

The key role of middle leaders - an Ofsted perspective

by Mike Cladingbowl, Ofsted

No-one forgets a great teacher. It's a truism that happens to be true. And understanding this is crucial to understanding all education systems because, fundamentally, it's the quality of teachers that matters most in education.

People, not structures, are the most significant drivers of improvement and change in our schools.

Writing in his 2011/12 Annual Report, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector, Sir Michael Wilshaw, argued that: "If England is to compete with the very best, then strong leadership is absolutely critical... When I look at any inspection report, my eyes are always drawn to comments on leadership because leaders are the key people in changing and improving the culture and performance of the organisation. Leaders provide the role models for the rest of the institution."

This is manifestly true, not just of headship, but of all levels of leadership in a school. And when we talk about leadership – what we mostly mean is the leadership of teaching, which everyone agrees has the biggest single impact on standards.

For that reason Ofsted's current "Handbook for Inspection" emphasises the importance of leadership and

management at all levels in promoting better teaching and learning in a school. In practice, this means that Ofsted inspectors look at:

- how well leaders, managers and governors pursue excellence, modelling professional standards in all of their work
- the effectiveness of monitoring and evaluation and the extent to which it is shared with governors
- the use of performance management and effectiveness of strategies for improving teaching
- how well leaders and managers ensure that the curriculum is of a high quality
- how well leaders and managers demonstrate the capacity to bring about further improvement.

They do this to bring about improvement in teaching, and increase its relevance, in schools. But a common misconception is that Ofsted expects all lessons to be taught in a particular way. What inspectors really want is for children to be taught in a way that engages them, helps them to acquire knowledge and to have good attitudes to learning. There is no preferred 'Ofsted' way of teaching.

This freedom undoubtedly gives scope for innovation but can also present a challenge for middle leaders because there's no obvious template to apply.

There's no easy or simple recourse to a formulaic view of what a 'good' lesson is and middle leaders must ensure that everyone in a school understands this. The best leaders are already rising to this challenge.

What does Ofsted look for in an outstanding middle leader?

High quality middle leadership is about more than managing a subject or an aspect of school life. Middle leaders are enthusiasts for their subject, good managers and administrators - but to be truly effective they embrace the more challenging characteristics of leadership, which are to do with vision, strategy and a drive towards improvement.

All the most recent Ofsted subject survey reports have reiterated the message that effective leadership is key. For example, the 2012 Ofsted report "Moving English Forward" on literacy, highlighted some of the key qualities of leadership:

"...a clearly communicated and ambitious vision, securely based on accurate evaluation of the subject's strengths and areas for development".

The 2013 report "Not yet good enough: personal, social, health and economic education in schools" commented that:

"...in the 20% of schools with outstanding PSHE education, the subject was a priority of the headteacher and at the heart of the school's work. Teachers and subject leaders were well trained, and leaders and managers had an accurate view of strengths and weaknesses based on a rigorous process of lesson observations, review and development, complemented by the views of pupils, staff, parents and carers."

Similarly, the recent 2013 Ofsted report "Religious Education: realising the potential" confirmed that:

"The effectiveness of the leadership of RE was a crucial factor affecting standards and the quality of provision."

Ofsted's 2013 report "Getting it right first time: Achieving and maintaining high-quality early years" on the early years reported:

'Effective leaders have a clear vision of what they are trying to achieve. They are absolutely determined to 'get it right first time' and to give children in their settings the very best start. They have high expectations of children and adults alike; this is a hallmark of their work.'

There are a number of consistent messages here running through recent Ofsted subject reports, including the importance of:

- senior leaders having a high regard for the subject and placing it at the heart of the drive for improvement
- subject leaders modelling best practice and challenging colleagues to explore and innovate
- having a well-articulated, ambitious vision based on high expectations for all pupils and an excellent understanding of current developments and thinking in the subject
- high quality monitoring, self-evaluation and action planning clearly focused on improving standards and the quality of pupils' learning
- consistent use of evidence about pupils' performance as the basis for high quality planning and self-assessment
- provision of regular and well-focused training for all those involved in teaching the subject in order to foster and share best practice
- effective use of resources to support excellent teaching and learning

How might schools develop their middle leaders?

In describing the factors which are critical in promoting outstanding leadership, “Moving English Forwards” referred to:

“...confident delegation and a collegiate approach leading to effective professional development and innovative curriculum planning.”

Too often, the most senior leaders in schools do not have high enough expectations of middle leaders or offer them enough support. Again, recent subject reports have highlighted aspects of middle and subject leadership, which need improvement.

Too often there is a failure by some senior leaders to translate rhetoric about the importance of subject leadership into real practice. Senior leaders need to ensure that middle leaders are given the skills and confidence to promote improvement.

Monitoring by some subject leaders can be perfunctory and superficial – focused on checking coverage of the curriculum or the presentation of work rather than evaluating pupils’ performance and reviewing the quality of teaching. In these cases, senior leaders need to work with their middle leaders to promote more effective practice.

Very often the quality of subject action planning is weak. Inspectors often find cases where planned improvements are limited to lower level management tasks – organising resources, writing schemes of work – rather than focusing on the key objectives of raising standards and leading teaching and learning.

In many schools there is scope to extend the role of governors in working with middle leaders.

So does any of it matter?

There is a clear and welcome consensus about the importance of middle leadership. The goals we all share for England’s education system – that all children, but especially the most disadvantaged, have the chance to achieve their potential at good or better schools – cannot be achieved without good middle leadership.

Having high-calibre people in middle-leadership posts is particularly important. Ultimately, the senior leaders and headteachers of tomorrow are the middle leaders of today. This is pressing as demographic factors are affecting the profession, not least as many headteachers approach retirement.

By developing the good leadership that is so crucial in our schools, we accelerate the pace of progress and ensure that more children have a brighter future.

Abraham Lincoln, despite speaking in an era that predated compulsory education, recognised that schools shape our society like little else. He said ‘the philosophy of the school room in one generation will be the philosophy of government in the next.’

All of which makes the work of Teaching Leaders in supporting middle leaders absolutely vital.



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