Dissertation research proposal:

An exploration of the extent to which middle leaders are autonomous and prepared for autonomy in their professional roles.

Submitted as assessment for the module *Investigating Research* in the MA Curriculum, Pedagogy and Assessment.

Statement of research & interest:

An exploration of the extent to which middle leaders are autonomous and prepared for autonomy in their professional roles. This research study will investigate how leaders within a secondary school are responding to the proposed curriculum changes of 2014 and 2015 to illustrate the factors that can help and hinder teacher autonomy in the leadership of learning.

Since the introduction of the National Curriculum in England and Wales, the literature on curriculum development has focused on the disempowerment of the teacher in shaping the school curriculum. Southworth (2000) and Poppleton (2000) through reviewing the reforms of the Thatcher, Major, Blair governments concluded that both major political parties have decreased the scope of teacher autonomy and empowerment. Kelly (2009) argues strongly that for a *democratic* curriculum to be achieved professionals should have the opportunity to input into the curriculum development. With the prospect of curriculum changes across all key stages in 2014 and 2015 combined with the opportunity of greater autonomy that an Academy Status brings, this raises interesting questions about the current perceptions of senior leaders responsible for the development of the school curriculum and subject leaders. To what extent do these school leaders feel they have autonomy to shape the curriculum for their subjects within their school? To what extent do school leaders feel prepared to plan and lead the extensive curriculum changes? How much support in terms of time, training, resources, is available for developing leaders to respond and interact with curriculum changes?

Literature on middle leadership articulates a lack of research into the role and impact of middle leaders in schools and on leading learning (Busher, Hammersley Fletcher & Turner 2007; Fitzgerald & Gunter, 2006; Moore 2007; Muijs & Harris 2007). Studies have focused on how schools can prepare teachers for middle leadership and there appears little research into how middle leaders conceptualise their roles. It is therefore this area that I wish to explore in my research.

Review of Literature:

Moore's report for the NCSL (2007) set out to explore a neglected area of research - the role of Middle Leaders in leading change. The study looked at how middle leaders responded to a particular change initiative, AfL within the context of many other changes taking place. Moore identified several factors that influenced the middle leaders effectiveness in leading change, many of which required the support of senior leadership. For example, whole school training that raised the profile and understanding of the initiative, school structures that enabled the monitoring of implementation, such as walk in observations and work scrutiny, as well as the availability of CPD, were all viewed as helping create a culture conducive to change within the school. Moore also recognised that success in leading change was also more often determined by the composition of the team as opposed to the leadership style of the Middle Leader, showing that leadership styles of middle leaders were not static and in fact shifted according to the responses of their team. Moore concluded by emphasising the difficult dual role middle leaders hold within schools and how greater support and understanding is required to assist them in the complexities of the role.

These findings were extrapolated from interviews of seven faculty leaders at the end of the academic year across a three a year period. Lesson observations, student questionnaires and interviews, OfSTED's judgements and LHTL questionnaires were used to triangulate the data. This multi-faceted approach, combining elements of quantitative and qualitative methods undoubtedly increases the reliability of the data. However, Moore does not detail the context of the school in which the research took place nor is the approach to sampling explained. The limitations in drawing any generalisations from this one case study are not outlined and seemingly ignored when presenting the conclusions. Although this research set out to address the underexplored role of middle leaders in school development, essentially the focus remained one of how middle leaders implement externally driven initiatives. The bold conclusion that where the initiative will lead to positive outcomes for students learning, middle leaders

should be prepared to utilise a more adoptive form of leadership ignores the limitations of implementation through coercion and the difference between carrying the 'letter of' and engendering the 'spirit of' an initiative. As a deputy head teacher and acting as an insider researcher, the extent to which Moore was able to put her own views to one side is questionable.

In contrast, Hammerlsey-Fletcher's and Strain's (2010) review of how middle leaders' attitudes in English primary schools have shifted over the last fifteen years focuses more clearly on the issue of *agency.* They draw on data gathered in three separate research periods between 1996-2007, comparing it to literature in this area. Their conclusions present a gloomier picture of middle leadership, concluding that 'middle leadership acts as a mechanism for ensuring compliance with the government's agenda' (p872). Their findings show that middle leader autonomy is minimal and any changes in school leadership models 'may simply cloak a story of 'smoke and mirrors' in which power still resides at the top' (p882).

Each of the three research studies utilised in this paper focused specifically on the experiences and perceptions of middle leaders. As this article draws on three previous studies as well as a thorough literature review, the rationale behind the methodology and importantly the sampling is not outlined. The lack of contrast with the perceptions of senior leaders of the role of middle leaders during the same period is perhaps a missed opportunity. In some respects this research is specific to primary schools that have seen a greater change with the emergence role of middle leaders. It might be expected that in secondary schools where the role of subject leader is long established and middle leaders are operating in their chosen field of expertise that the concerns and challenges expressed will differ. However, the tension between extent to which middle leaders are seen and feel as implementers of policies and the degree they can exercise genuine agency is likely to be similar.

 Ghamrawi's (2010) two year qualitative study of three private K-12 schools in Beirut, Lebanon highlights the role subject leaders play in developing teacher

leadership within their own departments. This study takes the principal of distributed leadership further, emphasising the critical role middle leaders play in enabling *teacher* autonomy. Fifty-one semi-structured interviews were conducted in total, involving three principles, seven subject-leaders and seven classroom teachers in each of the schools. The participating schools were similar in terms of size, facilities, attainment, reputation, and had similar involvement with professional development. However, the rationale for why schools with these variables were selected is not explained.

The research sets out the extensive range of roles subject leaders have, listing fourteen. Interestingly all senior leaders saw it as the subject leaders role to promote leadership in teachers and only two principles considered this as a joint task. Both subject leaders and classroom teachers considered SLs as the primary leaders of change within their schools. The findings stress the key role subject leaders can have in enhancing teachers' commitment to achieving educational excellence through the creation of a departmental culture, leading by example, ensuring a sense of collegiality and perhaps more radically through cyclical leadership. However, these roles did not fit comfortably with the requirement for subject leaders to monitor and evaluate teachers, supporting the tensions that identified in research of Hammerlsey-Fletcher and Strain (2010). Ghamrawi concludes that only when non-threatening systems of monitoring and evaluation are established within their departments can their efforts to build leadership capacity be sustained. A dichotomy between the beliefs of the senior leaders, that it is the middle leaders role to develop teacher leadership and their willingness to empower middle leaders was revealed in one school. Although this study was based on schools in Beirut, similar tensions are likely in the English system. However overall, the role of subject leader appeared to be valued by all those interviewed, a contrast to the assertion of Moore that in England middle leaders are 'under-valued' (p20). This potential difference between how leaders perceive the role and the reality of the experiences of middle leaders is an area I hope to further explore in my research.

Methodology:

This dissertation will adopt an exploratory approach to identify the degree to which teachers consider themselves to be autonomous or prepared for autonomy in their roles as middle leaders. This approach will enable a detailed examination of the perceptions and experiences; of both senior and subject leaders of the role of middle leaders; in leading learning and shaping the curriculum. It will also enable the identification of factors that are perceived as helping or acting as barriers to teacher autonomy in this field.

The empirical setting for this research has been selected on the basis of opportunity. As Dowling and Brown argue 'this is unimportant in terms of the quality of the research' (2010, p18) as long as the empirical setting is heard. Research will take place within the large comprehensive faith school in which the researcher currently works. Research will be localised to one school to make it manageable by narrowing the setting and keeping the sampling to a level suitable to MA level research. The school will provide interest as it has one non-state funded subject department and is currently involved in the process to become an Academy – both factors mean the issue of autonomy has particular resonance. However, the recognition of the risks in studying ones own organisation is required, Glesne and Peshkin (1992) question research that examines 'your own backyard'. Creswell (2007) states that such a study raises issues of power and risk to the researcher and recommends that multiple strategies of validation be employed to mitigate this. This study will clarify the researcher bias, make use of multiple sources of data to corroborate the evidence and check the participants' views of the findings and interpretations to give credibility to the account formed.

Sampling:

The research of Muijs and Harris (2007) and Wallace and Priestly (2011) in the area of middle leadership draw on selected case studies to enable cross case analysis and the identification of themes and exceptions in relation to the foci of their research. However, Dowling and Brown (2010 p27) dismiss the term 'case studies' as an effective means of describing sampling as a 'gloss of deliberation'

for what is essentially opportunistic sampling. Instead, the Grounded Theory approach will be followed, adopting *theoretical sampling*.

The starting point will be a sample of one to get an idea of what is going on. The initial analysis of this interview will form the basis on which the decision of who to interview next will be made. However, it is legitimate to hypothesise that SL experiences may depend on a number of variables, some of which being their experience in the role (new to the role, established or long serving) and their subject. These variables along with those emerging during the research process will also inform the selection process. The sampling will aim to include SLs from both core and foundation subject as well as capturing a range of experience, with the rationale that both variables may influence their experiences of curriculum development, internal and external pressures as well as their perception of their role. Members of Senior Leadership Team will be selected according to their role and involvement in the oversight of the school curriculum and middle leaders. Although the systematic approach of Strauss and Corbin (1990,1998) usually involves 20-30 interviews to reach saturation level, this level of data collection and analysis is not possible within the boundaries of the chosen empirical setting, one school and a specific focus on SLs, both of which will restrict the scale of the sample. However, the aim of reaching saturation point will be maintained. As a SL within the context of the school, I will include myself in the sample, keeping a reflective journal of my activities as a middle leader during the academic year 2013-14.

Data Collection:
As with a Grounded Theory approach, interviews will play a central role in this research study. Qualitative data will be collected in the form of semi-structured, face-to-face interviews that will be more conducive to eliciting perceptions and experiences. To increase reliability, verbal permission will be sought to audio-record all interviews. Interviews will last between 30-45 minutes and will be conducted with between 6-10 subjects. Open questions will be used as a starting point. It will be important to keep the subjects focused on specific experiences and actions rather than allowing generalised comments about their role, as

generalisation is the role of the analyst. Asking SLs to recall a recent event or action that involved them, as middle leaders, will ensure that they focus on substantive events. Subjects will be asked how they came to acquire the skills/knowledge they deploy as middle leaders and whether these are still under development. Interviews will then be guided through a use of a range of prepared probes and prompts, as recommended by Dowling and Brown (2010). This will also enable further clarification of issues raised and assist an inexperienced researcher. Pilot interviews (no more than two) will be carried out to enable the identification of potential problems with the open questions and prompts for the data collection, again with the view to assist an inexperienced researcher.

Data Analysis:

The Grounded-Theory approach of constant comparison between the data and analysis will be adopted. Memos will be written immediately after each interview to record the researchers initial reflections of issues that arose. The audio-recorded interviews will then be transcribed. The transcripts will then be read several times following the suggestion of Agar (1980) to 'Immerse yourself in the details, trying to get a sense of the interview as a whole before breaking it into parts' (p103) Memos will be written in the margins of the transcripts to explore the data. During and after the data collection process the researcher will look for patterns, identifying similarities and differences between the experiences and perceptions of the 'subjects'. This cross-case synthesis will enable themes and exceptions to emerge. The three phrases of coding – open, axial and selective, as advanced by Strauss and Corbin (1990,1998) will be applied. During the process of *open coding,* what the researcher perceives to be the key elements of the data will be drawn out and broad categories generated. Qualitative data analysis software will enable the marking of data, the appending of codes and the retrieval of instances of these codes. The data will then be reviewed during the process of axial coding where by new categories will be conceptualised, allowing a better understanding of the data. These categories should not be dependent on the specific data but allow the description of the data in the terms of these categories. The final step will be selective coding,

when hypotheses will be generated to explain the relationship between middle leaders and autonomy. The purpose of the hypotheses will not be to generalise to other settings but to raise potential questions for further research.

Ethical Considerations:

The British Educational Research Association (BERA) guidelines for educational research (2011) will be followed to ensure that ethical issues are considered at every stage of the research process. Firstly, it will be necessary to secure consent from the 'gatekeeper', the Head Teacher, for the exploratory research project to be carried out within the school. All 'subjects', will be fully informed about the purpose, methods and possible uses of the research. Participants will be informed of their right to withdraw at any stage of the research process. This 'informed consent' will be secured with a written agreement (signed consent form) and audio confirmation if they agree for the interview to be recorded. All participants will be volunteers and to ensure that middle leaders do not feel under any duress to participate, the researcher will approach potential subjects directly rather than liaising with the their line managers in the senior leadership team (SLT). As the empirical setting is limited to one school that is the workplace of the researcher and the focus of the research is middle leadership, complete anonymity cannot be guaranteed. However, participant names and references to their specific role and department will be removed to recognise participants' right to privacy. Middle leader participants will be kept confidential from the SLT and 'gatekeeper' to ensure that they do not feel professionally 'at risk' discussing issues of autonomy. In keeping with the 'good practice' outlined by BERA, the conclusions of the research will be shared with all participants.

Challenges:

As 'insider' research, there are many challenges associated with the empirical setting. As a middle leader and specifically a subject leader, the foci of my research, there are further implications of 'risk' and bias. My position within the school and vested interest in the role and autonomy of middle leaders may affect the responses SLT provide within interviews. As a colleague and peer,

participating subject leaders may also be concerned by the purpose of the study and any judgements that may be drawn. To mitigate this, complete clarity in the purpose and process of the study will be required. It will be emphasised that this is an *exploratory* study that aims to generate *potential* factors that can facilitate and restrict autonomy at all levels, school based and national. Keeping the questions open will enable the participants to discuss the issues they are comfortable with. I will need to avoid expressing my own views and drawing comparisons to my own experiences. As data analysis will commence after the first interview and a three stage coding process will be adopted, this should prevent themes from my own reflective journal driving and shaping the research.

Contribution to the researcher's professional development:

This research study will enable me to explore issues of leadership at a whole school level both empirically and theoretically. The context of the research; impending curriculum changes, will enable the me to develop my understanding of curriculum development at a wider school level. Such an investigation will provide opportunity for reflection on current personal practice, renewing and/or consolidating existing practise. Interviewing both senior leaders and a range of middle leaders will broaden my understanding of how best to facilitate teacher leadership and autonomy which will shape my confidence in pursuing a position in senior leadership as well as contributing to my understanding of what makes effective school leadership.

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