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Professional development leadership: the importance of middle leaders

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ABSTRACT

As initial teacher training and development becomes increasingly school-based, a central piece of knowledge concerning teachers' professional development is being overlooked. Middle leaders, who play an essential role in the development of other school teachers, are receiving little consideration or credit in the academic discourse. This article looks at how a group of experienced middle leaders working in three mainstream schools in England are making sense of their role in teachers' professional development. The study reveals that the middle leaders feel their expertise is not being adequately recognised and that they are consequently struggling to take true ownership of their role in teacher development. We argue that for teachers' professional development to be more meaningful and comprehensive, it is important to acknowledge and cultivate the expertise and potential of middle leaders. Achieving this will involve academics, school leaders, and middle leaders to collectively reimagine the role of middle leadership and its growing significance in teacher development.

Introduction

Over the past twenty years, a large body of literature and research has been dedicated to senior leaders and leadership models within schools. In comparison, middle leadership has received much less attention in the academic discourse (Harris *et al.* 2019, Lipscombe *et al.* 2023). Most notable is the apparent lack of interest in the crucial role middle leaders play in other teachers' professional development.

Like many other countries operating under neoliberal principles, successive English governments have seen education as a means of ensuring economic productivity and success, changing the education landscape to one preoccupied with pupil attainment and knowledge capital (Ball 2021). Central to these measures has been a sharp focus on teachers' classroom practice (DfE 2011, 2012, 2016, 2022a), driven by the belief that teaching skills and competencies are best developed through teachers observing and learning from one another (Gove 2010). As a result, and echoing an international trend (Jackson and Burch 2019), teacher training and development in England have become increasingly school-based. Academies and multi-academy trusts now implement their own programmes and professional training schemes. Teaching school hubs have received government accreditation and promotion as providers of high-quality teacher development (DfE 2022b). At the

same time, universities are playing a diminished role in initial teacher training, with school-led programmes accounting for 56% of all ITT provision in 2023–24 (DfE 2024).

What is less certain, however, is the parity across providers with respect to how teachers are professionally developed once qualified; and what skills and knowledge they have with which to promote the professionalism and professional learning of others. Middle leaders in schools, particularly department heads, are widely acknowledged as having a considerable impact on the professional development of other teachers (Dinham 2007, Leask and Terrell 2014, De Nobile 2018, Fleming 2019, GTCS 2021). As the provision for teacher training and professional development becomes increasingly school-based, it is necessary to question and understand how middle leaders are making sense of their role in teachers' professional development. Without such knowledge, the backdrop for professional development for teachers is likely to be inconsistent, potentially impoverished, and revolving solely around pupil attainment.

With a focus on a small group of experienced middle leaders working in various educational settings in south-east England, this article makes three contributions to addressing this research gap. Firstly, the study reveals a frustration from the middle leaders that their knowledge and insight into teacher development are not being adequately recognised or developed. Consequently, they appear to be struggling to take ownership of their role as teacher developers. Secondly, the findings indicate that the middle leaders are predominantly acting as intermediaries and experienced colleagues in others' professional development. But in doing so, they are failing to realise themselves as active facilitators of professional learning and to understand it as a holistic process. Finally, we argue for a shift in perspective that elevates middle leaders from being seen as mere intermediaries in the education system to intellectual advocates of teaching and school improvement, aligning with the concept of teacher leadership. Accordingly, we call on academics, school leaders, and middle leaders to reimagine middle leadership, and suggest how they may begin to initiate this change.

In the next section, we briefly outline the concept of teacher leadership and its link to middle leadership, before considering the role of middle leaders in greater depth. We then describe the study's methodology before outlining the themes that emerged from the middle leaders' interviews. Finally, we consider the findings and implications of the study, with respect to both practice and further research.

Teacher leadership

While the term 'teacher leadership' may not be as widely used or well-known as other education-related terms in schools, its significance lies in acknowledging and promoting the leadership potential of teachers in driving positive change within the education system. Teacher leaders broaden their impact on student learning by engaging with research and collaborating with professionals outside their local setting. They take ownership of their professional growth and actively seek opportunities to develop pedagogical excellence for themselves and others. As Harris and Jones (2019) suggest, a full appreciation of their potential to influence educational policy, contribute to curriculum development, and help shape the direction of education is long overdue.

With its commitment to enhancing educational practices, teacher leadership has an intrinsic and inescapable association with teachers' professional learning (Poekert 2012). Moreover, some authors indicate that teacher leaders act as catalysts, uniting groups of teachers to foster a continuous process of self-examination, exploration, and improvement within their schools (MacBeath *et al.* 2018, Margolis 2020, Margolis and Strom 2020, Nguyen *et al.* 2020). Recognising the dynamic and intricate interplay between teacher leaders' influence on other teachers and school-wide development, several authors have emphasised the need for theoretical frameworks to explore the characteristics of teacher leadership (York-Barr and Duke 2004, Wenner and Campbell 2017, Berg and Zoellick 2019, Margolis and Strom 2020). Notably, Margolis and Strom (2020) have made significant efforts to theorise teacher leadership and its impact on teachers and their schools' professional development. Utilising complexity theory, Margolis and Strom

propose that the influence of teacher leaders on others' development is non-linear, iterative, and dynamic, thereby highlighting the necessity for a nuanced understanding of teacher leadership that transcends simplistic linear models of professional learning. Much like Clarke and Hollingsworth's (2002) multifaceted model of professional development, teacher growth is not simply reduced to a prescriptive framework. Instead, it recognises the possibility of multiple change sequences and diverse growth pathways as part of professional learning. Thus, it underlines the complexity and unpredictability inherent in teacher development and the importance of teachers working together to establish individual and collective teacher agency.

York-Barr and Duke (2004) argue that teacher leadership is exercised through a variety of formal and informal roles, and the professional dialogue that takes place across a school community. However, hierarchical structures in schools can pose considerable barriers to teachers realising themselves as teacher leaders (Nguyen *et al*. 2020). Overcoming these barriers requires individuals with experience, respect, and strong interpersonal skills to influence a culture shift within their schools. Middle leaders, as a group, are especially well placed to effect such a change. Middle leaders inherently hold qualities associated with teacher leadership, in their unique position in schools of being experienced practitioners who support and guide colleagues in their continuous professional development. Moreover, middle leaders possess the capacity to exert influence on educational practice and drive transformative change, making them pivotal advocates in dismantling rigid hierarchies and fostering a nurturing environment that recognises and promotes teacher leadership among all educators. This assertion gains particular significance as teacher training and professional development increasingly become localised within the school setting.

Middle leaders

In the current education system, the importance of middle leadership is firmly established, with middle leaders occupying unique and pivotal roles of responsibility for students and staff. Fleming (2019) likens middle leadership to the engine house of a school, suggesting that schools would struggle to improve and operate effectively without middle leaders. Wise (2001) found that other teachers considered middle leaders to be more important than senior leaders in the general functioning of the school. Along similar lines, Leithwood (2016) argues that departmental leaders have a more significant influence on student learning than whole school initiatives and leadership. However, despite such endorsements, middle leadership has received little academic interest, particularly when compared to the attention given to senior leadership and leadership models in schools (Harris and Jones 2017, Harris *et al*. 2019, Lipscombe *et al*. 2023). The result is a limited knowledge base on middle leadership within the education system.

Within the available literature on middle leadership, two broad areas of interest have received the most attention: the delineation of the role and its complexities; and the practice of middle leadership and its impact on others. Although opinion varies on what constitutes middle leadership within schools, the role is generally defined as a formal position of responsibility between a school's senior leadership and its general teaching staff (Gurr and Drysdale 2013, Bush 2016, Fleming 2019). Middle leadership roles include key stage coordinator, head of department, head of year, head of faculty, and curriculum coordinator (Fleming 2019). In addition to their middle leadership responsibilities, middle leaders are acknowledged as typically having significant teaching commitments, intimately linking their leadership to classroom practice (Lipscombe *et al*. 2023). Accordingly, middle leaders are said to be instrumental in implementing curriculum and influencing pedagogical practices (Dinham 2007, Gurr and Drysdale 2013, Edwards-Groves *et al*. 2016).

As the intermediary between senior leadership and classroom teachers, middle leadership is often considered complex and challenging to navigate. In his small-scale study considering the key functional aspects of middle leaders' work, Busher (2005) details how their professional identity is tightly bound to the role, as they act simultaneously as 'advocates' for colleagues and 'agents' for senior leadership. Similarly, Bennett *et al*. (2007) consider middle

leadership from the perspective of structure–agency dualism, arguing that the demands and responsibilities placed on middle leaders by their schools cannot be separated from their agency. Thus, middle leaders' capacities are partially determined by the school structures in which they work and partially by their degree of agency. Unavoidably, the role is one of conflict and compromise as middle leaders negotiate points of tension between their own and others' thinking (Wise 2001). In addition, policy and performance pressures, particularly in high-stakes subject areas, further compound the difficulties and complexities of middle leaders' work (Maguire *et al.* 2015). As might be expected, evidence suggests that when middle leaders are afforded greater autonomy coupled with clear role expectations, they demonstrate more significant success and impact (Day *et al.* 2016, Leithwood 2016). Where this is not the case, middle leaders can struggle to develop and mediate their professional values and beliefs, with their role reduced to that of a disseminator of mandated policy and headteachers' agendas (Hammersley-Fletcher and Strain 2011, Larusdottir and O'Connor 2017, Forde *et al.* 2019).

An aspect of the middle leader's role that arguably poses a high risk for tension between policy and self-agency is their responsibility for others' professional learning. Middle leaders, particularly subject and phase heads, are credited as having key leadership responsibilities in staff development (DfE 2016, Lipscombe *et al.* 2023). As middle leaders work alongside colleagues, their capacity to facilitate on-the-job learning is said to be extensive, ranging from encouragement and guidance to the mentoring and modelling of best practice (Dinham 2007, De Nobile 2018, Fleming 2019, Tang *et al.* 2022). It is also suggested that middle leaders create conditions in schools that drive and build professional capacity by opening up opportunities for professional dialogue, enhancing curriculum and developing healthy professional communities (Harris and Jones 2010, 2017, Edwards-Groves *et al.* 2016, Willis *et al.* 2019, Bryant *et al.* 2020). In sum, as Edwards-Groves *et al.* (2019) highlight in their study, middle leaders play a pivotal role as insider practitioners in developing others within their schools.

For Perry and Boylan (2018), effective professional development for teachers relies on the expertise of the development facilitator, a criterion middle leaders appear likely to be able to fulfil. Middle leaders are typically teachers promoted to the role on the basis of being accomplished practitioners with good subject and pedagogical knowledge (De Nobile 2018). Moreover, central to middle leaders' professional identity is an enduring sense of being an experienced practitioner who can guide, advise, and pass on knowledge to others (Busher 2005, Willis *et al.* 2019). Being an experienced practitioner, however, does not automatically translate to being a holistic and competent professional development leader. Developing teachers' professional practice also requires an understanding of how to guide and build adult professional learners, make tacit knowledge explicit and visible, and challenge and shape others' inclinations and experience of their work. For Perry and Boylan (2018), such knowledge goes beyond generic teaching skills and requires teacher developers to engage in more specialised professional learning practices. Such practices require the teacher developer to constantly question and adjust their beliefs about professional learning as they orientate themselves and others to a form of professional development that is more transformative than transmissive (Kennedy 2014). Unfortunately, the professional development of middle leaders continues to be insubstantial (Tang *et al.* 2022, Lipscombe *et al.* 2023). In addition, while valuable contributions have been made in theorising the role of teacher leaders in professional development, efforts at delineating the tangible connection between teacher leadership and middle leadership, and conceptualising the role of middle leaders in teacher development, remain limited (Harris *et al.* 2019, Lipscombe *et al.* 2023). This represents a significant gap in an educational landscape that increasingly requires schools and teachers to be professional development facilitators. Middle leaders, who play such a vital role in the development of others, need more significant consideration. One essential aspect of this broad area of enquiry is to understand how middle leaders are realising and making sense of their role as professional development facilitators. By doing so, the opportunities for middle leaders to develop their skills and knowledge in the development of others can be better conceived and implemented. The present study accordingly explores this topic.

Design and methodology

Background and context

This study is set against a local and global backdrop of increasing school-based provision for teacher training and development (Jackson and Burch 2019), alongside the expansion of middle leadership roles within schools (Lipscombe *et al.* 2023). The research was conducted with two secondary schools and one primary school in south-east England.

- *School A* is a medium-sized selective secondary school for boys.
- *School B* is a large mixed non-selective secondary.
- *School C* is a small primary school.

All the schools are academy converter mainstream schools situated in the same borough. This means that they are state-funded but are independent from local authority guidance. The borough has above-average unemployment rates, and earnings are below the national average. A high proportion of residents in the area fall below the national average for educational qualifications.

All the middle leaders volunteered to be part of the research project in response to an initial email sent to them through their headteachers. Interviews with the middle leaders took place in their schools.

Participants

Nine middle leaders took part in this study from three contrasting educational settings. The names of the middle leaders have been changed to preserve their anonymity. The middle leaders invited to participate in the study all had more than four years of middle leadership experience and had been teaching for more than 10 years. The selection of experienced middle leaders was intentional, as it was felt that they could provide greater insight and draw on more established forms of practice. The following Table 1 details the middle leaders who participated in the study.

Table 1. Research participants.

School	Middle Leader's Name (pseudonym)	Role
School A: Selective Secondary Grammar School for Boys	Hamora	Head of English
	Laura	Head of MFL (modern foreign languages)
	Chris	Head of RE (religious education)
	David	Head of History
School B: Mixed Non-selective Secondary	Katy	Head of English
	Julien	Head of MFL
	Bryan	Head of Science
School C: Primary School	Clare	Key Stage 2 Phase Lead
	Jenna	English Lead

All the middle leaders felt that their involvement in the research would be interesting and improve their professional knowledge. In the time since the data analysis, meetings have been held with the middle leaders to share the findings and ideas emerging from the research.

Methodology

The study followed the principles of a qualitative research approach committed to documenting and exploring how a group of experienced middle leaders are making sense of their role in teachers' professional development. Fundamental to the study was a recognition of the importance of middle leaders and what they can add to the debate on teacher development. The research questions that the study aimed to answer were:

- What perceptions and feelings do middle leaders have about their role in relation to the professional development of other teachers?
- How is professional development understood and implemented by middle leaders, and what aspects of teachers' professional development have the most meaning for them?

Research design

The persistent absence of teachers' voices from the discourse about education has been widely commented upon, particularly in regard to educational policy and reform (Cohn and Kottkamp 1993, Hargreaves 1996, Heneveld 2007, Ingersoll 2007, Bangs and Frost 2012, Lefstein and Perath 2014, Harris and Jones 2019). This study arises from a firm conviction that middle leaders can make a valuable contribution to the debate on teacher development and should be given a voice in the discussion. As the intermediaries between senior leadership and teaching staff within schools, middle leaders are positioned as key interpreters and drivers of policy and staff development. By listening to the middle leaders' experiences, we gain an understanding not only of what they are doing, but also of how they are making sense of their role in teacher development. Going beyond a purely descriptive presentation of the middle leaders' experiential claims, the research employed an interpretative process to shed light on each research participant's sense-making within the social and cultural context of their schools. Hence, emergent themes drawn from focus group meetings and semi-structured interviews were re-evaluated from multiple perspectives to build an in-depth and contextualised understanding of the middle leaders' perceptions and feelings.

The focus group meetings were held as part of the initial phase of the research. The meetings provided an opportunity to introduce the research project to the participants and to discuss teachers' professionalism and professional development. The group discussions were seen as a means of providing greater insight by allowing the middle leaders to explore their personal accounts in relation to one another. The focus group sessions lasted between 40 and 60 minutes. The sessions were recorded and subsequently transcribed as part of the data collection.

Subsequent to the focus group meetings, individual semi-structured interviews were used consisting of open-ended and non-directive questions. The interviews were conducted in settings familiar to the participants, so they felt as relaxed and comfortable as possible. Moreover, the interviews were framed to reflect the middle leaders' professional insight and expertise, thereby creating a non-judgemental forum in which they could reveal their experiences freely and in their own words. The interviews lasted just under one hour and were recorded and subsequently transcribed.

Data analysis

The data analysis consisted of a qualitative interpretation of focus group and individual interviews. With participants' permission, audio recordings were made of the interviews and subsequently transcribed. These recordings were revisited throughout the analysis to draw on nuances of intonation and speech characteristics in interpreting participants' respondes. Adhering to Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2013) guidelines, we conducted a content-based thematic analysis of the

transcripts to illuminate the perspectives of the middle leaders regarding their role in teacher development.

Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) phased approach, we initially read the interview transcripts multiple times to familiarise ourselves with the content fully. We then conducted a broad initial coding, which was distilled into a set of codes that best captured the middle leaders' perspectives and voices. Initially, as two researchers, we examined and coded all the participants' transcripts separately before comparing and unifying our insights. Themes were then defined and refined by drawing together several of the codes through an iterative process. As Braun and Clarke suggest, the approach allowed us to capture the essence of each theme and its relevance within the broader context of the study.

Ethics

The research adhered to the ethical guidelines laid out by BERA (2018), and institutional approval was given for the study. Initially, the schools' headteachers were approached for permission to conduct the research with members of staff in their schools. Consent was then obtained from all of the middle leaders taking part. In keeping with consent agreements, the participants were free to withdraw from the study at any time, and their identities have been anonymised.

Research findings

Drawing on the focus group and interview data, this section analyses the middle leaders' views, perspectives, and feelings about their role in teachers' professional development through five emergent themes: Ownership of Teacher Development, Being the Intermediary, Being an Experienced Colleague, Practice over Theory, and Feeling Unrecognised.

Ownership of teacher development

Contrary to the findings of the research review conducted by Bennett *et al.* (2007), all middle leaders in this study indicated a strong sense of responsibility and engagement in monitoring and developing colleagues' practices. The past two decades have seen a shift in middle leaders' perceptions of their role, towards one that considers the development and assurance of the quality of other teachers to be a central component of it. These findings suggest that this development is now firmly established. As illustrated in the following extract from Bryan, an experienced head of a department for 15 years, the professional development of others is perceived as an expected and ever-present aspect of his work.

> There's definitely an increased emphasis now for heads of department to be developing their team and thinking about their development . . . When I first became a head of department, it was probably more of an aside, but now, yeah, it's very much an expected part of what we do all the time . . . So, there's that sense of being mindful of it.

By reflecting on the role of middle leaders in teacher development, Bryan sketches out his journey as a head of department. Previously his role in the development of others had been more of 'an aside', suggesting something separate and not integral to his main responsibilities. Over time, however, Bryan has come to see the development of others as an established part of his practice. It is noteworthy that Bryan does not describe his transition as one of professional self-discovery and growth. Instead, he speaks of an increased emphasis and expectation for him to be thinking about professional development: it is something that he must be 'mindful of'. As such, Bryan presents a picture of being more influenced by the structures around him than self-agency, revealing an absence of ownership over his role in teacher development. As middle leadership has evolved, it

would appear that the provision and culture necessary for Bryan to fully realise his role in teacher development has not kept pace.

Like Bryan, in her interview Hamora, a secondary head of English, drew attention to external influences and her ownership of teacher development. She talked about professional development in schools being more reactive than proactive, and largely taking the form of a response to top-down external pressures. When asked how such development provision made her feel, Hamora said:

> . . . I suppose a bit frustrated and helpless . . . because I can't give my team the CPD [continuous professional development] that they should be getting . . . and there's always that sense of what I should be doing and what I have to do, and if I'm honest, I do more of what I have to do because, at the end of the day, I'm responsible for the headline figure.

Middle leaders in charge of high-stakes departments have been found to experience high levels of the kind of pressure Hamora here refers to (Maguire *et al.* 2015). Hamora describes her responsibility for student outcomes as both pervasive and visible. She expresses frustration in not being able to give her team the professional development she feels they require. The extract conveys a note of resignation that she needs to forgo her version of professional development for one that is collectivised and externally managed. She is conflicted but cannot defend her conviction against the expectations placed upon her. It would appear that despite holding a clear sense of what she 'should be doing', Hamora indicates very little ownership of her role in the development of others, in a manner similiar to Bryan.

Being the intermediary

Being the intermediary between leadership and teaching staff is a well-recognised complexity of middle leaders' work (Busher 2005, Bennett *et al.* 2007, De Nobile 2018, Fleming 2019). This study obtained a similiar finding, with the middle leaders' interviews revealing the challenges and compromises they face in mediating between senior leadership above and teaching staff below. For most middle leaders, as highlighted in Harmora's extract above, such points of tension result in a sense of restraint and frustration. But for some middle leaders, being positioned as the guided intermediary provides essential coherence and direction to their role. In the following extract, Clare, a primary key stage 2 lead, expresses a sense of assurance from working within a framework of top-down school directives.

> . . . the problem with CPD is that some people engage with it and other people don't, so it tends to end up with everyone doing something different to everyone else, and then we don't really talk to one another, and there's no direction. Whereas what we're doing now is that from the school's development plan each phase is given things to focus on, so everyone knows what they're doing and, as a phase lead, I know where everyone is in their development.

Clare reflects positively on the structures that have been put in place for teacher development within her school. Under the umbrella of a whole school initiative for teacher development, each teaching phase is given specific focus areas. Training and professional development are vertically managed so that 'everyone knows what they're doing', and Clare knows where staff are in their development. Therefore, Clare conveys an impression of teacher development as a one-way process, and there is no indication of Clare or other teaching staff shaping their professional growth. Chiming with the findings of Larusdottir and O'Connor (2017), it would appear that Clare is acting as a conduit for her school's leadership, positioning herself as more of a participant in professional learning than an active influencer or facilitator of it. For Clare, without such hierarchical structures and guidance, teacher development becomes arbitrary and closed, with teacher motivation and communication challenging to sustain. Clare believes that teacher development is more sustainable and effective when she is able to work within and help to support her school's directives for teacher development. In making sense of her role as

a teacher developer, Clare appears more comfortable yielding her autonomy and being steered by her school's leadership, because it allows her to navigate her own and others' professional learning more successfully.

Being an experienced colleague

Seemingly less bound by school directives, several middle leaders talked purposefully about coupling their responsibility for implementing and monitoring teachers' professional development with their sense of agency. For these middle leaders, their tacit knowledge and intuition were seen as necessary to close the gaps they felt were being left behind by policy. This is illustrated in the following extract from Julien, a secondary head of MFL:

> You know . . . it's fine – the CPD that we're given in the school and what we're asked to do – but it does tend to feel a little bit more like a staff meeting than staff development sometimes . . . For me . . . I'm about getting members of the department to think and talk a bit more about the pupils and not in terms of who's failing and who's succeeding, but in terms of how we can be more imaginative and give them a better experience of languages, so things that are not really covered in staff development sessions.

Many of the middle leaders' descriptions of the professional development they had received in their schools were chiefly associated with introducing and implementing new school procedures and processes. Within this context, Julien's extract begins with a note of resignation and disappointment. He talks about the professional development provided by his school as being '*fine*' but feels that it is sometimes more representative of a meeting than staff development. The situation conveyed by Julien is one in which the sharing and updating of information can be more prevalent than an actual professional learning experience. To address the deficits that he perceives in teacher development, Julien talks about trying to encourage the teachers in his department to think more imaginatively about their teaching practice. Seemingly wanting to work beyond a purely functional model of teacher development, Julien seeks to create spaces for a professional dialogue that is not solely about student outcomes. He considers the modelling, sharing and passing on of good practice necessary. For Julien, the working environment appears to be paramount to good teacher development, as it is where teachers are best placed to get guidance and advice from colleagues. The working environment is a space for deliberations about practice and teachers' shared responsibility for students. It would appear that for middle leaders like Julien, in making sense of their role in teacher development, they are positioning themselves as experienced colleagues who can pass on not just teaching tips but professional attitudes and ways of thinking.

Practice over theory

For middle leaders like Julien, their experience and collegiality are fundamental to developing and professionally guiding other teachers. But the extent to which their collegiality and experience translate into promoting and facilitating a more holistic form of professional learning was less evident. Common to all of the middle leaders' interviews was a view that teachers are developed best experientially and that no other form of professional learning could substitute exposure to real classroom situations. In the following extract, for example, secondary head of English, Katy, talks about the process of learning how to teach through trial and error.

> Being in the classroom for me is key, that process of trial and error where you try things out and then they become part of your practice . . . it's about being in the classroom, and you simply don't get that from any other form of professional development.

For Katy, the teaching context is critical in teacher development, as it is the primary site where teachers find out what works for them. Fundamentally, classroom experiences are seen as the mechanism for reflection and subsequent professional growth. As demonstrated in the following extract from Chris, a secondary head of RE, being in the classroom was also portrayed as a means of

affirming professional pride and fulfilment. For Chris, it is in the classroom where teachers authenticate their teaching through the connections they make with their students.

> I personally get the greatest job satisfaction when I can see that the kids are really enjoying my lessons and are engaged in their learning … that's what makes teaching worthwhile for me and provides that sense of professional pride.

In contrast to the importance placed on classroom experiences, more academic forms of professional learning were not as prevalent in the middle leaders' thinking. Echoing the findings of Peiser *et al.* (2022) in their study on ITT mentors, the middle leaders provided little evidence of incorporating elements of theoretical knowledge in their guidance of others' professional learning. Moreover, the middle leaders openly rejected such intervention when invited in their interviews to discuss integrating theory into teachers' professional learning. As highlighted in the following extract from Laura, academic literature and courses are not at the forefront of her mind when evaluating the development needs of her department.

> Engaging with educational literature, if it served a purpose … but just to pick up and read everything that is going on, my head would just go into a spin, so I'm not terribly excited by that one. And courses and qualifications, I would also say are not at the forefront of my mind. Good CPD for me, tends to be about sharing good practice with members of my department …

For Laura, good professional development equates to the sharing of good practice with colleagues. She is indifferent to more theory-based professional development, finding the quantity of material overwhelming and seemingly lacking in relevance. Along similar lines, David, a head of secondary History, feels that the immediate working environment is a far richer source of professional knowledge than what can be gleaned from theory and courses.

> If people are part of a rich environment, then they can become better teachers … it's that immediate day-to-day environment and what they're surrounded by that counts … So, for me, it's about doing the job and learning from other teachers as opposed to theory and courses …

For David, the immediate working environment acts as the cornerstone for teacher development. He expresses the idea of a community of practice in which teachers learn through engagements with their work and colleagues. Valuing the insight and experience of teachers he works with, David conceivably dismisses theory and courses because he feels they are ill-equipped to shed light on the particularities of his classroom and school. In doing so, however, he is divorced from understanding teacher development as a holistic process that combines the intellectual and technical aspects of a teacher's work. Like the other middle leaders, he thereby fails to recognise himself as an advocate of pedagogical and teacher development innovation (Boylan 2013) and realise a more transformative professional learning model (Kennedy 2014).

Feeling unrecognised

In attempting to explain the middle leaders' indifference towards more academic forms of professional development, their perception of its irrelevance to the reality of their work is an undeniable factor. Furthermore, aspects such as constrained time and overwhelming workloads deserve consideration. What also emerged, however, as being prominent in the middle leaders' interviews was the lack of opportunity they have been afforded to engage in personal development and broader systemic discussions about teacher development. As highlighted in the following extract from Jenna, a primary English lead, the result has been to leave the middle leaders feeling that their knowledge and insight are unrecognised.

> Most of the time, it's hard not to feel undervalued, you know … as if I'm seen as someone who can't bring anything to the table. And, without that involvement, I don't feel like I have any real control over what I'm

doing to train and develop other people, which is a bit maddening . . . that's not a criticism of the school, by the way; I think it's just education in general.

Jenna talks about being dismayed with an education system that does not credit her experience. She tells us that she feels undervalued because others are failing to acknowledge the contributions she could make. Crucially, Jenna projects a sense of having no voice in the discussion about teacher development. With a lack of control over the teacher training and development she is required to implement, she is left feeling only vexed and ignored.

Along similar lines, Hamora, in the following extract, expresses her worries and frustrations about teacher development that exclude her opinions and experience.

I think middle leaders are a linchpin and incredibly important because we are constantly implementing the vision from the top down, but within that, there is a certain amount of frustration that we don't have more of a say in the direction of the school . . . I sometimes think it would be nice to be more involved in the decisions that are made. You know, why the individuals who actually do the teaching and know the pupils best within a school are not seen as the experts whose opinions and ideas can have the biggest impact on the pupils is beyond me. We just keep pedalling this idea of top-down initiatives . . . and it means that we just keep telling teachers how to teach instead of skilling them to make judgements . . . and develop who they are as teachers.

Hamora characterises the education system as one in which she feels constrained and unrecognised. She presents an impression of a perpetuated vision of teacher development that fails to energise professional intelligence. It is a top-down model in which teachers are told how to teach instead of equipping them to judge their teaching and professional identity. In agreement with many of the other middle leaders, Hamora would like to see a culture shift in schools from one that is less hierarchical to one that promotes greater inclusion and representation. Arriving at such a point might mean that middle leaders, such as in this study, could feel they have greater ownership over their own and their colleague's professional development – seeing themselves as active facilitators of professional learning instead of simply experienced colleagues and intermediaries of their school's leadership.

Implications for practice

The interview data from this study revealed that all the middle leaders recognised teacher development as an integral and expected part of their work and could articulate an understanding of their role within it. Some found clarity within vertically managed structures, acting more as participants and conduits of professional learning than leaders of it. In contrast, several middle leaders combined their responsibility for implementing and monitoring teacher development with a sense of personal agency, positioning themselves as experienced colleagues who could model their professional attitudes and practices for others. Nevertheless, their overall sense of ownership of their role in teacher development was less clear. While they unanimously recognised the importance of classroom experiences in teacher development, more academic forms of professional learning were considered less meaningful, raising questions about the middle leaders' understanding of teacher development as a holistic, multifaceted process that combines intellectual and practical components.

As teachers' professional learning increasingly falls under the remit of schools in England and internationally (Jackson and Burch 2019), teachers, especially middle leaders, need to develop broader skills to mentor other teachers. Boylan (2013) asserts that teachers can have a systemic impact on practice with adequate support and development opportunities. However, the middle leaders in this study appear to have lacked the necessary support, structures, and mechanisms to realise their potential for systemic change. We suggest that policymakers and school leaders have overlooked the influence of middle leaders, providing insufficient support for them to lead professional development. Additionally, research and academic interest in middle leadership remain

limited. Exploring innovative, adaptive, and creative practices to cultivate middle leaders seems crucial and has significant implications for various stakeholders.

Universities appear to be an obvious starting point for initiating a genuine two-way dialogue with schools and middle leaders to deepen our understanding of middle leadership. Although school-university partnerships are well-established in teacher development, particularly through teacher training, the ever-changing global landscape of teacher education necessitates constantly reimagining and re-establishing connections between universities and teachers (Furlong 2013). Arguably, unlike other teacher training providers, universities are uniquely positioned to use their knowledge, resources, and research acumen to make distinct contributions to teacher development. As Green et al. (2020) outline in their systematic review of the literature on school-university partnerships in Australia, these partnerships offer many mutual benefits, with the most commonly highlighted being the impact on teachers' professional learning. By bringing middle leaders together through specialised courses and research initiatives, universities can create opportunities for middle leaders to mentor each other and co-create knowledge within a broader community. Such an approach would recognise the expertise of middle leaders and embrace the inherent alignment between middle leadership and teacher leadership and the immense potential this holds for transformative change. Undoubtedly, fundamental to this transformation is the need for greater academic interest in middle leadership and the strengthening of its conceptualisation (Harris *et al.* 2019, Lipscombe *et al.* 2023).

School leaders may also need to consider whether they are genuinely engaged in a two-way dialogue with their middle leaders. The middle leaders in this study have indicated that they would prefer school leaders to act more as influences and facilitators of their work rather than directors. Internationally, the education system has been influenced by neoliberal reforms, leading to a top-down approach to quality assurance and performativity (Ball 2021). Consequently, the expansion of middle leadership in schools could be seen simply as a mechanism to absorb experienced staff into the school's leadership structure. A more progressive view would be to see middle leadership as a mechanism for fostering critical analysis, generating ideas, encouraging creativity, and driving professional change. This approach would involve middle leaders being afforded the time to meet with others and explore more comprehensive ideas about practice. Embracing this perspective holds the potential to transform middle leadership into a powerful force for innovation and growth in schools, aligning with the idea of teacher leadership.

As argued throughout this article, middle leaders hold great potential to energise professional learning and intelligence. To fully meet this goal, we recommend that, when guiding others' professional development, middle leaders position themselves as more than conduits of leadership or experienced colleagues. Middle leaders need to recognise themselves as active facilitators and shapers of professional learning, understanding it as a holistic process. This necessitates being attuned to educational research and current ideas, looking beyond their own practice, and engaging with wider networks. This shift potentially presents a significant challenge for middle leaders, as it requires them to move beyond their traditional role as intermediaries and position themselves as agents of transformative change. The outcome promises a 'bubble-up' model of development, enabling middle leaders to fully embrace their professionalism and function as authentic teacher leaders with the potential to flip the education system (Evers and Kneyber 2015, Harris and Jones 2019).

Conclusion

This study aimed to provide fresh insight into how middle leaders are making sense of their role in teacher development. Given their critical role in this process and the increasing shift towards school-based teacher training and professional learning in England and beyond, we have argued that this is an essential piece of knowledge that warrants consideration.

Drawing on the study's findings, we have asserted the need for academics, school leaders, and middle leaders to collectively reimagine middle leadership and recognise its huge potential to energise teachers' professional intelligence and learning. This has the potential to truly shift the semantics around middle leadership from descriptions of intermediaries to that of teacher leaders who hold the potential to drive transformative change. The findings also open up further research questions and opportunities of how to conceptualise middle leadership better, what needs to be implemented for middle leaders, and, most importantly, how this can be co-created with them.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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