THE SYSTEM OF MIDDLE LEADERSHIP IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN ENGLAND AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR THE LITHUANIAN EDUCATION SYSTEM

Anthony Thorpe
University of Roehampton

Julija Melnikova
Klaipėda University, Lithuania

Abstract
This paper explores the system of middle leadership in English schools and its implications for the Lithuanian education system. The paper draws on the findings from original research investigating three areas relating to educational middle leadership positions in the education system of England, including: the formal organizational role of middle leaders; their school responsibilities; and the training and professional development of middle leaders. The paper is sought to use the case of middle leadership in English secondary schools to raise questions and identify implications for Lithuania where choices about the future of education policy and schools are being considered.

KEYWORDS: middle leaders, secondary schools, England, Lithuania.

Introduction

The importance of middle leaders in bringing about change and improvement in schools is well recognized with the ever-present demand for raising standards and achievement in the United Kingdom (UK) as with many other countries. Therefore, the English secondary school system’s well-developed layer of middle leaders, which has been an important mechanism for bringing about school improvement, will be of interest to Lithuanian and similar countries continuing to consider their education policy on school models including leadership and governance.

The definition of what constitutes an educational middle leader in the UK system of education is largely related to the hierarchical organizational structure of schools. Busher, Harris (1999, p.10) explain that “in hierarchical terms the head of a department is a middle leader. He or she is not part of the senior management team, responsible for the overall strategic development of a school, but someone responsible for the operational work of others, namely classroom teachers”. Within secondary school organizational structures, teachers and ancillary staff are typically organized within subject, pastoral or specialized program groupings. These departments or teams require a coordinator to organize and supervise the work being carried out. Middle leaders fulfill this function and in doing so will be accountable to a school’s senior leaders for the work of the staff in their specific area of responsibility (Busher, Hammersley-Fletcher, Turner, 2007). Middle leaders can be thought of as providing the bridge between the teaching staff and the executive staff within their school (White, 2000). The bridging or linking function is one of the central attributes in defining a middle leader.

An awareness of the importance of middle leaders within a school’s organizational structure is on the rise (White, 2000) and the influence of middle leadership positions, especially in relation to whole-school development, needs to be considered. Middle leaders can play a vital role in whole-school planning and decision-making (Brown, Boyle, 1999). It is also thought that because middle leaders have the power to dramatically influence the performance within their department or team, they can in turn have a significant impact on whole-school performance (Brown, Rutherford, 1998; Busher, Harris, 1999). Busher, Harris (1999, p. 315) captured the significance of the role of heads of department in stating, “Within this middle management role, more than any other, is the real potential of organizational change and improvement”. The challenge for schools then, is to fully utilize middle leadership positions.

Although middle leadership is commonly viewed by researchers as being crucial to school operation and improvement, there is evidence to indicate that schools, in general, do not fully utilize the leadership potential of their middle leaders (Weller, 2001). The recent attention paid to educational middle leadership positions worldwide, has stemmed from a perceived failure to develop or expand the position within schools (Brown, Boyle, 1999).

The paper draws on the findings from original research investigating three areas relating to educational middle leadership positions including: the formal organizational role of middle leaders; their school
responsibilities and the training and professional development of middle leaders (Thorpe, Bennett-Powell, 2014). The aim of the paper is to raise questions and identify implications for Lithuania and other countries in similar situations where choices about the future of education policy and schools are continuing to be considered (Jackson et al, 2011). We use the particular example of the needs of middle leaders in English secondary schools to illuminate macro issues of change in education.

The article begins by providing some background on secondary schools in England and the systems of middle leaders within them drawing on quantitative and qualitative data before a brief consideration is given to secondary schools in Lithuanian. The importance of establishing the context in order to understand the nature of reforms and how they operate is made. Then the original study is introduced and the key findings from it are outlined before a discussion of the wider issues which concludes with calls for further research.

Background of secondary schools and middle leaders in England

England has a population of around 57 million people is one of the four countries which makes up the United Kingdom (UK) along with Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Each country oversees education separately so there is increasingly little sense in speaking about UK school system. In England there has been a general move from a national system which is locally administered to more direct control from central government meaning that the role of local government is increasingly diminished. A great emphasis has been placed on the inspection of schools by a government agency known as Ofsted, national assessments of children and the use of school league tables based on those results with much use of consumer language and market concepts by the mainstream political parties (Gunter, 2011). A version of ‘leadership’ in schools has emerged which involves the following of central government policy rather than the reflective and ethical envisioning of the early supporters of the term (Glatter, 2006).

Around 90% of secondary schools in England are state funded. There are approximately 3,268 state secondary schools with approximately 3.2 million students (Department for Education [DfE], 2012a) so most schools have 1,000 or more students and those with fewer than 800 are often seen as ‘under threat’ of closure or merger with another school. Secondary schools take students aged between 11 and 18 years old but in some parts of the country there are middle (for 9-13 year olds) and upper schools (for 14-18 year olds) as there is considerable variety in school structures in the English system. The school day for children begins after 8.30 am and finishes around 3.30 pm but again this can vary from school to school as they have control over the structure of their day, and there are voluntary pre- and after school activities.

State secondary schools have considerable autonomy in the selection, appointment, monitoring and also the dismissal of members of staff who are all employees of the school rather than the national or the local government. The average teaching staff of a school would number some 66 teachers per school (217, 200) but some will be larger and others smaller dependent on the student cohort. An increasing number of non-teaching staff are employed (some 54,100 teaching assistants and 99,000 other support staff). So the average school staff would be around 112 employees though there may be other people working in the school as sub-contractors such as cleaning and catering staff (DfE, 2013b). Primary schools will have a smaller staff cohort which reflects the smaller number of students they tend to have.

The management structures of secondary schools are both complicated and complex and can differ from school to school. However, all schools have a governing body made of lay people and usually the head teacher. The governing body have overall responsibility for the school and they appoint the head teacher. In addition to head teachers (sometimes calling themselves Principals and/or Chief Executives) there are an increasing numbers of senior management posts with additional salary for these roles such as deputy head teachers and assistant head teachers. There would also be a number of middle management posts, which also carry additional pay to a classroom teachers, including the role as a head of department (this could be a single subject such as Mathematics or a group of subject such as science or the humanities) and cross-school co-ordinators with responsibility for special education needs or pastoral care for a year group of student. This well developed system of middle management is a particular feature of the English secondary school system.

A middle leader role typically involves leading a team, developing the vision and setting a direction for the team as well as being accountable for the team. This accountability involves monitoring and holding the team to account through appraisals and teaching observations. There is a great emphasis on raising student attainment and the standard of teaching for all teachers in their teams and not just themselves. This task requires them to undertake the data analysis of student progress as well as leading
and initiating change within their teams but also collaborating across the school and with the wider community (Wise, Bennett, 2003; Goodall et al., 2005; Pedder et al., 2008).

A national college was established by the government in 2000 to, amongst other things, improve leadership in schools and oversee qualifications for school leaders outside of the higher education institutions. Much is written about the development of senior leaders especially in relation to the National Professional Qualification for Headteachers (NPQH) (Bush, 2008; Cowie, Crawford, 2009; Crawford, Earley, 2011) and the trajectories of government policy have been mostly concerned with headteachers (Simkins, 2012). In comparison, middle leadership development in schools has received less attention (Fitzgerald et al., 2006; Bennett et al., 2007) particularly with regard to the exercise of middle leadership itself as opposed to seeing such posts as a means of advancement to senior leadership positions.

There have been evaluations of existing middle leadership development programmes such as the National College’s ‘Leading from the Middle’ (Simkins et al., 2009), now discontinued and replaced by the National Professional Qualification for Middle Leadership (DfE, 2013). The programmes have led participants to make changes in their leadership practices which affect teaching and learning processes and improve student outcomes, though the particular in-school context can either promote or else limit the continuing development of the middle leader.

The importance of middle leaders in bringing about change and improvement in schools is well recognised and the demands upon them to ‘raise standards’ is ever present. Two significant tensions affecting subject leaders are first, ‘between expectations that [the] role had a whole school focus and their loyalty to their department, and second, between a growing school culture of line management within a hierarchical framework and a professional rhetoric of collegiality’ (Bennett et al., 2007). The monitoring of colleagues’ work and passing on assessments to more senior colleagues are an example of a situation in which these tensions can emerge (Glover et al., 1998) as classroom observation by middle leaders has been seen by many departmental members as demonstrating a failure of trust and an implementation of a culture of surveillance (Wise, 2001).

**Methods and methodologies**

The objectives of the original study (Thorpe, 2013; Thorpe, Bennett-Powell, 2014) were to uncover the perspectives of current middle leaders about the needs they perceived to have been met, what they saw as their immediate development needs and what would help them to meet these needs. The participants were middle leaders from state secondary schools in the south-east of England who had recently completed a major middle leader development programme. The ‘needs’ are those that the participants believe they have as expectancy theories of motivation have long placed an emphasis upon the importance of identifying self-perceived needs in the workplace and planning of development programmes (Vroom, 1964; Gentry et al., 2014). However, the methodology of this current paper adds to the literature through an analysis of those findings to generate new questions and identify implications for Lithuania and other countries in similar situations where choices about the future of education policy and schools are continuing to be considered.

An online questionnaire and semi-structured interviews with middle leaders were used to collect the data. The construction of both research instruments drew upon widely accepted categories and roles of secondary school middle leaders in the UK (Wise, Bennett, 2003; Goodall et al., 2005; Pedder et al., 2008). The questionnaire focused on areas of confidence and immediate development needs, whilst the use of semi-structured interviews also encompassed questions about ways to meet these perceived needs. Content analysis and simple standard statistical measures were used to draw out themes in line with an interpretivist, qualitative approach identifying diversity and variation rather than statistical significant correlations between responses which was neither possible nor appropriate with the small numbers (Jansen, 2010).

The invitation to complete the questionnaire was distributed via email to middle leaders in state secondary schools. The majority of the respondents were between the ages of 30 and 40 years old having been in a middle leader role for no more than 5 years. The group was split approximately 60/40 female to male. A second phase of the project involved interviews with six middle leaders (four female and two male). The majority of interviewees had a plurality of focus to their role and were working across subject department structures within the school making them particularly interesting due to the complexity of their role.
Results of the research

As reflected in the literature on middle leadership, one of the definitive features of middle leadership is the dual nature of the position. Middle leaders typically have a significant teaching allocation along with their leadership role and as such are expected to liaise between their school’s teachers and leaders. This double function places middle leaders in a critical position within a school’s organizational structure. A lack of clear delineation of the responsibilities and duties required of senior leaders and those required of middle leaders was also noted. It was felt that the increased work demands being placed on senior leaders and teaching staff, had resulted in a sandwiching of the middle leadership position. Their role as both a teacher and a leader creates the potential for middle leaders to experience a sense of isolation. In particular, the position was seen to becoming more complex with increased responsibility, accountability, workload and performance expectations.

The findings of the original research (Thorpe, Bennett-Powell, 2014) were that the middle leader participants were confident in their role particularly in being accountable for their role and team, raising learning and teaching standards, and working with others outside of their team. They were less confident in monitoring and holding their teams to account and linking with the community. Some middle leaders saw the team as a ‘mutual support’ so a tension arose between their accountability responsibilities to senior leaders and to their team.

Some middle leaders interviewed also expressed a sense of frustration at having limited authority within their middle leadership position. They observed that middle leaders lacked of opportunities to be involved in whole-school planning or decision-making.

Despite a view that they at times lacked involvement in school development processes, middle leaders saw their role as being a linchpin within their school community. Specifically, middle leaders can fulfill several organizational functions by contributing to the operation, communication, decision-making and planning of their schools. At an operational level, middle leaders work to achieve the objectives or goals of their school, through their day-to-day duties and interactions and were seen as being vital for the daily operation of the school. Middle leaders were also seen to play an important communication and support function within their school, providing a link between teaching staff and senior leaders. Middle leaders have direct, daily contact with teaching staff and students and can therefore act to understand and ‘voice’ concerns of school members to the senior leaders. Middle leaders can also function in a decision-making and planning capacity, with varying degrees of involvement as has been discussed. At a whole-school level, middle leaders may contribute to school decision-making or act as a catalyst in the planning process.

In terms of their immediate development needs, questionnaire respondents expressed high levels of confidence in raising learning and teaching standards but identified this as a high priority in terms of need and urgency for further development along with monitoring and holding team to account and data analysis. Often the interviewees were unclear about their immediate needs but, as with the questionnaire respondents, a similar, though slightly less marked, pattern emerged with the interviewees in a wish for more development in the very areas which they felt the greatest confidence. However, under further probing, the interviewees began to identify concerns around developing their team leadership skills, developing curriculum knowledge for subjects that they now had leadership responsibilities for but were not subject specialists in, and also time management and task prioritization skills. The dominance of the raising standards and the reductive nature of the target culture that has developed in the English system may well be leading middle leaders to identify the need for more development in the areas they feel most confident whilst leaving their deeper concerns around leading people and their own self-efficacy unmet so working against the likelihood of improving the team culture to improve educational outcomes (Mulford, Silns, 2011).

The interviewees were asked about the ways their development needs might be met. Whilst there was some desire amongst newer middle leaders for ‘a course that shows me what a good co-ordinator is within the subject’, the considerable emphasis was placed on the importance of one to one relationships: ongoing mentoring or coaching (there was often confusion between these terms) and generally support mechanisms encouraging reflection. Some middle leaders saw it to be helpful if the mentor or coach was someone from outside of the school or else that they, the interviewees, would be developed by acting as the coach and mentor for middle leader colleagues in the school or other schools without being the line manager. However, some interviewees saw being consulted and encouraged to make an input with time and opportunities for self-reflection as the way to develop them as middle leaders.
Discussion and implications for Lithuanian schools

Situated in the Baltic region the population of Lithuania is 3,057,682 (as at Nov 2010). There are around 1,400 general education schools, 500,000 students and 45,000 teachers. The country is experiencing a demographic crisis because of emigration and reduction of birth rates. In the recent more then 20 years after gaining the independence from Soviet Union the Lithuanian system of education went through major reforms in curriculum, testing of students’ achievement and decentralization of governance. Education is presented by the government as one of the major priorities for the further development of the country. In the light of the challenges faced by society today, as well as taking into account that the knowledge society, the security of the people and a competitive economy are defined as priorities in the Long-Term Education Development Strategies of the State (2003-2013; 2013-2020), the mission of education is set: to develop an efficient and consistent education system which is based on the responsible management, targeted funding and rational use of resources; to develop an accessible system of continuing education that guarantees life-long learning and social justice in education; to ensure a quality of education which is in line with the needs of an individual living in an open civil society under market economy conditions, and the universal needs of society of the modern world. It is apparent that the quality of management is critical to bringing about the changes required to implement the reform agenda.

In this context, in 2006 Lithuania together with British Council and University of Manchester conducted scoping exercise into education leadership development. Lithuania looked at the role of leadership development in delivering the Lithuanian reform agenda within the education regulating documents. In summary, the challenges were around the leadership and management of change and how to work with management, school staff and the community to achieve the changes needed. Recognizing the significance of school management and leadership, there have been and are implemented different projects in Lithuania (School Improvement Programme 2002–2005, Improvement of School Structure 2006–2009, Time for Leaders 2007–2013). The project “Time for Leaders” stresses the importance of sound school leadership as a factor of school improvement. It should be noted, that these projects are based on global trends in education management and leadership and apply foreign models in Lithuanian education thus ensuring successful dialogue between Lithuania and Western countries. The impact of global trends on Lithuanian education and modelling of its segments according to foreign examples is encouraged by various international organizations and foundations: Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), European Training Foundation (ETF), European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP), World Bank etc.

Presently the Government of the Republic of Lithuania aims at strengthening the quality of schools’ management: the model for quality management system at school has been established, a new system for appointment of heads and evaluation that assesses necessary abilities more precisely is being prepared, heads of education institutions are motivated to improve their skills in the fields of management and strategic planning, advanced methodologies of informal, informal alternative education. Under the paradigm of distributed leadership the new school structure management models are being implemented. To ensure more efficient work of teachers and principals at schools, additional administrative positions are being established (Leadership in education: Lithuania report 2008).

As stated in the report on the national leadership and school improvement, there is no formal leadership structure below directors and their deputies although there are a number of leadership roles but in a variety of forms. Often these are heads of methodological circles (pedagogical leaders) but there is no formal career path or financial incentive to encourage teachers to take on a middle leader role. This leaves a gap at middle leader level making sustainable whole school change very difficult. Also, since there are no formal intermediary leadership and management roles between the teacher and the head teacher, there are no opportunities to progressively develop leadership and management skills. There are no genuine consultants in Lithuania capable of developing the kind of leadership and management system and development programme that will enable school leaders to deliver the required changes. Therefore, the country needs to tap into international expertise.

While there has been a considerable amount of research into the area of educational leadership and management (Mečkauskienė, 2011; Žvirdauskas, 2008), much of the research has focused on leadership issues relating to senior leaders, such as school heads and deputy heads (Melnikova, 2011). Comparatively none of research has addressed the needs and issues relating to middle leadership positions within secondary schools.
Discussions around improving the educational outcomes of children and young people in schools often forget the complexity of schools in different countries and that solutions cannot be neatly borrowed from other contexts such as England and directly translated to the Lithuanian or similar contexts without longitude research (Lingard, 2010). The agendas of modernisation and reform also need an understanding of structure and culture in order to test how successful ideas and initiatives might be in a different structure and culture, that is to say, ideas which seem to work well in England may be due to the context they operate in. A characteristic of English secondary schools is a highly developed layer of middle leaders and many of the strategies implemented to raise student achievement can only work because of those middle leaders, so without a developed middle leadership system and resources to support them, the initiatives will not necessarily work. The size of English schools means that they need middle leaders to undertake the administration of academic and support staff members. The creation of this layer of middle leaders takes many years and requires considerable resourcing.

The English secondary school system with its developed layer of middle leaders promoting change seems to be successful in raising standards of teaching and learning but there are perverse and ambiguous aspects such as those identified in this paper. Firstly, an overemphasis upon a discourse of improving teaching and learning may lead to important leadership development remaining unidentified. Secondly, training courses are not the only form of development and mentoring should be seen as a long term development strategy. Thirdly, middle leaders need not to be just instructed to do this and that by senior managers, but involved and consulted upon decisions. Countries such as Lithuanian need to take the best of ideas from elsewhere but apply rigorous scepticism to the claims made and consider developing its own structure and ways of working for change and modernisation.

In conclusion, this paper sought to use the case of middle leadership in English secondary schools to raise questions and identify implications for Lithuania and other countries in similar situations where choices about the future of education policy and schools and are being considered. We have shown how the specific issues of middle leadership development in the English context can be used to gain insight into the wider issue of school leadership and education policy. In particular, we note the importance of understanding reform strategies in their specific context in order to evaluate how they might work in another context.

This paper has contributed new understandings to the literature and we call for further research into middle leaders and their development in English, Lithuanian and other contexts. It would also be good to consider the issues of educational policy in Lithuanians around the preparation of senior school leaders and the type of schooling system that the country wants and needs by exploring what can be learnt from other contexts.

References
tiesiog perkeliami iš vieno konteksto suteiktų pavaduotojų direktoriaus lygmens vadovavimo struktūros, todėl leidžia geriau suprasti šio reiškinio esmę.

Summary

VIDURINIOSIOS GRANDIES LYDERYSTĖS SISTEMA ANGLIJOS BENDROJO LAVINIMO MOKYKLOSE IR KAI KURIOS ĮSVDADOS LIETUVOS ŠVIETIMO SISTEMAI

Anthony Thorpe, Julija Melnikova

Summary

Staipsnyje diskutuojama apie viduriniosios grandies vadovų vaidmenį mokylkos organizacinių struktūroje. Užsienio mokslinės literatūros analizė leidžia teigti, kad viduriniosios grandies vadovų veikla sąlygoja mokylkos kaip organizacijos kokybinę kaitą. Viduriniosios grandies vadovai prisitaikė prie svarbiausių organizacijos procesų (strateginio planavimo, grupinio darbo organizavimo, veikos priežiūros ir kontrolės) tokia būdu užtikrinti visos mokylkos kaip organizacijos veiklos efektyvumą.

Angljos švietimo sistemos, turinčios ilgas viduriniosios grandies lyderystės mokylkos tradicijas, analizė leidžia geriau suprasti šio reiškinio esmę, svarbą įgyvendinant švietimo reformas ir siekiant mokylkos kaip organizacijos veiklos efektyvumą. Originalaus tyrimo rezultatai (Thorpe, 2013; Thorpe, Bennett-Powell, 2014) leidžia atsispindinti viduriniosios grandies vadovų veiklą mokylkos organizacinių struktūroje, apibūdinti jų atsakomybes ir veiklos sritis, aptarti profesinį rengimą ir tobulinimą. Empirinio tyrimo įžvalgos galutę būtų naudingos projektuojant švietimo reformas ir tobulinant mokylkas Lietuvoje.

Staipsnyje taip pat aptariama Lietuvos švietimo specifika viduriniosios grandies lyderystės aspektu. Lietuvos mokylkų hierarchinė piramidė tradicijai yra gana „plokščia“ - nėra formalios žemesnio ne direktorių bei jų pavadautojų lygmens vadovavimo struktūros, nors egzistuoja kelios įvairių formų su vadovavimo susijusių užduotys. Todėl viduriniojo lygmens vadovų trūksta ir įgyvendinti nuolatinus pokyčius visos mokylkos mastų yra labai sudėtinga. Taip pat nėra oficialiai numatytojų lyderių bei vadovų vaidmenų tarp mokytųjų ir mokylkos direkторiaus lygmens, todėl nėra galimybės nuosekliai tobulinti lyderių ir vadovavimo igūdžius. Lietuvoje nėra tikrų konsultantų, galių įterpti lyderių uždavinius bei valdymo sistemą ir tobulinimo programą, kuri mokytųjų lyderiams suteiktų galimybę įgyvendinti reikiamus pokyčius. Todėl Lietuvai reikia remtis tyrinėtine patirtimi.