

## The Evolving Role of the Middle Leader Within the Scottish Attainment Agenda

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### Background and Rationale

Middle leaders in Scottish education are key drivers to ensuring positive outcomes for all learners. They help to contribute and devise the schools' vision and cultural values, which communicate the overall strategic direction of the school with all stakeholders. Middle leaders can be described as:

Those who have a specified leadership remit beyond the classroom and are provided with resources to carry this out. Such roles might include – but are not limited to – class teacher, depute head teacher, principal teacher or head of faculty. (SCEL 2018)

Middle Leaders face increased accountability for raising attainment in specific subject areas - literacy, numeracy and health and wellbeing as a responsibility for all, as outlined in *Curriculum for Excellence: Building the Curriculum 3*, (2008), *BTC 5* (2011) and *How Good Is Our School 4* (2015). *HGIOS 4* also highlights a greater focus on recognising wider achievement, developing the youth workforce, learner transitions, and engaging parental and community groups whilst improving partnerships and professional review, and development alongside building staff capacity (*National Improvement Framework 2017*). The Attainment Challenge in Scotland plays a major part in the role of the middle leader who is “faced with tremendous pressure to demonstrate that every child for whom they are responsible is achieving success” (Shields, 2004, p.109 as cited by Cook, E. 2015).

This paper outlines some issues facing today's middle leaders in Scottish Secondary Education and their historical journey through policy and discourse.

### Methodology

Although classification of educational research is a difficult task, Best and Kahn (1989) have divided educational research into three types: historical, descriptive and experimental, or a

combination of the three. Historical research involves analysing, interpreting, investigating, and recording events of the past to discover generalisations that clarify both the past and the present, and attempt to anticipate actions for the future. Descriptive research describes conditions that exist at present involving comparison or contrast whilst attempting to find relationships between them. Experimental research describes what will be when certain variables are controlled or manipulated. The focus of this type of research is on variable relationships. Primarily, it is descriptive, as it attempts to analyse, describe and interpret the professional position of middle leaders and how they carry out their leadership role with perceived successes and challenges. There is also an historical dimension and interpretation of events of the past by analysing original documents of a selection of Scottish Educational Policies and their enactment as part of its data source.

### [The Political Context](#)

Education in Scotland has always been distinctive from provision in other parts of the United Kingdom, (Humes and Bryce 2008) even before the establishment of a Scottish Parliament in Edinburgh in 1999. Here, a range of powers became devolved from the UK Parliament in London.

Education was a key arena of social and public policy and played a significant role in the Scottish Government's 'project' of modernised nationalism. Through 'referencing inward' the government introduces ideas of equity and public provision; through 'referencing outwards' ideas of nationalised democracy and accountability are mobilised (Arnott and Ozga 2009).

In December 2000, five National Priorities for education were approved: Achievement and Attainment, Inclusion and Equality, Framework for Learning, Values and Citizenship, and Learning for Life. Additionally, the Labour/Liberal Democrat administration commissioned a

report into the future of the teaching profession *A teaching profession for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Scottish Executive 2000), which informed the basis of the McCrone deal in 2001 covering conditions of service, staff development, promotion and salary scales. Wider consultation took place in March 2002 to gather public views on the development of future educational policy, where the Scottish Executives' response introduced the term 'Excellence' into the official discourse (Scottish Executive 2003). It is through these developments that a review group was set up in 2003 to consider the form and content of the new Scottish Curriculum (Humes 2013).

Alongside this, Scotland was subject to a variety of global pressures including economic, technological, social and demographic, which impacted on other countries. International studies of educational achievement made political leaders extremely anxious regarding their country's position on league tables comparing results of literacy, numeracy and sciences, particularly those studies conducted by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). An international emphasis was placed on skill development, adaptability and enterprise due to technological developments, increasing global economic pressures and the changes to employability and working patterns. Sahlberg (2011 as cited by Humes 2013), refers to a Global Education Reform Movement, which influences the thinking of many politicians in many countries and which drives policy in uniform directions. Scottish Education was attempting to create and develop its own distinctive educational agenda during a time when there were numerous forces pushing international educational systems in a uniform direction.

Beliefs about the importance of social justice and equality are part of the Scottish cultural identity and were always going to influence the development of Curriculum for Excellence.

These beliefs have evolved based on a foundation of 'democratic intellect' (Davie 1961). Whilst not entirely supported by historical fact, Scottish society considers itself to be 'egalitarian' and 'meritocratic', where achievement and ability is a measure of success rather than position or rank, and where public institutions should be the vehicle for developing this greater good within society (Humes and Bryce 2009). They go on to say that even when merit does attract award, there is still a basic respect that humanity deserves equality in the way we treat and consider others. These values are reflected as wisdom, justice, compassion and integrity as inscribed on the mace of the Scottish Parliament. This cultural identity is reflected in the four identified capacities for learning: that the curriculum should enable all young people to become successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens, and effective contributors. These capacities are presented as a purpose of the curriculum that frames overall aspiration for the intentions of CfE and as intended outcomes of CfE, introduced in the 2004 document, *A Curriculum for Excellence* (Scottish Executive 2004, p.12).

Scotland is not unique in exploring education in terms of 'capacities', there is a similarity with Northern Ireland who explored 'cross-curricular skills' and New Zealand who refer to 'key competencies' (Biesta and Priestly 2013). They go on to note that the use of the term 'capacities' was not a deliberate decision taken by members of the review group developing the CfE documentation, but rather, emerged through the work of civil servants, whilst discussion by the review group centred around 'purposes and characteristics'. It is worth making the point that in terms of the purposes of the capacities that should guide educational practice, the framework provided by CfE was intended to provide a very open and light attempt at engaging teachers in thinking about their aims, values and classroom pedagogy and practice.

The 'building' metaphor which is part of the title of CfE documents published (Scottish Executive 2006, 2007; Scottish Government 2008, 2009, 2011) suggest that constructing the new curriculum was a developmental project. This reform focused on five elements: developing the four capacities, active learning in the early years, a framework for learning and teaching, the development and application of skills, and guidance on an assessment strategy for CfE. These were an attempt to build the curriculum on a roll out process from bottom to top. To avoid an assessment driven curriculum, discussion and development of examinations came late in the process, after much had already been developed and implemented. However, teachers expressed concern that the shape of new National Qualifications must be made clear before they could create a new and suitable curriculum in preparation. However, when the final version of the experiences and outcomes appeared, after a process of consultation on the draft proposals (Scottish Government 2009), concern was expressed by many that they lacked detail or were too vague. These responses suggest the scale of the challenge in attempting to promote the intentions of greater teacher agency (Hulme and Menter, 2013).

Given the period of long-term change in the sector with a new curriculum, new assessment models and the implementation and development of new technologies, there is a renewed vigour and necessity to keep an up to date evidence base of comprehensive research on what works. This evidence is increasingly more vital as the evolution and impetus of the Attainment Agenda proves a need for a more coordinated approach to research and synthesis of existing knowledge to influence past and future pedagogy, support and leadership.

Arnott and Ozga (2016) conducted an analysis of Scottish Government policy texts from 2007 to 2014, interviews with policy makers during the first SNP administration and on current

relevant policy texts. This revealed a shift where early statements were dominated by economic imperatives towards a more complex mix, stressing the need to ally education to the promotion of sustained economic growth. However, this evolves to show an increased emphasis on incorporating education to address issues of poverty. Policy interventions are harnessed explicitly to the 'fairer' agenda: the Scottish Government discursively references an education system that was successful and worked well for most, thereby underlining Scotland's tradition of meritocratic egalitarianism (Grek et al., 2009 as cited by Arnott and Ozga, 2016), whilst underlining the obligation to help identified groups overcome material disadvantages.

### Attainment Agenda

Scottish education under the Scottish Government places sustained emphasis on Raising Attainment and Achievement and how this is measured. However, the introduction of Curriculum for Excellence in 2010-2011 placed new challenges on teachers and leadership and led to a more sophisticated tool called Insight which helped standardise National Benchmarks (Scottish Government 2014).

John Swinney (MSP) delivered the statement that as part of his Attainment Agenda he wanted to:

- to ensure that every child has an equal chance to fulfil his or her potential,
- to deliver the best possible outcomes for all of our children, and
- to use every moment in this term of Parliament to interrupt the cycles of deprivation and poverty which attacks the life chances of far too many children and young people in Scotland.

'That is my agenda for Scottish education' (Swinney, 2017).

He goes on further to state that we have a vibrant, healthy contest of ideas about policy and performance. That is as it should be. In assessing what is fair, constructive criticism and what is simply political rhetoric, there is only one yardstick: the data (Swinney, 2017).

It is now widely accepted that this focus on performance in national exams can be referred to as the Scottish Attainment Agenda.

It is against this backdrop that this study stands, seeking to understand what research supports the evolution of the middle leader in Scottish education and their professional practices in context and resultant perceived impact on the Scottish Attainment Agenda.

### Literature review/ policy discourses and performativity

Education is provided at pre-school, primary and secondary levels in both mainstream and special schools. In accordance with the Education (Scotland) Act 1980, the provision of education is the responsibility of local authorities who perform the function of education authority. Education must be flexible to fit individual needs, be tailored to 'age, ability and aptitude' (Education (Scotland) Act 1980) and aims to develop the 'personality, talents and mental and physical abilities of children and young persons to their fullest potential' (Standards in Scotland's Schools etc. Act 2000).

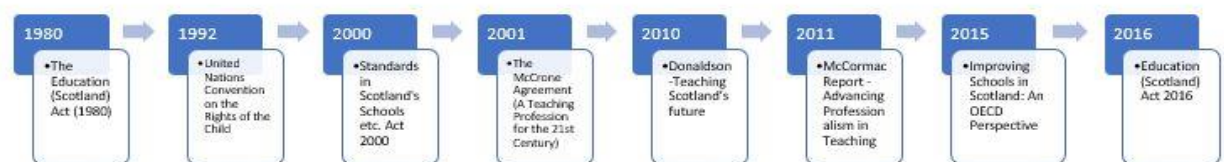


Figure 1 Educational TimeLine - Main Impactor on Educational Policy

## Policy Impact

The general movement in International Educational reform is towards market-driven policies, increased devolution of powers to schools, combined strategically with a set of Government policies which form an accountability-performance regime (Ball, 1998; Gewirtz, 2002; Maroy, 2009). This includes key features such as the definition of a national curriculum and standards, examinations, assessments and league tables, school inspections, and an increasing focus on performance outcomes, and the scrutiny and interpretation of results.

This trend can be seen in education policies adopted in Scotland such as: *The Standards in Scotland Schools Act 2000*; *National Priorities in Education* (SEED, 2003a), the document *How Good is Our School?* (HMIe, 2007), the implementation of *Curriculum for Excellence* (2010), and the introduction of the Education (Scotland) Bill 2015 and the *National Improvement Framework* (2017). Here, the implication has crept towards ever increasing accountability in devolving opportunities for success and accountability to Individual Headteachers, Senior Leadership Teams and onto Middle Leaders. The Education (Scotland) Bill 2018, aimed to create a school and teacher-led education system, establishing a Headteachers' Charter setting out the rights and responsibilities of headteachers, empowering them to be the leaders of learning in their schools. It aimed to improve parental and community engagement in school life and in learning outside of school, strengthening the voice of children and young people. Regional Improvement Collaboratives would provide professional learning and leadership, support in both curriculum and specific sectors allowing for a greater sharing of good practice, peer to peer collaboration, among other responsibilities. The bill also aimed to enable registration of other educational professionals with the Education Workforce Council, taking on the responsibilities of the GTCS and Community Learning and Development Standards Council allowing establishment of professional standards for other education



professionals within the workforce. After widespread consultation it was decided by the Scottish Government that these proposals will not go ahead.

This highlights the drive that school management be devolved (Cameron, 2011), while school targets, standards and evaluations are centralised and nationalised. The quality of educational provision becomes a discursive construct which represents an objective notion that can be observed and measured by testing student outcomes. Biesta (2009) argues that is important to recognise now are mainly measurable targets and outcomes.

Lyotard describes performativity and the subsumption of education to the efficient functioning of the social system and society. Here, education is no longer only focused on the pursuit of ideals of personal autonomy or freedom, but with skills or strategies that contribute to an internally cohesive and efficient legitimate operation of the state in world markets (Marshall, 1999). Ball (1997, 2003b) argues that the pre-eminence given to performativity leads to practices which produce a lack of authenticity, instead of the promised transparency and objectivity, therefore, Headteachers do not perform authentically but rather perform in a way in which they presume will be judged positively. Local Authorities and Headteachers, by implementing their own strategies, strive to improve results of the performance measures imposed, thereby, a shift from Lyotard's ideology as education being for the greater good to society can be seen to one of individual gain through attainment and onward success this may bring.

More importantly than ever, policy is an imperative public platform for the dissemination of discourse. Discourse can be interpreted as the use of the spoken or written language in specific settings by social actors (Wodak 2008). It can a vehicle for how people represent their views of the world (Fairclough, 2003) as cited by J. Spratt, 2017. According to Foucault: 'Any system of education is a political way of maintaining or modifying the appropriation of

discourses along with the knowledge and powers which they carry' (Foucault, 1984, p.123). Ball (2008) suggests that focus should be placed on the discourses of education policy, as these will impact strongly on the building of meaning, relationships, demonstrating the necessities and inevitabilities that take place on the ground in schools. It can be strongly argued that the social implications, challenges and opportunities of the discourses associated with the Attainment Agenda within Scottish schools are designed to have far reaching influences and impact on the learning and development of young people, and ultimately middle leaders in delivering these. It is this that demands closer scrutiny of the emergent discourses surrounding the impact of the Attainment Agenda and perceived successes and challenges to Middle Leaders. Discourses of performativity within the educational arena justify these practices and provide a rationale for actions leading to improvement in outcomes (Ball, 2003b). Given that this study deals with policy documents, their interpretation and implementation, it is worth identifying an additional area of policy positioning.

Gee (2012) captures the ways in which communities enact and recognises socially and historically significant identities of people through combinations of language, actions, interactions, objects, tools, technologies, beliefs and values and labels them as 'Big 'D' Discourse'. Additionally, the notion stresses how 'Small 'd' discourse' identified the actual language in use among people. The notion of "Big 'D' Discourse" sets a larger context for the analysis of 'discourse' (with a little 'd') the analysis of language in use. Gee goes on to say that behaviour only becomes meaningful when set against the Discourse, or indeed a set of Discourses that compete or complement each other 'can "recognise" and give meaning and value to that behaviour'. (Gee, 2012; 190 as cited by Adams 2015). Adams continues that what is said, is a product of the Discourses a person or persons are in at the time and the other Discourses of which they are a member.

There is a great deal of trust placed by Headteachers in educational priorities and notions of effective schooling which are driven by Educational policy. Deutsch (1958) defined trust as an expectation of interpersonal events which is where its occurrence and expectations will have a greater impact than if they were not to happen. Womak and Meyer (2009) suggest that when an ideology has become naturalised within the population a situation of hegemony has been reached. Van Dijk (1997) suggests that hegemonic power causes people to act as if they have made their own choices by their own free will therefore, in such a situation coercion and commands by a dominant group is not required. Headteachers constantly engage in diverse strategic behaviour to produce visible and successful school outcomes according to assessments and rankings, and to improve the school's public image in accordance with Local Authority wishes. Consequently, the functions of school leadership are directed in accordance with these motives and subject to resultant limitations, discipline and control. Ozga (2009) calls this approach 'governance by numbers', as educational leadership (at a global, national and local level) is increasingly focused on and driven and controlled by assessment information, the Attainment Agenda.

Schools are discursively formed, and it is this discourse that also shapes and disciplines those working within schools (Gillies, 2013), in this case Headteachers, Senior Leadership Teams and with or then to middle leaders. The implications of this can be seen in the development of the role and practices or 'Framing' of the middle leader and will be developed in this study using the concepts of Ball et al (2012) building on Foucauldian principles.

Multiple discourses construct the view of Educational Leadership including the discourse of measurable and quantifiable school outcomes and school effectiveness criteria correlated with Faculty/Departmental examination success (INSIGHT), Quality Assurance and

Monitoring and evaluative practices. As such, performance indicators are highly influential on Headteachers, who are accountable for results and controlled by performance information. This is reinforced using data in School Inspections to triangulate, compare and classify vis a vis the performance or Attainment Agenda. Therefore, school effectiveness and Headteacher success can place additional pressures on middle leaders with performance outcomes seen as the measure of success. The concept of the professionally performing middle leader and the pressurised impact of an attainment and accountability agenda create a central focus of this study that impacts on middle leaders with potential increased additional pressures from policy discourse.

### Performance Management GTCS – Professional standards

Internationally, a key driver behind education policy is the improvement of pupil attainment outcomes and effective practices associated with these (OECD [2012](#)). The Scottish Government commissioned a review of teacher education, *Teaching Scotland's Future (TSF)* (2011) as part of their ongoing programme of reform to Scottish education. Amongst the recommendations was a 'reprofessionalisation' of the teaching profession. As part of this process, there was a revision to the sets of professional standards for teachers which enabled the standards to be used as texts in which policy intentions were encoded as part of the wider project of upskilling the teaching profession (Taylor [1997](#)). Expectations within the revised standards were to support a process of redefining the role of the teacher to reflect wider expectations and demands: '... to help teachers develop and improve in a planned way which reflects their growing expertise and their ability to work effectively in different contexts' (Donaldson [2011](#)). In 2012, The General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTCS) published revised professional standards creating a suite of standards covering the significant phases of

a teaching career which included a revised *Standard for Headship* and the new *Standards for Middle Leadership and Management* (GTCS [2012a](#), [2012b](#), [2012c](#)). Clear statements are given at the beginning of each standard about leadership being central:

All teachers should have opportunities to be leaders. They lead learning for, and with, all learners with whom they engage. They also work with and support the development of colleagues and other partners. (General Teaching Council for Scotland) SFR, 2012a)

By giving ‘teacher leadership’ and ‘practitioner enquiry’ greater emphasis, this serves to identify the wider policy intention of achieving improved outcomes for pupils by elevating the role and contribution of the teacher (Torrance and Forde 2017).

Whilst, these professional standards are significant tools to aid professional learning, they also have a regulatory function allowing increased alignment with Professional Standards in annual PRD Reviews and working towards Professional Update every five years with the GTCS (Torrance and Forde, 2017).

### Results and Synthesis

Few heads of departments, or faculty heads have been consulted about the perceived impact their actions have on educational and improvement issues. Predominantly, research favours class teachers or Headteachers, rather than middle leaders on a national scale of research (Hill, 1995). Moreland (2009) further acknowledges the lack of literature, within secondary performance management, with which to measure the perceived impact middle leaders have or consultation with them.

Whilst, effective leadership at all levels is recognised as important, Department and Faculty Heads are the driving force behind any school improvements and ‘the key to improving the quality of the learning process’ (Earley and Fletcher-Campbell, 1989, p.215). They state

further that an evolving role means that they are now too busy with routine administration and crisis management rather than strategic thinking, planning, evaluating, reflecting or observing (p.220). Tymms (1995) leads a growing movement which believes that effective middle leaders are key to developing successful schools. This can be attributed to middle leaders and members of departments sharing a subject loyalty as well as “micro political” interests, forming smaller units of change agent within schools (Brown et al 2000). This notion is further developed by the idea that Department and school performance are not linked. Departments are not dependent on HT leadership. ‘They were largely successful because of their own efforts’ (Harris et al., 1995, p287). This hypothesis is challenged by Sammons et al, who frame the Role of Headteacher as an instructional leader (2010). However, leadership must be conceptualised as a process of mutual influence whereby instructional leaders influence the quality of school outcomes through shaping the school culture focussed on raising attainment and high expectations of learning and teaching, Hallinger (2005). Therefore, the introduction of school context comes into play. Across the studies, an increase in engagement with measuring data is mentioned, with Fullan using this to identify stagnation of attainment and the need to be removed from the attainment plateau (2004). Relating to the English Education system, motivation to do this is through increased performance management. Bottery (2003:33) warns against ‘legislative culture’ – career development in developing own career rather than improving educational experiences for learners as a primary concern.

“What is the evolving role of the middle leader in education?”

Brown et al (2000) cite Brabander (1993) which states that “Departmentalisation in Secondary Schools is an almost universal feature in Western societies, yet it has received very little attention from researchers” (p.56). It is widely recognised that the preferred organisation of

secondary school departments is organised around a general subject base. This defines who teachers are, what they do with and where teachers work and their perception by others (Siskin, 1995). The move to a faculty within a school's organisational structure is common with most schools in or have been initiated towards this trend based on the enactment of a variety of policy over the years. However, it is noted by Anderson and Nixon (2010) that there is a necessity for ongoing observation and research to the effectiveness of this change. Fullan (2004) refers to the work of Heifetz and Linsky (2002) which asserts that adaptive challenges requiring knowledge beyond our capacity or current way of thinking may conflict with Buchanan (Cited in Bryce and Humes 2008, p39) which outlines the anxiety and frustration surrounding the inability of Faculty managers with no subject expertise to lead and manage specific subject areas. He goes on to suggest that a longer timescale of study might be required to fully evaluate and assess this area. Leadership ethos can affect how performance management happens and its perceptions with a view that Heads of Department or Faculty Heads have inherited additional responsibilities from the Senior Leadership Team but without the time or authority associated with these tasks to be effective. Faculty heads are also increasing in frustrations, having to operate as a buffer between colleagues' aspiration, development and the Implementation of a National Curriculum which can also be interpreted as Curriculum for Excellence. Further frustrations may be gathered from this, in terms of a lack of promotional opportunities for staff, with the flattening out of the management hierarchy.

Research regarding the culture and climate of the organisation indicates an increase in accountability and pressure on exam result success while the notion of distributed leadership among managers at middle and senior levels is promoted as a factor which contributes to school effectiveness and improvement (Steinbach, 1996). Siskin (1993) suggests a way

forward might lie within researching the management styles and relationships of middle managers and identification of culture and leadership styles within departments instead of as a school. Trafford (2006) highlights that those promoting an ethos and culture of respect in schools can help to dilute the focus of the data gathering culture which is a driving force behind the accountability, pressures and frustrations experienced by middle leaders. He highlights the need to put children and their education first.



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