much of the research that has been undertaken in this area has comprised small-scale case studies. There is an urgent need for larger scale and longer term studies of middle leaders in action.