Power, agency and middle leadership in English primary schools

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Abstract:
English primary Schools are considered to be quasi-collegial institutions within which staff communicate regularly and openly (Hammersley-Fletcher and Kirkham, 2007). The activities of staff however, are bound by the norms and activities of the institution and by the norms and activities of the institution and societal expectations. Thus despite the perceived collegial nature of the primary school wider agendas of governmental control over the curriculum and an emphasis on accountability and standards have had an impact on the development and purposes of the roles of primary school middle leaders and also upon their agency. This is a conceptual paper that explores issues around the agency of primary school middle leaders within wider political agenda for education. Through a reconsideration of research conducted by one of the authors since the inception of the notion of ‘subject leaders’ (formerly curriculum co-ordinators) we seek to exemplify ways in which primary school middle leaders attitudes have developed and changed over the past fifteen years. In this paper we identify attitudes to leadership, the influence of distributed leadership on primary school role-holders, and possible ways forward for middle leadership.

Conceptions of Leadership:
As MacGregor Burns argues “leadership is one of the most observed and least understood phenomena on earth” (1978, p. 2). For Cuban (1988) leadership is “influencing others’ actions in achieving desirable ends” (quoted in Bush, 2003, p. 9)). The literature on leadership is extensive and reveals a concept that is highly contested. Even the seemingly benign suggestion that leadership involves a process of influence between leader and follower (Yukl, 1998) does not go unchallenged. Moreover there are numerous definitions and recommendations in support of a variety of styles or approaches to leadership. Depicting particular ‘types’ of leader as ‘saviours’ is a current trend according to Collinson (2005). He argues further that leaders are presented as the hero or alternatively as the villain. Some ideological and educational implications of what is seen as the creation of a leadership, as distinct from a ‘management’ ‘discourse, and the conceptual and linguistic hallmarks of the two, are explored in Strain (2009). A burgeoning literature advising leaders to become ‘excellent’ tends to exaggerate what leaders themselves can achieve. More recently there has been a movement to encourage non-hierarchical and inclusive models of leadership, resulting in an emphasis on ‘distributed leadership’ encouraging more reciprocity among component relations. Leadership can thus be viewed as relational, fluid, multi-directional and a dimension that can empower workers, described by Collinson (2005) as dialectical.

In England distributed leadership was a term adopted and arguably adapted from notions of ‘distributive’ leadership by the National College of Schools Leadership (NCSL). The college, a government funded body developed to promote leadership in schools with the aim of raising standards of attainment and standards of teaching and learning, finding that schools were somewhat resistant to notions of developing multiple leaders (schools initially saw the move as divisive and associated leadership with hierarchy – see Hammersley-Fletcher and Qualter, forthcoming) decided that there was a need to re-frame the notion of leadership. As a consequence former notions of one leader taking full responsibility was replaced by a notion that through distributed leadership, a variety of staff could work together, different staff taking responsibility for particular initiatives and thus working for that particular period or project as ‘the leader’. Distributed leadership focuses on developing shared contexts for learning and growing leadership capacity (Grint, 2005). Grint goes on to explain that this model of leadership draws on the unique skills of those people within the organisation and
allows them to act flexibly taking on leadership and working on tasks as and when appropriate, reverting to a non-leader when the task is complete. It emphasizes the leadership role where the concerted efforts of multiple organisational agents serve organisational purposes (Spillane, 2006). Thus leadership from the middle is emphasized. As Leithwood and Reilh (2003) argue “teacher leaders can help other teachers to embrace goals, to understand changes that are needed to strengthen teaching and learning and to work towards improvement” (p. 3).

The notion of developing school middle leaders as a force for change is an attractive one. It appears to challenge traditional understandings of hierarchical leadership and has proved appealing to schools and in particular to primary schools. Here, the attraction of distributed leadership may be that it appears to offer primary schools a more collaborative way forward, in line with notions of what primary schools are like as organisations (Hammersley-Fletcher and Kirkham, 2007). To exemplify this phenomena research reported by Hammersley-Fletcher and Brundrett, (2005) demonstrated that head teachers claimed to be acting as a distributed leader without exception despite cases of contradictory evidence provided by their staff. The idea that distributed leadership is a benign force can however be challenged. Notions of embracing change and developing teaching and learning might also encompass a more compromising quality where agendas are developed externally to the organisation and where such leadership simply becomes a means by which external policy is enforced rather than discussed, evaluated and perhaps adapted before implementation. Moreover the extent of the middle leadership remit is delimited by the range and extent of tasks on offer and this is controlled by the head teacher. Further whilst leadership may be formally given to a member of staff this does not mean that authority and respect automatically follow. In this paper we consider the activities and roles of middle leaders over the last fifteen years and examine the extent to which middle leaders in primary schools have agency or a merely acting as agents of government change.

**Changing relations in the school:**

Educational reform has been a significant focus of the government policy of industrialised nations for more than two decades (Levin, 2005). The development of middle leadership in primary schools became emphasized in 1998 at the point when the then Teacher Training Agency (now Training and Development Agency) promoted the redefinition of what were curriculum coordinators to subject leaders. The advent of the notion of leaders below that of headteacher and perhaps deputy headteacher represented for the primary school, something of a culture shift. Alongside this the imposition of a national literacy and numeracy curriculum led to primary schools identifying senior management teams consisting of the subject leaders leading these ‘core’ curriculum subjects, core subject leaders being viewed as more senior than other curriculum leaders (Hammersley-Fletcher, 2002). Furthermore, because primary schools tend to be smaller organisations than those in the secondary phase, many primary schools gave some curriculum responsibility to their entire staff (with some holding multiple responsibilities). Thus, in some cases all teaching staff could have a middle leadership role. This agenda which placed a greater significance on the role of leadership, created divisions in the significance of different leaders and emphasized the importance of leadership in all discussion about school organisation, developed alongside an emphasis on efficient management and on market forces. For Robertson (1996) this shift led teachers away from the important work of ideological control such as looking at social reconstruction, educational goals and curricula. As Fullan (2003) commented,
England brought about large-scale improvement in literacy and numeracy in 20,000 primary schools in the 1997-2002 period. School leaders played a key role in these impressive accomplishments, yet, in this same period, the morale of teachers and principals did not improve due to a number of complex factors: the overall pace of change, work overload, lack of ownership of the strategy, and so on…” (p. 27).

Thus Fullan argued that the pressure upon teachers increased during this period. Nor were such problems confined to the United Kingdom.

As a consequence of (imposed) changes in the control of curriculum and assessment and increased measures of public accountability, teachers in most countries now work within cultures in which their careers are ever more dependent upon external definitions of quality, progress and achievement for their success. Although many experienced teachers have maintained their identities, finding room to manoeuvre within a general reduction in their traditional classroom autonomy, the pressure on these and younger colleagues is to comply with competency based agendas. (Day, 2002, p 677)

Recent government strategies have attempted to reduce the pressures upon teachers and indeed some testing has been dropped. Initiatives such as ‘Remodelling the School Workforce’ and the ‘Extended Schools’ agenda have also sought to shift the ways in which schools operate to include a greater range of ‘non-teachers’ in learning and teaching. For example, beginning in 2003, workforce remodelling claimed to provide opportunities for all staff to get involved in setting school wide agendas with a shift in emphasis towards the importance of learning for all in the school community. This agenda was hailed as offering schools freedom from the centralised models of the recent past by handing control back to the schools themselves (Hammersley-Fletcher and Adnett, 2009). In this way, it could be argued that teachers were given opportunities to recapture the local educational agenda. Gunter (2007) however argues that remodelling operates to distance teachers from the classroom, using allocated time designing schemes for others (i.e. non-teachers) to implement, whilst their own classes were taken by less well paid non-teachers. Certainly such initiatives have provided a framework for continuous functional adjustment among professional and operational roles, and, though less overtly, acted as a vehicle for a significant redistribution of power (Hartley, 2007).

Agency, as Anthony Giddens has so eloquently explained (1998, 84-85), is an elemental basis of power. Equally, agency presumes a context of constraints. In this paper we begin to identify attitudes to leadership in primary schools, the influence of distributed leadership on primary school role-holders, and possible ways forward for middle leadership that could expose new relations of agency and constraint among UK primary school teachers.

Teacher agency
Barber (2005) controversially argues that teachers have moved from a period of ‘uninformed professionalism’ prior to the 1980s where he argues that teachers lacked knowledge, skills and attitudes appropriate for a new century, through ‘uninformed prescription’ to ‘informed prescription’ and now into a period of ‘informed professionalism’ where these skills have developed so that governments can now allow teachers a degree of licensed autonomy. Whilst there are debates about this view of teacher development, what is clear to everyone is the level of control Barber attributes to the state. Whitty (2006) also argues that the
characteristics of a professional are increasingly determined by the state. Therefore significant questions now arise as to how power redistributions change professional relations and how working relations may in their turn affect schooling outcomes. Saunders (2006) shows how recent theory narratives implicit in much current policy and practice highlight ‘boundary crossing’ as a necessary and efficacious ‘move’ within learning processes, a concept which makes largely defunct many assumptions and claims regarding the ‘transferability’ of formal, codified knowledge to life and the ‘workplace’. Learning is increasingly recognised as ‘taking place’ as part of the learner’s crossing of significant activity and institutionally defined boundaries. Contu and Wilmott (2003) have shown how readily the situatedness of learning is susceptible to subordination and manipulation by power, unless the power relations operative within the learning situation are themselves identified and configured to protect the autonomy of those who co-create the learning.

These spatial metaphors, help to explain how power relations are configured in particular historical and organisational circumstances. They can also provide a dynamic perspective of organisational change, supplementing our understanding of structural relations embedded in ‘habitus’ by which Bourdieu and others have explained the formation of norms and practices among particular social classes and social groups (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). These concepts are important in developing our understandings of what is meant by the ‘agency’ of individuals and of the constraints which agency is both enabled and limited. Thus it can help inform our thinking about the ways in which primary school middle leaders have reacted to and developed practices within what has been a predominantly neo-liberal political agenda for education. Whilst individuals may feel authorised to implement their own decisions, needs and desires, their agency is in reality constrained by the less visible structures and rules constructed within wider agendas which, in their turn, influence the cultural norms and practices of society and the institutions within which they operate. In this way teachers may be placed in a position where their actions and priorities are heavily influenced by wider political agendas. For example, work by Forrester (2005) indicated that school leaders were more anxious to do a good job as judged by inspection findings than to ensure positive experiences for all the children that they teach. This is not to say that this is true of all teachers, or that teachers don’t believe in the importance of developing a good educational experience that will benefit all children. But the example also reveals the pressures that a regime of public accountability and a predominantly consumerist model of society (Patterson, 2000) place upon teachers.

Managing change
It is important to recognise that change cannot be wholly under the control of any person or body. Thus, whilst governments can legislate or advise on change, the outcomes may not be those predicted (Newman, 2001). Already discussed was the resistance to notions of devolved leadership in primary schools until this was re-formulated as a move towards distributed leadership – an apparently collaborative model of leadership that sat more comfortably with school teachers notions of how schools as organisations behaved. Nevertheless as the educational environment has shifted so too have the behaviours and attitudes of school middle leaders. Isomorphism describes the ways in which organisations adapt to a changing environment and changing expectations about appropriate practices (Newman, 2001). Here it is important to adapt to gain legitimacy. Thus in an environment of public criticism of schools and teachers then schools adapt and confirm in order to demonstrate their professional ability. DiMaggio and Powell (1991) suggest that isomorphism can occur in one of three ways. Coercive isomorphism is where the state obliges an organisation to change. Here legislation and policy have clear implications for school practice. Mimetic isomorphism
refers to situations where one organisation mimics the practices of another organisation where the other organisation is identified as successful. For schools success is in terms of test results and inspection findings and thus schools may adopt practices regarded as those bringing other schools success. Finally normative isomorphism describes the adoption of a set of professional norms for example what it is to be a middle leader in a primary school. Thus as Currie et al, 2005) argue the degree to which schools can take a risk is limited as all of these change processes re-enforce vertical lines of control in spite of rhetoric about the value of distributed leadership.

**Stories from middle leaders:**

In this section we draw on the research of the first author to illustrate 1) the middle leadership role; 2) the rise of distributed leadership practices; and 3) a period of change when leadership roles are being re-considered in the light of workforce remodelling.

1996-9: This sub-section draws on PhD research (Fletcher, 2000). Twenty primary school curriculum co-ordinators from ten schools took part in semi-structured interviews across two English Local Authorities. This was a period when the TTA was introducing the principle of subject leadership as part of the introduction of a national curriculum for literacy and numeracy. Responses tell us something about how these developing middle leaders viewed their roles and what issues were of importance to them at that time. Roles mainly centred on providing subject knowledge and resources for colleagues.

…advice and helping people and taking lessons and getting equipment out for other people and things like that… (p.151)

Support for the notion of providing subject expertise and practical support was very strong. There was however an expectation that leaders would also monitor colleagues work in their area of curriculum responsibility. Whilst they were aware of this role, there was a lot of sensitivity about going into others’ classrooms and monitoring teacher activity, so the middle leaders interviewed had opted for looking at childrens’ work as a preferred method of monitoring standards. They also pointed out that observing a colleague’s lessons had implications for covering classes, as it was not easy to leave their own class without the head or a supply teacher coming in. These middle leaders talked a lot about leading by example rather than imposing their own practice upon others, and hoped that they would gain support through demonstrating enthusiasm for the subject. For those teachers that had gained a curriculum responsibility that they would not have chosen and which was not an area of expertise this was more challenging, as they had to develop their knowledge of the subject. The middle (subject) leaders also voiced objections to being labelled as a leader. Thus in order to cope with their new leadership roles some teachers interviewed commented that they liked to have a senior manager tell staff that change was necessary so that they could then suggest what that change might be, without appearing to be the initiator or enforcer of the change.

[I prefer]…somebody in senior management actually making the whole thing more formal and then it’s not really me forcing my views of what I should be doing on everybody else (p.184)

The other way of engaging colleagues in change was to suggest and discuss developments in staff meetings. This was by far the most popular way of introducing change and most readily allowed staff to behave in a collegial and collaborative way. The middle leaders also
expressed their concerns about areas of the curriculum being identified as ‘core provision’, and so becoming a focus of attention, because of the negative impact that this may have on other curriculum areas. One history subject leader was distressed that she had spent a lot of time working on the history curriculum and was now meeting resistance from staff who were prioritising the new literacy curriculum changes. What was also clear was the power of the head teacher to agree to or reject their ideas and suggestions for development. “The teachers make requests and then the head tries to accommodate them…by allowing staff meetings or I suppose by putting it in the school development plan” (p.213). Action was very much in the gift of the head; the head could choose what subjects to prioritise and which approaches to adopt. The middle leaders felt this to be entirely appropriate as the head was after all in charge of the school and held the final responsibility.

2002-4: This sub-section reports research on Primary School Middle Leadership commissioned by the NCSL (Hammersley-Fletcher, 2004). The paper draws on the forty-four semi-structured interviews conducted with middle leaders in twenty-two primary schools. Twenty-four interviews were across four English Local Authorities and the final twenty were part of a sample of NCSL volunteer schools which covered a range of schools across England. The significant difference between this and the previously reported research was the growing focus on the notion of distributed leadership. The head teachers talked directly about shared and distributed leadership whilst the middle leaders talked about their growing leadership confidence and potential (rather than explicitly referring to a model of leadership) as this middle leader indicates.

I think my natural style is to discuss issues and manage as often as possible by consensus. In this role, I have learned to be more of a leader; by stating requirements clearly…I am very proud of my work. I am proud to see my ideas implemented and improving the climate of our school. (p. 11)

The emphasis was very much on making change through consensus, with one or two middle leaders talking about initiating change by recruiting a reluctant member of staff to pilot new practices, on the basis that if you could convince a difficult member of staff, the rest would be easy. They emphasised the importance of teamwork.

…working together as a team, building up a good… team skills so that one person isn’t just ‘oh follow me I’m the leader’ but ‘come on we can all work together on this so I think that’s important…to build good team skills working together…(p. 11)

Working collaboratively with colleagues was still a strongly emphasized quality, albeit now exhibited as a leader. This suggested that notions of what it is to be a leader had shifted in line with the NCSL vision of distributed leadership. But whether practice actually reflected what was still at that time rather confused definition of distributed leadership, is open to question. References to ‘consensus’ exposed a more worrying edge, however, in stories of non-conforming teachers who had left, or been given roles where they had little influence on others were mentioned. Four schools had a story of a difficult member of staff who ‘didn’t fit’.

Whilst still often referred to as curriculum co-ordinators rather than subject leaders, these middle leaders saw themselves as holding a leadership role. It became clear however that they were doing much the same as they always had done with slightly more emphasis on the
monitoring aspects of the role. Some schools were now conducting peer review of teaching but this was still at a very modest level with most monitoring being conducted through review of children’s completed work. The importance of subject knowledge was still emphasized so that middle leaders could act as a guide and mentor within their curriculum subject area. It was again clear that their ability to be innovative and instigate change was very dependent upon the head. On the whole they were acting to implement government agendas, with perhaps some modifications, rather than generate new practices of their own. Nevertheless, in many of the schools visited the middle leaders were enjoying their new ‘leadership responsibilities’. Interestingly however there were some indications that middle leaders were beginning to see themselves as the means of establishing government agendas within the school, albeit unquestioningly.

…I need to be a channel through from the authority or the government where the initiatives are coming from…a resource provider, a facilitator in the broadest sense really…to make sure that my subject is being delivered to the highest standard it can be… (p. 26)

There were also indications that being a core subject leader meant you were more likely to gain the support of colleagues (which justified the concerns expressed in the earlier study above) and be on the senior management team. “I’ve gone…from a fairly minor subject as viewed by most people to…a core subject… my role has actually changed quite a lot because people are very receptive to literacy because they’re all doing it every single day” (p. 30). This notion that agency enjoyed as a middle leader is dependent upon an externally authorised emphasis on your subject area supports the view that middle leadership is more complex and elusive than implied by the mere conferment of a title on a teacher. Leadership potential in the designated role derives crucially from the political agenda pursued outside of the school.

2004-7: This section reports data collected on three occasions (Hammersley-Fletcher and Lowe, 2004, first report; Hammersley-Fletcher 2006, second report; Hammersley-Fletcher 2007, third report) from middle leaders as part of reflection on the changes engaged upon after introduction of the school workforce remodelling agenda. Nine primary middle leaders from nine primary schools were interviewed from two Local Authorities. Here, initiating significant change appeared to dominate the now established middle-leadership roles, with either senior management teams deciding upon ways forward or, alternatively, the whole staff being consulted.

… we’ve had the change team meetings, which we’ve talked about the different sort of things that’s going on there; we’ve had audits, which all staff has filled in and given their ideas, which then had been summarised and given back to us and we’ve responded to those …. (p. 26 first report)

The focus on consultation was a significant feature of all three reports. There was undoubtedly a lot of discussion around changes being adopted and the middle leaders consulted felt fully engaged and involved in initiatives. When asked about instigating change however, it seemed that in most cases the head was still firmly in charge of any significant shifts, albeit after consultation.

… the Head is very, very adamant that all staff have an input… so that everybody knew what was going on … (p. 27 third report)
Consulting with and keeping staff informed was regarded as good practice and seen as allowing schools to conform to government agendas. Within the remodelling agenda, the government had suggested that schools should develop a team which should include representatives from the whole school, as well as interested local bodies, so that locally based and promoted initiatives could be encouraged. This was not a part of the legislative provisions for the changes; where such teams were set up, they appeared mainly to look at ways of implementing the formal parts of the change process. Thus changes made appeared to be rather conservative in nature. One more significant element of the change process was the introduction of a 10% requirement for teachers to be released from the classroom to have an opportunity to plan, prepare and assess. Releasing primary school teachers from classrooms had the potential to cost schools with relatively small budgets a significant amount of money in supply cover. The government also encouraged the use of teaching assistants to cover classes as a possible solution and had already introduced initiatives to develop and focus on this role. As a consequence, in the schools visited, teaching assistants were taking responsibility for whole classes, albeit for short periods and with particular forms of support to enable them to do this. This was receiving mixed support as some teachers saw this as a threat, others as a significant help, and others expressed a concern about the temptation to exploit the teaching assistant’s role.

… I think teaching assistants are so invaluable, I mean we’d be lost without them, but I do very much keep in my head they are a teaching assistant, they’re not there to do my job… (p. 40 third report).

Middle leaders also expressed a concern to protect their subject responsibility in terms of standards: “I’m quite protective of those subjects cos I’m accountable at the end of the day” (p. 43 third report). Thus there was some uncertainty that teaching assistants could uphold the quality required to gain good subject related results, if over-used. The remodelling initiative had also led to a reconfiguration of leadership roles. In some schools the whole staff were involved in discussing and implementing the remodelling programme. In others the senior management team (which is some cases involved a senior level teaching assistant) led the change agenda. Most middle leaders also advocated a need for agreement and consensus with only one middle leader advocating the benefits of listening to other perspectives.

I like to see things turned on its head ….if they’re viewing something different than how I’m seeing it, then it’s other people’s perceptions, a child’s perception and so forth and the parental perception… for me it all feeds in to the big picture… (p. 47 second report)

This data indicates that the role of middle leadership is shifting, re-forming and arguably serving to give renewed emphasis to teaching, learning and management structures that effectively support the individual school.

Conclusions:
It could be argued that the notion of middle leadership in the setting of a primary school when it could involve all staff was a flawed idea. The advantages of some form of distributed leadership was that different people can assume responsibility at different times for different things. It might be argued that as labelling someone a leader appears counter to primary school cultures of collaboration and given that this involves some move away from traditional notions of leadership then this also is not helpful. Bell and Ritchie (1996) argued
that the advantage of developing subject leaders was to encourage those taking up a responsibility to be pro-active in developing their subject area. The evidence above would seem to suggest however that such middle leaders become efficient at implementing government agendas and the dictates of the head rather than using their role to develop significant shifts in educational practice. Thus we should ask how relevant notions of multi-layered leadership are. The notions that teachers need to be labelled as a leader in order to be pro-active in their role is also open to question. If the aim is to foster creative practice then practices which encourage colleagues to discuss and debate practice would seem to be the most productive way forward rather than formulaic processes which are imposed on all schools.

Richmon (2006) recommends a move away from the “tired premise: the principal does… and the school improves. The fundamentals of administration are reduced to pulling levers and turning knobs” (p. 21). Instead it is important that schools acknowledge the chaotic environment within which they operate. Fielding argues that conceptual clarity and coherent arguments are vitally important. “Too often the best of what is intended is denied by poverty of thought and a surfeit of misdirected enthusiasm” (Fielding, 2007, p. 384). Primary school middle leaders have been subjected to a variety of political initiatives which define their role as one of leadership, specify in more detailed what is expected of them, and require them to transmit and deliver externally defined agendas for change. These measures appear so far to have redefined what it means to be a leader in a way that provides an alternative to the rigidities associated with hierarchical forms of leadership, but which does little to address primary school power relations in practice.

Wheatley argues that,

Once we stop treating organizations and people as machines and move to the paradigm of living systems, organizational change is not a problem. Using this worldview, it is possible to create organizations rich in people who are capable of adapting as needed, who are alert to changes in their environment, who are able to innovate strategically. (p. 76)

In primary schools, the head teacher is still responsible for setting the school vision and the main influence on models of professional practice. However, distributed leadership has sought to draw upon the leadership capacity of staff and thus raised the institutional profile of middle leaders. The extent to which this group has power, however, is open to question. Furthermore, the question of the extent to which the principle of middle leadership represents an authentic innovation must be considered alongside the possibility that middle leaders have been created as a device to encourage compliance to externally driven agendas for change. It might be argued that middle leadership provides a potential solution to the need for a sustainable leadership recruitment pathway at a time of chronic shortage of headteacher supply. If this is so, these seemingly complex changes may simply cloak a story of ‘smoke and mirrors’, in which power still resides at the top of institutional hierarchies and delegation of power as agency remains minimal, a situation concealed by the delegation of an increasing range and number of relatively meaningless administrative tasks. We have found that where middle leaders did not comply with headteacher requirements, they left the school. Thus, coercive isomorphism appears to be operating to eliminate questioning within a prevailing culture of compliance and control. It would also appear that mimetic isomorphism is encouraged with each
school adopting similar solutions to those adopted by ‘successful’ schools. Certainly a simplistic ‘one size fits all’ model of leadership seems to have been heavily promoted by bodies such as the NCSL, the statutorily appointed body that defines, legitimates, and disseminates leadership norms and practices for publicly accountable schools.
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