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E822-20J Dissertation
Extended Proposal

A critical analysis of middle leaders' perceptions of professional agency in an English academy secondary school.

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Abstract

In England, high-autonomy contexts such as Academy schools form part of highly politicised school-improvement reforms. However, literature suggests teachers in academies do not necessarily experience higher levels of professional agency and middle leaders' experiences have been overlooked, despite increased whole-school responsibilities. A case study and critical approach, using interviews and documentary analysis, is suggested to explore how middle leaders in an English academy secondary school perceive and experience their professional agency within highly politicised educational reform. Thematic and critical discourse analysis aims to provide a voice for middle leaders and explore the processes that underpin school-led school-improvement reforms.

Keywords: academisation, leadership, agency

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Chapter 1 - Introduction

Global Educational Reform and the Academies Act

The global education reform movement has seen a move away from prescriptive control of curriculum and pedagogies from a top-down government policy level towards a 'school-led, school improvement' system (Greany and Waterhouse, 2016, pp1192) in which individual contexts take responsibility for their own development and improvement. For example, the Academies Act (legislation.gov.uk, 2021) allowed English schools to convert to academy status, granting them control of curriculum, funding, and staffing decisions. These reforms were considered to lead to rapidly improved outcomes by encouraging contextually relevant and innovative curriculum development and improved teacher performance through increased agency. The more recent development of multi-academy trusts and free schools have furthered the emphasis on school-led improvement processes and 72% of English secondary schools now hold academy status (National Audit Office, 2018).

However, this reform movement is also underpinned by a performativity culture that emphasises strict accountability (Knight, 2020). As top-down government control has reduced, accountability to school governors, sponsors and local and market interests has arguably increased (Heilbronn, 2016). In addition, accountability to government bodies such as Ofsted, and the school's performance in national league tables measured through high stakes testing, remain. These performative instruments of measurement mean that academy schools are unique in being considered both 'high autonomy' and 'high accountability' contexts.

Although the Academies Act grants greater autonomy at the school level, this has not necessarily impacted school leaders' and teachers' professional sense of agency and efficacy. Indeed, despite the prevalence of academy schools, surveys of teachers leaving

the profession cite lack of professional agency as a key factor in their decision (Department for Education, 2018). Literature often positions teachers as the 'most significant within-school influence on school improvement' (Priestly et al., 2015, pp1). Therefore, investigating how teacher agency can be supported or constrained in an academy context appears an important aspect to further understand how the school-led school-improvement agenda can be effectively implemented

Teacher Agency

Teacher agency has been widely researched and conceptualised. How the role of the teacher is conceived in education systems reflects the dominant political discourses and understanding of knowledge of each context and each specific period. Teacher agency is generally positioned as a positive phenomenon, referring to the ability of teachers to act independently in their professional capacity with regards to day-to-day aspects of their role such as curriculum, pedagogy and assessment choice (Priestly et al., 2015). A lack of agency has been linked to teacher de-professionalisation and lowered efficacy (Greany and Waterhouse, 2016; Heilbronn, 2016; Priestly et al., 2015). More recent research extends this understanding to explore the concept of teacher agency as something that exists as different types, such as collective forms of agency that, while constraining individual autonomy, may exist to support agency in specific contexts (Frostenson, 2015).

Accountability features as a theme explored throughout much of the literature review on the phenomenon of agency. The unique nature of academy schools as existing within a high-autonomy and high accountability context highlights the importance of investigating how accountability structures interact with professional agency. The prevalence of accountability regimes that measure outcomes through key performance indicators appear to constrain agency regardless of the surrounding political discourse and government direction on school autonomy (Bergh & Wahlstrom, 2018; Priestly et al., 2015). Some papers reviewed attempted to investigate ways teachers could draw upon alternative forms of agency, such as collective autonomy, to reduce the negative impact

of accountability regimes (Day, 2020; Frostenson, 2015). This underpins consideration that collective agency could be a valuable concept to include in developing relevant research questions.

Furthermore, literature examining the devolved governance of academy schools, highlighted the importance of local leadership within the school contexts for creating cultures that supported risk-taking and agentic behaviour from teachers within contexts, regardless of the level of autonomy the wider school saw itself under. However, overwhelmingly, literature focused on the impact of the principal or senior leadership team (Greany & Waterhouse, 2016). As a current middle leader in an academy setting, it was notable to the researcher that middle leadership research, particularly regarding implementing and achieving the goals of the Academy Act (2010), was scant. Chapman (2013) considers staffing structures of academy schools unique, with increased numbers of middle leaders with more distributed responsibilities and accountabilities. Middle leaders, such as pastoral and department heads, arguably hold a unique position at a 'meso-layer' (Zhou and Deenan, 2020), positioned between enforcing whole school policy and being accountable for their departments and classroom practice.

Developing the research questions and research proposal

The apparent gaps in the literature relating to middle leaders and the importance placed upon middle leaders in devolved governance in academy schools suggest that focusing on middle leaders may give unique and essential insights into how the autonomy of academisation plays out in reality. The difficulty in finding literature on the specific topic of middle leader agency and the Academies Act draws attention to a gap in the existing literature. Moreover, it highlights the potential benefit of focusing future research on this area.

An additional weakness in current agency research is the tendency to adopt a socio-cultural or constructivist framework situated in interpretivism and qualitative research

methods. While these are appropriate when considering the subjective and anti-realist nature of the phenomenon studied, it is apparent that very little research has attempted to address the broader social beliefs and normative views that create powerful discourses surrounding education. For example, Academisation stems from political reform, which is imbued with the beliefs and values of the dominant political party and wider society. These views can influence how middle leaders view their purpose and identity and interact with their ability to experience agency in their given contexts.

Therefore, the proposed study aims to approach the topic from a critical paradigm and encourage a transformative and reflective look at how powerful discourses shape the identities and agency experienced by middle leaders in secondary schools with Academy status. However, the lack of critical research in this area has also influenced the conceptual framework and instruments proposed for this study to uncover unconscious and hidden discourses surrounding educational reform, agency and professional identities of middle leaders. Therefore, it is suggested that the proposed small-scale investigation into middle leader agency adopts a case study and critical discourse approach. In addition, the study should utilise methods such as interview and documentary analysis to uncover the personal, subjective and temporally and contextually bound perceptions of middle leaders.

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Chapter 2 - Literature Review: The Topic

What is teacher agency?

There is a general lack of consensus regarding the definition and conceptualisation of teacher agency (The Open University, 2018). However, between these individual conceptualisations there is some agreement that agency involves action and, in an educational context, involves teachers perceiving themselves as having the capacity to act as ‘agentic individuals’ in their professional practice within the parameters of their contexts.

This chapter will look at how empirical research has attempted to uncover the constraints and affordances of agency regarding pedagogical, curriculum and accountability structures. It will interrogate the available literature to understand how agency research has developed into more specific and niche areas and how neoliberal reform may offer new constraints and affordances to a teacher’s perceptions of professional agency.

A systematic review of the literature was carried out using the Open University's online library search function. Initially, a generalised search using the terms ‘agency’ and ‘academy’ was conducted, with later searches narrowing down literature by more specialised topics as gaps were identified. However, very few research papers were returned that met the bounded criteria using the search term ‘agency’ alongside other contextually relevant criteria such as ‘secondary school’ and ‘academy’. Bloomberg and Vulpe (2008) suggest that if investigating areas that appear underdeveloped, it is appropriate to widen the search and review any studies that are related in some ‘meaningful way’ to the topic. Therefore, despite Priestly’s cautions against using the terms synonymously, both the terms ‘agency’ and ‘autonomy’ were used to find relevant literature, and papers used or discarded depending on whether the author used these

terms synonymously or not. This search produced a wider range of literature regarding teacher agency.

The effect of accountability on teachers' perceptions of agency

School-led reforms such as the Academies Act (2010) aimed to increase autonomy for schools, leaders and teachers by returning decision making to the local contexts of schools. However, whether a school is an academy or not, it is still subjected to top-down external accountability structures which aim to create transparency, encourage reflexiveness and promote constant change and improvement. Schools in the English system commonly experience accountability as a 'mechanism' (Bovens, 2010) which consists of performative instruments of measure such as league table positions and Ofsted ratings. Thus academies are positioned in a unique space of having high autonomy to make decisions while retaining the pressures of high-accountability contexts through vertical accountability systems.

It is argued that high accountability contexts could lead to the implementation of structures and processes that undermine teachers. There are ongoing concerns that the promotion of performative cultures has deprofessionalised teachers and stripped them of their agency (Heilbronn, 2016; Priestly et al., 2015). While national frameworks and assessment, league tables and inspections constrain autonomy at a general level through top-down regulation and comparison, local accountability structures also exist that bound autonomy at the level of teacher practice. It is argued that the consequence of control and monitoring at a national level may be 'instrumental policy making' at a contextual level (Priestly et al., 2015, pp2).

Indeed, critical researchers claim that pressures of high stakes testing, inspection and league tables inevitably create internal policies that aim to monitor and control teachers' practice (Heilbronn, 2016). This promotes an increase in 'backdoor' regulation through school inspections and student attainment data to rank and judge teacher performance.

The importance placed upon high-stakes examination outcomes creates 'bounded autonomy', reducing a teacher's ability to exercise their professional autonomy in practice (Preistly et al., 2015). Teachers face pressures to constantly raise student performance (Skerritt, 2019), becoming 'accountable rather than responsible' (Frostenson, 2015) for student outcomes. Regardless of individual differences in efficacy and experience, evidence suggests that teachers across contexts and situations experience similar accountability pressures, making teaching more structured and less spontaneous (Bergh & Wahlstrom, 2018).

Furthermore, Skerrit (2019) argues that common practices within schools that should empower teachers, such as professional development opportunities, are instead utilised by contexts to mold teachers, for example, to help them 'learn accepted modes of successful practice for an Ofsted inspection'. The tensions resulting from working under high accountability regimes can lead to teachers either conforming to norms or adopting strategies to give the impression of conformity. Priestley et al. (2015) also recognised that teachers might decide to use maladaptive forms of agency in practice.

While much of the research into the effects of accountability on teacher agency does not focus specifically on Academy schools in England, cross-cultural findings may provide insight into general underlying processes that restrain agency. Findings from a wide variety of contexts suggest that accountability appears to work as a condition that bounds a teacher's perceptions of agency, even in autonomous contexts such as Academy schools.

Agency and curriculum innovation

One critical driver of educational improvement in the school-led school-improvement regime is that of curriculum innovation and improvement. By passing curriculum control back to schools through reforms such as academisation, it is considered that greater autonomy could encourage the creation of a rich, contextually-specific and innovative

curriculum. Increased teacher agency is considered to lead to improved learner outcomes (Sinnema and Aitken, 2013). Curriculum innovation has been considered central to school-led improvements across contexts, with teachers positioned as ‘active developers of the curriculum’ (Priestly et al., 2015, pp1). However, some empirical studies suggest that academies have failed to demonstrate significant curriculum innovation, despite having autonomy over the curriculum choices they make.

As previously discussed, the constraints of a pervasive accountability regime may lead to teachers feeling unmotivated to take risks and innovate (Greany & Waterhouse 2016). Indeed, literature positioned within the critical approach argues that when teacher performance is measured by student outcomes, such as exam results, it can lead to a restricted scope of the curriculum in a system that values measurable knowledge over soft skills and capabilities (Heilbronn, 2016). This reflects dominant discourses surrounding National Curriculum reforms in England that value a knowledge-rich curriculum. Taking a critical perspective on agency and accountability highlights the ethical and moral issues with an education system that prioritises a curriculum built for examination success rather than a curriculum aimed at supporting learner capabilities and their social and personal growth.

Increased top-down monitoring of teachers and tighter controls of their work practices, even in high autonomy contexts, may lead to the narrowing of the curriculum and less creative teaching (Skerritt, 2019). This is despite a plethora of educational reforms, including the Academies Act in England, that aim to remove the constraints of a nationally prescribed curriculum and instead promote the ability of teachers to plan and create more local and contextualised curriculum maps that support the development of student capabilities. Findings from studies that have observed teacher practice agree: when teachers' performance is graded against metrics such as examination results, teachers are more likely to teach to the test or rely on pedagogies that involve 'passive transmission of knowledge' (Priestly et al., 2012, pp208).

Existing research has evidenced the tension between curriculum, pedagogy choices and accountability mechanisms. For example, in the USA, pressures created by high stakes testing in combination with a new set of curriculum standards limited teachers' risk-taking and experimentation in their practice and focused on following a prescribed curriculum and increasing test scores (Baker-Doyle and Gustavson, 2015).

There is a lack of research into the relationship between accountability, agency and curriculum development in English academy schools. However, available research from systems that have adopted similar ‘school-led school-improvement’ reforms can offer some insight. For example, Scotland’s Curriculum for Excellence reforms positions the teacher’s role as central to school-led changes as an active curriculum maker. Research, however, suggests that despite being positioned as curriculum innovators, teachers appeared adverse to risk-taking with curriculum choices. Feedback from teachers outlined that the new curriculum was ‘under specified’ and teachers lacked confidence in their capability to undertake curriculum development (Priestly et al., 2015).

More recently, Hughes and Lewis (2020) found that workload and accountability pressures in Welsh reforms that encouraged teachers to become curriculum innovators resulted in teachers who felt daunted and challenged. Thus it can be concluded that giving teachers the scope to create a curriculum does not necessarily lead to increased agency without sufficient support, particularly under accountability structures that scrutinise teacher's performance based on exam outcomes rather than curriculum innovation.

These findings suggest that teachers, regardless of experience or context, are more likely to teach instrumentally to help learners pass exams. Findings in contexts of high curriculum autonomy in other countries in the UK (Hughes and Lewis, 2020; Priestly, 2015) could be used to make inferences about similar processes in the English academy system.

Moving towards models of collective and collegial agency

Research into teacher agency that outlines how accountability and contextual influences can harm a teacher's individual agency is problematic as these accounts derive from the understanding that professional agency is an individual construct. The accounts consider that, although influenced by social, cultural and environmental factors, agency resides and is experienced by the individual teacher in interaction with their environment. As a researcher currently practising within an academy context, this does not account for how teachers work in practice, often collaborating and cooperating with others.

More recently, the focus has moved to the collaborative and collective ways that teachers can construct their professional identities and enact their professional agency. Indeed Frostenson (2015) rejects the general assumption made by many agency researchers that the loss of individual agency inevitably leads to de-professionalisation. Instead, Frostenson suggests that collective forms of agency, such as collegial professional autonomy, can compensate and offer new ways to achieve professional goals.

Recent studies support the idea of a dual perspective of agency that is experienced both collectively and individually (Bergh & Wahlstrom, 2018; Wild et al., 2018). The concept of collective agency has become more evident in the recently reviewed literature, perhaps driven by global educational reforms that have removed prescriptive national curriculums and encouraged collaboration and cooperation between teachers on a local and national level. Although individual teacher agency has been a key driver of school-led improvements, curriculum innovation relies on teachers' ability to interpret and deliver these changes (Sinnema & Aitken, 2014). As previously discussed, not all teachers can utilise an increase in individual agency due to a lack of experience, knowledge, or confidence. Therefore, regardless of how autonomous a context is, it could be argued that teachers may need to draw upon support to enable them to meet professional goals and actualise this autonomy.

Recent studies support the concept of collegial agency (Frostenson, 2015) and provide evidence that this type of agency can be exercised by teachers practising in contexts with tight control, such as more prescriptive curriculums or high accountability structures (Wild et al., 2018). This reflects the notion that professional efficacy can be created through collective and collaborative projects, even though individual professional agency may be limited by the prescriptive nature of the curriculum and limitations of group work. Collaborative school cultures have been positioned as vital in improved satisfaction at work and higher self-efficacy in teachers (Hauge, 2019). Supporting Frostenson's model of different levels of autonomy and the idea of a dual perspective of agency, Wild et al. (2018) found that while teachers experienced reduced individual agency due to prioritising collective decision making with a group, they still reported a positive professional identity and improved efficacy.

The outcomes of empirical research into collective forms of agency, such as collegial autonomy, suggest that certain conditions could be created within school communities to support teachers' perceptions of self-efficacy and professionalism, even when general or individual professional autonomy is constrained. Teachers in Wild's study were able to reject the standard view of individual professional agency as 'all or nothing', supporting 'dual' or 'levels of' agency that suggest agency is not one fixed phenomenon. This is a more ethical and transformative view of agency. It indicates that adopting collective agency is a powerful way that teachers can exercise agency when faced with contextual or general constraints to their practice. It also emphasises that the teacher should be able to draw upon their context for support in actualising agency rather than placing the responsibility solely on the individual teacher or positioning the teacher as helpless to the constraints placed upon them by the broader mechanisms of accountability or decision making. Despite the lack of research within an English academy school, the suggestion that collective or collegial agency can be fostered to help teachers work together towards an increased sense of self-efficacy within a high-accountability or highly constrained context could have implications. The support and promotion of collective agency as a whole school initiative could be one way to overcome individual, contextual and temporal constraints on teachers' perceptions of agency.

Similarly, research that has looked at agency as a factor in school-led school-improvement regimes emphasise the positive effect on teacher perceptions of agency and improved outcomes when participating in wider school-to-school collaboration (Chapman, 2013). School-to-school collaboration may be essential in England's self-improving school-led system reforms, particularly as many academies are part of wider multi-academy trusts that require between school cooperation. In situations where the influence of other bodies such as the local authority has been removed, space has been created for collective agency through collaboration between schools to support teachers' efficacy and ability to reach an agentic state (Greany and Waterhouse, 2016). The HertsCam initiative (The Open University, 2019) demonstrated how teachers can be empowered and lead change through collaboration with other teachers and institutions within an English context. Outcomes of this initiative suggested improved self-efficacy within practitioners, supporting arguments that collective agency can drive school improvement within the English system. Like Wild et al., interviews with teachers within the initiative suggested that collective agency supported, rather than subverted, individual professional identity.

Indeed, the conceptualisation of multiple types of agency available to teachers posited by researchers (Bergh & Wahlstrom, 2016; Frostenson, 2015) challenges the arguments that link educational reform with reduced autonomy and de-professionalisation of the teaching profession. The available research on collective or collegial agency answers earlier concerns posited by research into individual agency regarding teachers faced with under-specified curriculums; perhaps working collaboratively strengthens a sense of efficacy in challenging tasks. The importance of collegiality and shared values has been underlined in recent research (O'Sullivan & Goodwin, 2020) that highlighted the importance of a teacher belonging to a strong department with effective leadership that guided their success. Overall, the collective body of literature strongly points to how collegiality can support and empower individual teachers and suggests agency must be viewed through the lens of collaboration and cooperation.

However, conceptualisations of collective agency, such as Frostenson's collegial agency, can be further divided into two different mechanisms. Firstly, and reflecting the findings

of the empirical literature discussed in this section, collegial agency may refer to individual teachers coming together to collaborate and act at a local level. However, collegial agency may also refer to decisions that are driven by managerial processes by senior or middle management. These two types of collective agency create tensions; for example, the latter definition of collegial agency suggests school leadership can directly influence how agency is experienced and in what form, filling the space created by removal of government and LEA structures. Academies, it could be argued, exemplify this definition of collegial agency, promoting structures and hierarchical arrangements in which management and leadership have the authority to 'influence teachers' ways of working' (Day, 2020).

The impact of Leadership Agency

Empirical research into agency has moved from looking at how individual agency is constrained by accountability and curriculum prescriptiveness, towards the processes that can mediate these factors and support teachers' efficacy regardless of context. Arguably at a context level, school leaders mediate how teachers can exercise autonomy in their day-to-day practice.

Leadership can be seen as driving processes relating to how contexts implement government policy and embed this in wider school policy decisions that subsequently affect individual and collective teacher practice. This is of consideration in contexts afforded greater autonomy at a school level, such as academy schools. Leaders can develop and distribute a collective sense of direction and purpose. Therefore, how school leaders experience agency could be considered vital for understanding how innovation is or is not supported in academy schools (Greany and Waterhouse, 2016). Leadership is an important area to investigate when attempting to understand how contexts can create a culture that allows individual teachers to effect change.

There are individual differences between academy schools, which is reflected by how some schools have flourished under academisation while others have not. Empirical

research suggests that how well such practical aspects have been embedded depends on leadership capacity and confidence (Greany and Waterhouse, 2016). School leaders who actively encourage pedagogical experimentation by embedding appropriate support in school policy may support the development of teachers' autonomy (Emo, 2015). Findings suggest school leaders' values and beliefs are as crucial as neoliberal influences such as market factors in driving innovation. For example, one study found that teachers stressed the importance of a positive school ethos and the value of support from school leaders in influencing their practice and identity (Sammons et al., 2016). Just the perception of having one's agency supported positively affected teachers' well-being (Ebersold, 2019). This shows the importance of leadership practices on empowering and enabling teachers to reach professional self-actualisation.

However, there is only limited empirical research available on how managerial forms of collegial autonomy and academisation might interact. Day (2020) considered how collegial forms of work, organised by school principals, led to an agenda for change in an academy primary school. Individual teacher's agency here was purposely rejected and constrained. Findings suggested that prioritising collegial autonomy and managerialism over teachers' individual agency led to improved outcomes for learners. While previous empirical research into agency has assumed that individual professional agency is a desirable state for teachers, Day (2020) supports Frostenson's argument that constraining individual professional agency does not necessarily lead to de-professionalisation or loss of efficacy. This has implications for leadership implementation of robust managerial processes to support school-led improvements, even when they appear to constrain teachers' individual professional agency.

Much leadership research available inevitably focuses on the role of the headteacher or principal and the top-down decisions and processes they enact. Neeleman (2019) argues that research that focuses on the principal holds a certain validity as the principal is ultimately accountable for the operation of each institution. However, since the introduction of the Academies Act, more literature has brought to attention the differing structures of academy schools. Chapman (2013) identified that academies often work under altered accountability patterns towards a 'delegated form of leadership'. This

distributive leadership model may allow for a more collegial environment (Wilkins, 2015). Responsibility for school improvement is devolved to increasingly complex tiers of 'senior and middle leaders', given whole school responsibility for developing and enacting policy. Indeed, senior and middle leadership support was the most frequently mentioned school factor affecting teachers' practice (Sammons et al. 2016) and was closely linked to feelings of self-efficacy and motivation.

Harris et al. (2019) identified that middle leaders, such as department heads who have curriculum and whole school responsibilities, play a crucial role in developing and maintaining pupils' learning experiences, perhaps because they remain connected to classroom practice and also influence wider school development. However, Harris et al.'s (2019) review of the available research on middle leaders identified significant gaps in the knowledge base, particularly regarding the professional identity of middle leaders. This highlights how middle leadership is an under-researched and under-developed area. What research does exist draws attention to how accountability impacts middle leaders' agency, with competing pressures from expectations from senior leadership and their department (Bennett et al., 2007, cited in Harris et al., 2019, pp256). Again, this suggests that the high-accountability regime identified in academy schools is inextricably linked to perceptions of agency in professionals regardless of experience, seniority, or responsibility.

Harris et al. (2019) also highlights common concerns with most literature on both teacher agency and middle leader agency. Findings are highly contextualised and may be limited in application across contexts and political and social spheres. Furthermore, each education system is subject to its own structures, affordances and constraints that means caution must be exercised when attempting to draw a singular narrative about what teacher agency is, why it is important and how it can be developed. This also highlights why future studies within the specific context of an English academy school are important. There is a lack of relevant and contextualised literature that investigates the processes underpinning the successful implementation of a school-led school-improvement system in the unique context of an English academy school.

Although much middle leader research to date has been small-scale and qualitative, with low generalisability or transferability (Harris et al., 2019), existing literature from global contexts suggests some cross-context and cross-cultural generalisations that could be made about middle leader agency. In each context, middle leader refers to a professional with both a teaching and wider school responsibility, most often managing a department or faculty and making curriculum decisions. For example, Hirsch and Bergmo-Prvulovic (2019) investigated middle leaders' perceptions of identity in Swedish schools. They found that middle leaders tended to feel isolation and conflict due to their divided role and the inherent power struggles between supporting departmental colleagues and embedding often unpopular or constraining policy from senior management. Supporting these findings, Zhou and Deenan (2020) found similar tensions in Chinese further education contexts. Here, middle leaders played a significant role in change management at a whole school level. As a result, they experienced their identities as either 'sandwiched' between conflicting priorities or 'filtering' priorities to produce meaningful outcomes. This affected their agency to make choices based on their own professional opinion or experience.

The middle leader research that has been conducted in English schools is somewhat outdated. For example, Gleeson and Knights (2008) found that middle leaders in further education contexts in England perceived their agency as higher than senior leadership due to having space and autonomy to 'stay in touch with their subject, students and attend to personal and family identities'. At the same time, middle leaders expressed concerns about the 'invasive auditing, inspection and performance cultures' surrounding education reform and expressed reluctance when considering promotion to senior leadership positions. However, this research does not generalise to all middle leaders in secondary schools. Furthermore, since its publication, academy and curriculum reforms have increased autonomy and accountability at a contextual level.

The lack of relevant research focused on middle leadership in English Academy schools highlights the need for research that considers how middle leaders experience agency since recent educational reforms in secondary education have been enacted. Additionally, the consideration that middle leaders lack future career trajectory aspirations

(Gleeson and Knights 2008) is concerning. Chapman (2013) suggests the lack of quality leadership is a barrier to developing improvements in Academy schools.

The commonality in middle leaders' experiences and perceptions across contexts highlights implications for developing middle leaders' agency through managerial and collective processes. With an increase in academies in England, most middle leaders at secondary level now work in an academy context. The experiences of middle leaders may be essential to help highlight ways that devolved leadership structures can support these agendas of change.

Conclusion

The literature reviewed has outlined how the topic of teacher agency has evolved considerably from initial considerations that agency is an individual entity required for teachers to reach self-efficacy and high levels of professionalism. More recent empirical studies have focused on how collegiality and managerialism can support individual teacher agency. Within the context of academisation, middle leaders are given increasing responsibilities for implementing and promoting whole-school objectives. However, gaps in the literature suggest that middle leaders' role in supporting education reform is under-researched, and their perceptions and experiences remain unheard despite their unique and essential role within their contexts. Developing an understanding of middle leaders' experiences could help identify how different types of agency in high-autonomy contexts can be used to support school-led school-improvement agendas. It may also shed light on the conflicting aspects of a middle leader's role, helping leaders reflect on their role in school-led school-improvement reforms.

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Chapter 3 - Literature Review: The Conceptual Framework

Conceptualisations of Teacher Agency

Conceptualisations of teacher agency often refer to the scope for teachers to be able to act independently within their professional role, with regards to aspects such as curriculum, pedagogies and assessment choice (The Open University, 2018). Literature generally positions the ability of teachers to have agency over their professional choices as ideal and positive. In contrast, a lack of agency is often linked with adverse outcomes such as the continuing de-professionalisation of teachers. Most research available seems to draw upon one or two main conceptualisations of agency, using similar and limited methodologies to support their findings and conclusions.

Historically, the primary division in the conceptualisation of teacher agency has been how teachers come to experience and perceive their agency. Past conceptualisations of agency considered it something that is possessed or teachers 'have' (Frost, 2006). However, more recent conceptualisations consider individuals ‘actively engage’ in their ‘contexts for action’, or environments, and this interacts with existing experiences, beliefs and values to support agency development (Biesta and Tedder, 2007). The different approaches root agency as stemming from either a 'cognitive' approach or from a 'socio-cultural and constructivist view' (Baker-Doyle and Gustavson, 2015). The approach that is adopted in research has implications regarding the extent to which it is believed that teachers can influence their ability to practice agency and the influence of the educational contexts, and the importance of political discourses in shaping a teacher's perception of their agency.

Biesta and Tedder's definition of agency maps onto contexts that involve individuals actively engaging in professional activities with 'contextual or structural factors' shaped by top-down policy and available resources (Biesta and Tedder, 2007, pp137). Priestly et al. (2015) considered this ecological view of agency as applicable to explaining teachers' experiences of agency within educational contexts. Here, the definition of agency was further developed to include how an individual teacher can act within the bounds of their 'social and material environments' to effect change (Priestly et al., 2012, pp196). Within this explanation, the understanding of how reforms such as academisation influence the perception of agency is vital. Teachers in this instance are considered the most 'significant within-school influence' on school improvement (Priestly et al., 2015, pp1).

Biesta et al. (2015) further acknowledged the importance of personal identity within this ecological model. Here an individual experiences different levels of agency as a result of their past experiences and values interacting with the present contexts and structures, combined with future aspirations and motivations. This recognises that teachers will have different experiences of agency depending on their personal histories. Drawing upon the 'chordal triad' model (Emirbayer and Mirsch, 1998, cited in Biesta et al., 2015, pp626) the iterative dimension, the projective dimension and the practical-evaluative dimension of agency are introduced. This practical-evaluative dimension is the engagement with the present and is influenced by the iterative (past experiences) and the projective (future motivations). In this sense, agency is fluid and can change based upon the contexts and future aspirations of the teacher. Thus, some teachers may experience professional agency in situations where others do not, due to prior experiences and their beliefs and values.

Under this conceptual framework, agency stems from an ontological view that considers it is subjective, constructed by an individuals' inner, sometimes subconscious, experiences, values and beliefs. Agency under this perspective would be investigated from an interpretivist viewpoint to understand how the participants' prior experiences, beliefs, and values interact with their environment. The data that researchers need to collect to uncover how agency is experienced is personal, subjective and unobservable

and would rely on qualitative methods to collect rich personal and contextual information from the subject. For example, teachers may have different perceptions of agency in similar contexts due to differing personal qualities and historical experiences. Concerns with lack of curriculum innovation in academy settings could be explained under this conceptualisation as stemming from iterative concepts of teaching, learning and curriculum that are built so deeply into teachers' mental structures that they are resistant to change (Sinnema and Aitken, 2013). Existing values and beliefs that teachers should follow a prescribed curriculum in combination with dominant discourses that position knowledge transmission over other capabilities and skills could drive the perception of lack of agency over curriculum choice. These factors are not externally and objectively collectable by an uninformed observer. Instead, they must be teased from the subject through various methods to collect subjective and unobservable data.

The popularity of the ecological view is important when viewed alongside educational reform. It argues that to help teachers achieve agency, public policy-makers and leaders should focus on the contexts within which teachers are trained and exercise their day-to-day professional judgement. Contexts have the capacity to constrain teachers who have otherwise high agentic capacity. Even teachers with high efficacy and strong aspirations may find innovation too difficult or risky within contexts with high accountability structures affecting structures in the practical-evaluative dimension. Therefore, the ecological conceptualisation of agency offers a credible explanation of how educational reforms, such as academisation, influences the perceptions and experiences of teacher agency.

Alternatives to the Ecological Model

A majority of studies into teacher agency have drawn from constructivist frameworks that take an ontological and epistemological position that agency is subjectively experienced. Thus agency must be investigated against frameworks that look at how an individual experiences agency by exploring how they think, feel and enact agency by observing their teaching practice or interviewing them about their practice. However, academisation has

altered the dominant hierarchies and led to distributed responsibilities. Therefore, it could be argued that conceptualisations such as Frostenson's levels of autonomy (2015) may be more useful at recognising alternative ways that agency can be experienced, internalised and drawn upon. This positions agency as something that can be enacted between groups of individuals as well as an individual's sole professional interactions. Frostenson's conceptualisation appears to have been inadequately explored in current literature when compared with the ecological model.

The ecological model's inherent consideration that a lack of individual teacher agency is evidence of a deficiency within an education system is rejected by Frostenson (2015), who argues that different levels of autonomy are achievable in contexts where individual agency may be hard to attain. Frostenson put forth a new conceptualisation of autonomy as experienced on three distinct levels: general, collegial and individual professional autonomy. Here, different levels of autonomy may be utilised by teachers depending on the local constraints of their professional context. For example, if a lack of general professional autonomy at a top-down policy level is experienced, teachers may still draw upon collegial or individual professional autonomy. This conceptualisation may be helpful when examining how schools can develop different policies and processes to support combinations of autonomy. However, Frostenson, like most agency theorists, draws from an ontology similar to the ecological model, considering agency as anti-realist and subjective. Furthermore, it draws upon a similar epistemological view grounded in interpretivism.

Frostenson's levels of autonomy framework supports wider ideas that have been used in research into identities and education, such as Lave and Wenger's Communities of Practice (1991). The latter considers that collective forms of agency enable the pursuit of shared endeavours to make change, which supports Frostenson's consideration that agency can be experienced on multiple levels and for multiple purposes. While Priestly's ecological model incorporates cultural and social influences into how an individual experiences agency, it does not recognise collective agency as a separate entity in and of itself. Frostenson's professional autonomy framework reflects Lave and Wenger's idea

of how a Community of Practice, such as a context like an academy school, can utilise cultural tools and actions to build social capital and collective identities, producing transformative effects and power to make changes. This also differs from Priestly et al.'s conceptualisation, which suggests that while teachers can use their agency in unique, and sometimes negative, ways, there is no mechanism by which teachers can draw upon other types of agency in the pursuit of collective or shared practices. Agency in the ecological view is singular and is either achieved or not achieved. Frostenson's levels of autonomy, therefore, seems to provide a more transformative way to look at teacher agency, recognising the possibility of teachers adopting collective form of autonomy within restrictive contexts to produce powerful shared outcomes.

Shifting Paradigms

While the role of the middle leader has become increasingly varied and impactful, their voices and experiences often go unheard in their professional contexts and in existing agency research. From personal experience as a middle leader in an academy school, the perception and utilisation of agency are often unconsciously navigated in practice by teachers and middle leaders. Although notably, most agency research adopts an interpretivist paradigm, it is difficult to offer criticism regarding the lack of positivist research. Lived experience as a middle leader suggests that agency is notably difficult to acknowledge and identify by the subject, let alone categorise, measure and manipulate as a disinterested third party. Agency is not conceptualised as something objective or stable, with the ability to be isolated as a variable and manipulated.

The absence of research from a positivist perspective can be explained due to its largely inappropriate approach to agency research. However, one other theme that is notably absent from both conceptualisations and empirical investigations into teacher agency is the influence of power relations and normative discourses in shaping how agency is experienced. Education is highly politicised, particularly more recent neoliberal reforms. The academies act in England is no exception. The political and economic framework

that has implemented these changes have derived from a refined form of Taylor's 'scientific management' (Shulga et al., 2021), the appliance of science to the 'perfection' of the school as a 'machine'. This has emphasised efficiency and machine labour to reduce errors inherent in human work and explains why agency has often been so constrained in an attempt to prescribe teacher's work as closely as possible to reduce 'mistakes'. Consequently, educational research that draws from an objective positivist paradigm has historically been prioritised under consideration that it holds most integrity and relevance through supporting the scientific and measurable aspirations of policy-makers. However, agency as a phenomenon is not able to be studied in this scientific manner due to its shifting and subjective nature, which is why most conceptualisations have rejected this paradigm.

Although an interpretivist approach is favoured in agency research, middle leaders discharge their duties and undertake additional whole school responsibilities alongside powerful political and cultural discourses surrounding the purpose of education and its outcomes. While Priestley et al. recognise that cultural and social discourses shape the projective iteration of agency in their ecological model, and Frostenson acknowledges that general autonomy can be bound up in political structures, neither conceptualisation attempts to lay bare the extent to which powerful discourses drive the experiences of agency. Academisation in and of itself is highly politicised, driven by narratives of how education should be delivered to the students through teachers' everyday practices. This places the blame for lack of outcomes on teachers, which creates ethical concerns, particularly if teachers' practice is shaped partly by the dominant discourses and constraints of the system within which they are working.

While academisation has been considered an opportunity for contexts to rebel against the powerful normative discourses of government (Greany & Waterhouse, 2016), it arguably places schools under capitalist or financially driven motivations. This highlights a weakness in current conceptualisations of agency. The dominant ontological position considers that agency is subjective within the individual and can be accessed by interpretivist methodologies and qualitative data collection methods. However, critical

approaches, such as Heilbronn (2016), position agency as stemming from dominant political discourses and positions, taking a more critical epistemological approach to consider how agency should be conceptualised and investigated. Critical researchers argue that for a complete account of knowledge, research must make explicit political structures and power imbalances that influence groups' social reality and drive positive change.

Heilbronn (2016) argues that academisation has created tension between idealistic and philosophically grounded models of education, and the model of education as a product that can be measured and compared within a competitive marketplace paradigm. This has consequences for how teachers experience their professional identities. According to Heilbronn, managerialism is a consequence of this type of system, with teachers' professionalism and competence regulated. Therefore, the identity of the autonomous teacher trusted to manage their work is often not reality, even in highly autonomous contexts such as academy schools. This type of managerialism links to Frostenson's collegial level of autonomy. However, little research, particularly in English schools, has investigated how teachers and middle managers navigate the pressures of managerialism and how it affects their decision-making and practices, perhaps subconsciously. Middle managers in have been identified as existing in a unique space between managing a department or team or colleagues, making curriculum decisions, and the expectation of adhering to and propagating top-down values and beliefs that are shaped by wider discourses.

Indeed, political statements and theories impinge on teacher agency but also are so ingrained in common discourses that teachers, perhaps unconsciously, adopt and reproduce these stances. Foucault sums up the modern approach to discipline, arguing that it produces 'docile bodies' which perform as instructed by higher powers (Gutting and Oksala, 2021). These docile bodies are produced by means such as observation, normalised judgement and examination. This can be viewed as conflicted in middle leaders who apply managerialism to their department colleagues through observation and work scrutiny but find that they are also subjected to these processes by more senior

colleagues. Indeed, Foucault considers that behaviours are regulated by society and are manifestations of disciplinary power. Here, an ontological position is adopted that considers that individuals create positions of agency alongside often invisible narratives regarding the purpose of education. Therefore, drawing conclusions about the experiences and perceptions of teacher agency using methodologies that rely on data collected from interviews, observation, surveys and biographies, as is common when researching agency, could be considered impossible without also considering the wider social discourses that are normalised and reproduced in the discourses of the participants.

Foucauldian frameworks have been drawn upon in a wide variety of educational research to explore a diverse range of social-justice topics in education and training (Stickney, 2012; Bourke and Carter, 2016; Gerdin, 2017). Common epistemological and methodological approaches span these varied topics, using qualitative methods such as document and policy analysis, interview, and observation favoured. The analysis of the reproduction of certain language and discourse provides insight into the dominant and permitted social controls of that section of society. Each of the studies aims to lay bare social injustices or how the dominant genealogies act as a form of social control to its subjects; they also suggest how individuals can resist this power through their discourse and actions. The ontological assumption is that the phenomenon cannot be externally observed or measured without analysing spoken or written individual and societal discourses.

With increased accountability regimes, including the threat of internal and external observations and 'grading', critical theories suggest that this 'panoptic surveillance' places teachers in a constant stage of monitoring (Gutting and Oksala, 2021). In high accountability educational contexts, classroom teachers experience this through scrutinies, learning walks and informal observations. At the same time, middle leaders experience both this and also take part in panoptic surveillance of members of their department. Therefore, middle leaders are positioned in an interesting space between being the observer while also being observed by their line management.

Taking a critical approach and utilising tools such as critical analysis could also increase the ethicality of the overall study. Roberts (2019) used a Foucauldian lens to examine middle leader's practice within a performative context. The study found that middle leaders do have the power to disrupt the powerful discourses of the current performative context. This suggests a Foucauldian lens could be applied within an academy context to analyse the discourses collected from middle leaders and uncover hidden powerful discourses and also suggest how middle leaders in academy settings can overcome constraints on their leadership practice. Roberts suggested that adopting a disruptive leadership style was implicated in more ethical leadership practices. Therefore, a critical approach could offer insights that would lead to transformative change and disrupt the powerful constraints and established normative processes of surveillance and control brought on in performative contexts.

Conclusion

Critical researchers argue that for a complete account of knowledge, research must make explicit political structures and power imbalances that influence the social reality of groups and to drive positive change. By applying a critical lens to research, a transformative study could be developed to uncover the dominant and unconscious reasoning behind middle leaders' choices as part of their practice and hold up a lens through which they can recognise power imbalances and rhetoric.

Despite criticisms of existing research relying on qualitative methods, Jones (2017) argued that qualitative approaches allow meaning to be 'co-constructed' between researcher and participant, supporting the conceptualisation of agency that posit it to be fluid and actively constructed in contexts. The rich qualitative data collected allows the authentic voices of participants to be captured. Indeed Baker-Doyle and Gustavson (2015) state in their research that agency is developed 'iterationally through personal histories, discourses, cultural tools, and imagined futures'. This points strongly to a

phenomenon with multiple influences that can only be extracted from individuals through the collection of authentic qualitative methods and analysed alongside participants to ensure that researchers interpret meanings correctly. Qualitative data will also allow the adoption of a critical approach to explore how middle leaders' conscious and unconsciously internalised discourses reflect normative political and cultural values and help provide a voice to the experience of being a middle leader within English educational reforms.

(Word count: 2943)

Chapter 4 - The Research Proposal

The review of the available literature on agency and its conceptualisations highlight a distinct lack of research surrounding how middle leaders experience and draw upon different agentic states. Researching middle leader perceptions of agency may explain why academisation reforms that increase the autonomy of individual school contexts have not always been successfully implemented. The proposed study aims to give voice to the middle leader and explore how they experience different types of professional autonomy to navigate their identities within the context of a high-autonomy academy school under high-accountability pressures.

This research has been developed by an inside researcher, a middle leader in an academy secondary school in England. This is advantageous as the research can utilise insight gained into the effect of academisation on the middle leader's role. For example, dealing with competing pressures of running a department alongside conflicting expectations from key stakeholders and the ability to create and develop a creative and contextually-relevant curriculum alongside pressures from whole-school policy and exam board specifications. Middle leaders have the responsibility to embed whole school policy and also ensure their department conforms with policy, meaning that they are simultaneously supporting individual and collaborative agency in their colleagues and also monitoring adherence to policy which may constrain this.

These competing roles have underpinned the importance of adopting a conceptual framework such as Frostenson's levels of autonomy that recognises the autonomy can be held in multiple ways in complex school environments. This may help capture how middle leaders frame and choose their interactions with others based upon desired goals and outcomes under local and wider constraints. The resulting research question focuses on how middle leaders understand and access 'different levels of professional autonomy', explicitly referring to the level of general, collegial and individual autonomy outlined in Frostenson's conceptualisation.

When developing the research question from E822 TMA01 onwards, it was evident through an extended review and critical analysis of the available literature on agency, that while research has historically approached the phenomenon of agency through a constructivist or socio-cognitive approach, there is an absence of research focusing on a critical approach. This is particularly important in middle leader research due to the competing tensions and power imbalances they face when discharging their duties and the inherently political discourses that have driven the school-led school-improvement reforms such as academisation. Therefore, the research question was further developed during E822 TMA02 to incorporate a focus on critical views of agency and extend the study's focus to frame individual perceptions of agency within wider social discourses about the purpose and role of education. This also addressed ethical issues of 'deprofessionalisation' and critique of teachers' choices featured in some of the literature reviewed.

The final research question and subquestions are:

What are middle leaders' perceptions and understandings of their professional agency in Academy secondary schools in England?

- How do middle leaders understand and access different levels of professional autonomy to fulfil whole school and departmental responsibility?
- What are middle leaders' perceptions of their role in school-led, school-improvement reform?

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Chapter 5 - Research design, research methods and methods of analysis

Research Approach

Despite criticisms that agency research has historically relied on mainly interpretative approaches (Harris et al., 2019), this study will utilise inductive theory building by adopting a qualitative methodological approach, collecting and analysing the rich qualitative experiences of middle leaders. The use of frameworks and methodologies underpinning qualitative data collection allows a critical approach to explore how middle leaders' internalised discourses reflect normative social and political values. This legitimises the research question and allows the study to explore the identified gaps in the literature. To apply a critical paradigm, research approaches for this study will combine case study and critical discourse analysis.

Case studies are appropriate as they offer a way to investigate ‘complex’ and ‘dynamic’ human relationships and interactions in unique instances (Cohen et al, 2018, pp 376). This reflects the aims of the study which are to collect experiences and perceptions that are contextually and temporally bound. Here, the unit of analysis is an academy school. This situates the study within the localised space and time of school-led school-improvement reform and allows agency to be studied within its unique and dynamic context.

Case study approach is particularly valuable when the researcher cannot manipulate or control behaviours. Conceptual frameworks consider agency as constructed internally concerning individuals and their contexts and not objectively observable and measurable, implying that agency cannot be easily manipulated in the context of an experimental or positivist paradigm. Therefore, the proposed case study approach would be exploratory

and descriptive to support inductive theory building in an underdeveloped area of middle leader researcher and suggest further areas of interest and importance.

To meet the goals of the research question and allow for a critical analysis of agency, a case study can be used alongside critical discourse analysis. The two approaches could be considered complementary as case study research often deploys a mixture of methods, including those that collect discursive data such as interviews. These methods allow the researcher access to the subjective and fluid experiences of the participants and produce rich qualitative data for analysis. Critical discourse analysis can uncover how discourse practices ‘contribute to educational institutions' structural and hierarchical social relations’ (Rahal & Vadeboncoeur, 2013). For example, how middle leaders use language can highlight how powerful normative discourses are reproduced through the choices middle leaders make in their professional actions bound by contextually specific pressures.

Research Methods and Instruments

Case study approaches allow the researcher to collect 'thick descriptions' of middle leaders' experiences (Geertz, 1973, cited in The Open University, 2020). Every school provides a specific context in which school leaders practice, which makes it more difficult to seek reliability when using qualitative methods (Briggs et al., 2012). Credibility, analogous with the scientific method's validity, can be reached through using different methods to enable the 'triangulation' (Greener, 2011) or 'cross-checking of data' (Lincoln & Guba, 2007, pp18) and increase the trustworthiness of the interpretations. In this study, two data collection methods will be deployed: interviews and document analysis. By choosing to adopt a critical discourse analysis and case study design, qualitative data methods are the most appropriate to gather descriptive data that can be used to explore agency through a thematic analysis of both conscious and hidden discourses.

Practically, interviews allow a researcher to gain quick insight into a phenomenon (Coleman, 2012), a pragmatic use for the small scale researcher. Interviews provide a simple way to achieve a deep understanding of people's beliefs, perceptions and opinions, which links directly to the aim outlined in the research question and supports the theoretical position that agency is constructed by middle leaders concerning their personal experiences and contexts. The use of interviews is prominent in existing agency research, evidencing their value in allowing the collection of appropriate data to investigate this phenomenon. Interviews, when used in a less structured format, are adaptable and allow a researcher to follow lines of enquiry as they arise during the interview which will help the researcher uncover the subjects' inner or authentic self, which may not otherwise be publicly visible (Roulston, 2010). This is an important aspect of designing research that aims to access unconscious or subjectively constructed discourses.

This study would draw upon a semi-structured interview as it is aiming to investigate personal opinion and experience of agency. These authentic views might be more difficult to elicit using a formal and structured interview, as respondents may tailor their answers to fit pre-determined questions. As a result, researchers have less scope to follow up on interesting viewpoints or queries that might arise. Marvasti & Freie (2017) argued that in-depth interviews allow greater flexibility for 'phrasing and re-phrasing' interview questions. Despite arguments that semi-structured interviews may have lower reliability, they are also considered a high validity method of data collection (Burton and Bartlett, 2005). Thick descriptive data is more likely to produce truthful or credible accounts of agency from the participants. A draft interview schedule has been created (Appendix 1) to demonstrate how open-ended questions will help the researcher collect data relevant to addressing each research question and also provide additional prompts the interviewer could draw upon to draw out participants' views. This would be piloted before use to ensure that questions elicit relevant and authentic responses.

The use of documentary analysis further improves trustworthiness and credibility as it creates the ability to cross-check, complement or support the interview data collected

from middle leaders. In addition, it supports the overarching critical approach by helping the researcher to understand how the academies act is understood and operationalised, how ideologies associated with school-improvement reforms are apparent in the context, and how the organisational context of the academy school has devolved responsibility and accountabilities.

Firstly, documents could be selected that have been created at a top-down government level by the Department of Education that is publicly available and used to inform national and local policy, such as common inspection frameworks and curriculum documentation. Publicly available documentation and policy can support the critical approach to the study by helping the research contextualise the policy decisions made at a local level against wider policy, pressures and discourses. Researchers could also draw upon documentation produced by the school to create a contextual understanding of the context, its structures and processes (Piggot-Ervine, 2010). Mediums collected and analysed may include whole school policy on curriculum development, department meeting minutes, line management meeting minutes, job descriptions and pay progression/performance management criteria. The latter will help the researcher understand the scope of responsibilities and accountabilities officially afforded to middle leaders. School documentation can be examined alongside the government created statutory and guidance framework documentation to understand how national policy is disseminated and used to influence and shape local policy by senior leadership.

A key issue when collecting and interpreting documents will be how well the researcher understands the document. As an insider researcher, this is less problematic as the researcher will have background knowledge of internal policies and how they are understood and enacted. However, some documentation may include sensitive information naming teachers or students, creating anonymity and privacy concerns. The researcher must gain approval from the context regarding the use of the documentation before research findings are published.

Research Participants

Participants will be drawn from the pool of middle leaders at an English secondary school with voluntary academy status to ensure that the school is not under any additional accountability measures which may alter the pressures and role of the middle leaders within the school.

Middle leader often refers to teaching staff with additional management responsibility, such as a head of department with curriculum responsibility or a Head of Year with pastoral responsibility. Middle leaders invited to participate will have curriculum responsibility as the research question is partly interested in understanding how autonomy over curriculum choices is one aspect of a middle leaders' role. Two interviews would be conducted, with one interview during the autumn term and a follow-up interview in the summer term to avoid requesting participants' time during examination periods.

Ideally, a stratified sample would be used, with interviews at each level of the school hierarchy from classroom teachers to senior leadership to place middle leader discourses within a wider context of experiences and perceptions. However, within the scope of a small scale investigation, the time and resources required to conduct, transcribe and analyse these additional interviews would be prohibitive, and thus a stratified sample will not be adopted for this study. Indeed, the amount of data produced from a large number of participants, particularly from semi-structured interviews, may be prohibitive to transcribe and analyse. Thus initially, no more than three leaders will be selected for the study. The sample naturally constrains itself to middle leaders. However, characteristics such as experience and level of the whole school or departmental responsibility will need to be considered to ensure a representative sample is selected.

Ethics

There are important aspects of research design and implementation that must be considered to acknowledge the researcher's responsibility and commitment to follow ethical guidelines, such as those outlined in BERA (2019) or the BPS (2014). In addition, throughout the research process, it is essential to demonstrate and uphold respect for the persons involved in the study.

The consequential ethical considerations of the proposed study highlight the lack of existing research on middle leaders' experiences of agency. The proposed study could contribute positively to expand the wider body of research on agency. The study aims to be transformative; therefore, these benefits need to be communicated to the school before the start of the study; research could support middle leaders' role development and identity and help them become more effective practitioners. The literature review highlighted how middle leaders often lack development opportunities in schools, so partaking in this study could help create a dialogue with schools regarding how to best support their professional development aspirations. Additionally, participation could help practitioners reflect upon the threats and opportunities of agency in their practice, empowering middle leaders.

By adopting a critical approach and collecting qualitative data, there are clear relational considerations for the study. The study will be conducted in the researcher's workplace, and existing relationships at the school may prove both an advantage and a barrier to the research process. O'Sullivan and Goodwyn (2020) suggest an advantage of this is greater understanding and empathy towards participants' struggles as an insider. Additionally, there will be increased understanding of school created documents used as part of the documentary analysis (Benjamin, 2002, cited in Busher and James, 2012). However, the existing relationship between the participants and researcher may affect the quality and veracity of the interview data collected. Gilham (2005, cited in Coleman, 2012) states that the interviewer is not a neutral force, and this is a particular problem as the researchers 'dual role' may exacerbate unequal power relations (BERA, 2019). Participants may not give an accurate insight into their true perceptions. They may perceive a risk of professional harm and judgement if they reveal practices that portray themselves or their

context negatively. Reflexivity must be utilised as all stages of research design, data collection and analysis to signpost where the researcher's own beliefs and values may have contaminated or influenced findings.

To ensure participants feel more comfortable with sharing authentic insights into their perceptions of agency and protect them from harm, privacy and anonymity of participants must be ensured when collecting and analysing data, and certainly before findings are disseminated more widely. This also ensures that the researcher abides by legal acts such as the Data Protection Act and GDPR. Furthermore, by using pseudonyms and anonymising data, individual autonomy can be respected through making identification of the participants more difficult. (BPS, 2014). However, protecting participants' anonymity can be challenging when collecting qualitative data, particularly in a small-scale investigation. The rich and descriptive data collected can make it harder to anonymise discourses and descriptions of events and perceptions. The researcher must be transparent from the outset about these risks to allow participants to make an informed decision about participating, and consent must be continually revisited to allow participants to withdraw at any stage.

Using critical discourse analysis may also address ethical issues during data analysis as it encourages the researcher to co-construct meaning with the participant to ensure the interpretation is fair and accurate (Rahal & Vadeboncoeur, 2013). Critical approaches may address criticisms of existing research that negatively describe teachers' choices by recognising powerful hidden discourses that unconsciously direct agency (Wiggins, 2017). In some research, participants have been portrayed negatively due to poor practice highlighted; adopting a critical approach will help the ethicality of the study as instead of assigning blame to individual choice, practice is looked at within the context of wider power imbalances, accountability discourses and constraints. The researcher in this study aims to empower, not to place blame or identify individual weaknesses in participants.

Methods of analysis

One challenge of qualitative data analysis is that data is rich and detailed and requires interpretation by the researcher to produce trustworthy and dependable findings and conclusions (Cohen et al, 2018). This study aims to take an inductive approach to data analysis, using themes produced in the data to group the data, relationships and patterns.

Firstly, the researcher will transcribe the interview data for analysis. Then, a thematic analysis will be applied to the data collected from the interviews to identify key themes that arise from the transcripts. The purpose of this type of analysis matches the research question(s) and aims of the study as it intends to describe and explore issues related to middle leader agency in academy schools. The subsequent findings can be used to drive new research questions and theories. In this study, themes would be driven initially by the conceptual framework applied, with Frostenson's levels of autonomy drawn upon to group potential themes related to the three levels of autonomy. As a critical approach is being adopted, the researcher will also look at aspects of Critical Discourse Analysis, identifying common discourses or positions adopted by the participants, repeated or unconscious discourses drawn upon and the way the participants positions themselves with regards to political school-led school-improvement reforms. Dominant discourses may be so powerful that participants may find it hard to ‘voice dissent articularly or objectively’ (Gold and Evans, 1998, cited in Perryman, 2012), which would be supported by choosing the discursive methods available to both case study and critical discourse approaches.

It is expected that analysing the transcribed interview data will be ‘messy and nonlinear’ (Wellington, 2015, cited in Cohen et al., 2018). Using a second researcher to independently verify identified themes ensures the chosen categorisations are logical and valid and ensures consistent use of codes throughout. However, independent blind

parallel coding may not be feasible in a small scale investigation with a sole researcher. In addition, dependability and confirmability, analogue to reliability, may be an issue in small scale research studies as they require independent confirmation by a 'disinterested auditor'. However, establishing an audit trail that makes explicit researcher decisions and recognising potential limitations in the write up may increase the dependability of the findings and conclusions drawn.

To further increase the dependability of findings, the researcher should plan to undertake stakeholder and member checks of data, returning for a second interview later in the school year to confirm themes and conclusions and address any questions identified during data analysis, including from documentary evidence collected. This supports the iterative and inductive nature of the study in that the analysis of the initial interview data will drive new strands of questioning as greater insight into the phenomenon of agency emerges. Conducting a second interview with participants would also provide an additional method by which to check that the researcher's analysis of data is not overly influenced by their own internal pre-existing beliefs and values. Ensuring a prolonged engagement with participants and checking the data with the data source further increases the trustworthiness of the study and transforms the participants into 'insightful collaborators' (Marvasti and Freie, 2017)

Documentary analysis will also complement the findings of the interview analysis. As this study is interested in the discourses available in the documents, quantitative analysis methods such as content analysis are inappropriate. Instead, once underlying themes have been identified, documentary analysis can help ‘augment’ the analysis of the interview data (Fitzgerald, 2012). Documents that are publicly available and produced by the government can be used to identify top-down structures that reflect the dominant political thought process of the context. The context's documents can be analysed to ascertain how wider policy is interpreted within the school context and how these top-down discourses in both the governmental and school policies and internal documentation are reflected in middle leaders' discourses. This part of the analysis will be used to support and triangulate findings of the middle leaders' subjective perceptions

and experiences and offer additional questions that could be followed up during the second interview.

When evaluating the conclusions of this small scale study, it is important to recognise that the research is founded in the interpretivist and critical paradigm utilising qualitative methodology. The study is not aiming to become generalisable or replicable; indeed, the nature of agency is that it is personally experienced and socially constructed within a specific temporal and spatial context. As the study aims to be transformative and produce additional questions for future research, transparency in the write-up and dissemination of findings must identify the limitations of the data analysis and conclusions drawn.

(Word count: 2887)

Chapter 6 - Postscript: Narrative critical reflection

Throughout undertaking the Masters qualification my understanding of educational research has been challenged. From EE830 onwards, I have continually returned to the question of what counts as educational research and what should and could be studied and how. I had been exposed to many academic studies during professional development as a teacher and Middle Leader. However, these studies were often derived from positivist or scientific paradigms, manipulating variables such as classroom intervention practices, or assessment strategies and measuring student outcomes, most notably through key performance indicators such as exam results.

A turning point for my own interests came during EE831 with units focusing on teacher identity and agency. This validated my own anecdotal experience working within a high-autonomy academy context, that although teachers may be an important influence on school improvement, often the role of the teacher is constrained by other factors, in particular outcomes-focused targets. As a middle leader I was also interested in how management can play a role in processes of autonomy. The knowledge provided in EE831 helped shape the focus of my dissertation early, as the concept of agency within high-autonomy contexts was of personal interest and literature and understanding was somewhat lacking.

Feedback from E822 TMA01 helped me consider the concepts and theories that underpinned my research questions and methodology by asking me to link the literature to the research focus and development of the research questions (Appendix 2, Section 1). Therefore, while writing E822 TMA02, I critically analysed each piece of literature and explicitly outlined how it influenced the research focus and how the research questions developed from this. This supported the development of the overall EP as it encouraged me to reflect and prioritise which pieces of literature were most relevant. Additionally, at the start of my literature search I specialised too early and found available literature lacking; after discussing this issue in an online tutorial, I revisited the literature review

starting with more general search terms to increase the amount of literature available for review.

The most challenging aspect of writing the final dissertation was the conceptual framework chapter. Developing an appropriate ontological and epistemological stance and relating the available literature to my middle leader experience and position as an insider researcher was challenging. Feedback from the EE831 EMA suggested that the 'interpretivist' paradigm I initially aligned my investigation with was not supported by the data collection tools put forth in the research methods section (Appendix 2). By undertaking a further review of the literature, I analysed the gaps in the current conceptual frameworks and identified that a critical approach may help create new knowledge. I prioritised writing this chapter during the dissertation process so it could be submitted first for tutor feedback. Initial feedback suggested that I had identified valid conceptual frameworks, however suggested I look in more breadth at the conceptualisation of additional aspects of research question, such as middle leaders or schools (Appendix 3).

Following the dissertation, my professional practice and aspirations have changed considerably. I have discussed with my context about working with the ECT induction programme to support early career teachers. In future I would like to use my understanding and move to a teacher training focused role and further engage in research that focuses on how to prepare and support teachers achieve professional efficacy throughout their careers.

(Word count: 549)

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Appendix 1 - Draft Interview Schedule

Research Questions:

RQ1 - What are middle leaders' perceptions and understandings of their professional agency in Academy secondary schools in England?
RQ2 - How do middle leaders understand and access different levels of professional autonomy to fulfil whole school and departmental responsibility?
RQ3 - What are middle leaders' perceptions of their role in school-led, school-improvement reform?

	Questions	**Prompts / Probes**
Warm Up	Why did you become a middle leader? What part of the role do you find rewarding?	What are your day-to-day duties? What whole school responsibilities do you undertake? What departmental responsibilities do you undertake?
RQ1	How do you, your department and/or your school make decisions about what the curriculum for your subject will look like and what will be included or left out? How does this decision making process differ at upper/lower school (KS3/KS4)?	What are the statutory or curriculum requirements for your subject? To what extent are you free to make choices about the curriculum? What other members of staff contribute to curriculum planning in your subject? How do whole school policies influence departmental curriculum decisions?
RQ2	How do you delegate or assign planning responsibilities in your department?	Who takes responsibility for planning sequences of work? Are there any opportunities for collaborative planning? Is there any QA process involved? Who manages this?
RQ3	Please describe any other departmental responsibilities you have as a middle leader?	Do you have responsibilities for managing other teachers in your department?

		Who is responsible for performance management in the department and how does this process work? To what extent can you manage your time and responsibilities and choose your priorities?
RQ2	Please describe any whole school responsibilities that you undertake?	Are middle leaders expected to take on additional responsibilities alongside their departmental role?
RQ3	With regards to whole-school policy, to what extent do you feel middle leaders are consulted or asked to contribute to changes in school policy, vision or long term whole school plans?	What level of consultation occurs when a whole school change is proposed? Can middle leaders instigate whole school policy changes? Do you feel SLT consult with middle leaders enough, too little, too much?
RQ1	How much professional agency do you feel you have over your day-to-day duties and responsibilities?	Are you free to make any decisions related to your department? What and who holds you accountable for the decisions you make? Do you perceive levels of agency surrounding your role too much, too little, enough?
RQ1	How do you feel accountability structures, such as performance management and assessment policies, affect your role?	What does your appraisal process consist of? How do you feel about the performance management targets you are given? How much of a decision do you get towards your appraisal targets?
RQ3	To what extent do you think you have more or less agency and accountability compared to a middle leader in a similar role in a Local Authority led school?	Do you think academy status affords or restrains agency? Do you think any aspects of your context benefit with

		regards to agency as a result of becoming an academy? How do you think accountability processes may differ between LA and academy schools?
RQ3	Are there any aspects about working either within the wider education system or within your local context that constrains or affects your ability to undertake your role effectively? How do you think you could be supported more effectively in your role as a middle leader?	Are there any government policies or mandates that cause you to be less effective in your role? Are there any policies or structures within your school that cause you to be less effective in your role? Could you suggest any changes that may support you in performing your role?
Thank the participant for their time and ask them if they have any questions.		

Appendix 2 - EMA Reflection Grid

Category	Feedback received, targets achieved and areas of development worked on	How did this shape my dissertation
1. **Knowledge and understanding:** Targets, reflections or feedback relating to knowledge of current debate and issues in your specific area of focus; drawing out concepts and themes; choosing a focus area for your dissertation; identifying and overcoming ethical issues.	Using the PDP framework, I set a target for improving my ability to conduct a systematic literature search to find relevant literature. I attended an online library event during the module EE831 to enhance my understanding of using the advanced search function when conducting a search using the Open University online library. During the course E822, I used the module units to help me develop and refine my search from the EE831 EMA using course literature for E822 to support a more systematic search. E822 TMA01 Feedback - “You describe all sources and analyse them in terms of what they offer. It would be helpful to consistently explain how each	Initially, my search was too specialised, and I had difficulty finding relevant literature on my chosen topic. Therefore, I widened the literature search to include additional key terms. The course literature helped me recognise and justify in my write up that this was appropriate in this circumstance as there was a distinct lack of research on this particular topic. Therefore, I referenced the terms ‘autonomy’ and ‘agency’, despite conceptual frameworks that positioned this as a separate phenomenon. To support my dissertation development, I ensured that I searched for and read more contemporary literature. This shaped my dissertation by helping me recognise common trends in the literature and identify gaps. After conducting a systematic search, I was also able to situate the literature within my given context more accurately. I used all available and relevant literature to build a full picture of the phenomenon and

	piece of literature has influenced your thinking and your research focus." This highlighted my need to reflect more carefully and make explicit in my literature review why I selected each piece of research and the specific link to my dissertation question.	apply this to my research context.
2. **Critical analysis and evaluation:** Targets, reflections or feedback relating to justifying or challenging your personal perspective; interpreting and critically analysing evidence and methodologies from your own and others' research; analysing and evaluating themes and issues; sourcing and critically reviewing a wide range of publications; creating an academic argument using synthesis; comparing and connecting practice and theory.	E822 TMA01 Feedback advised me to "critically analyse the methodology of the key topic and conceptual literature. For example, it would be helpful to further explore the module material on research paradigms to consider its epistemological and ontological stance. This will strengthen the research proposal and have significant methodological implications." EE831 EMA Feedback advised me to "focus on analysing the methodology of literature. Ensure the research questions posed are situated in the correct paradigm with suitable data collection tools."	I used both the course materials and online help through the course forums, synchronous online tutorials and tutor feedback to build my conceptual framework chapter. I utilised my additional research on conceptual frameworks and research approaches to look at how other literature in a similar domain set out and incorporated discussions surrounding conceptual frameworks. I used this understanding and feedback to build the conceptual framework chapter and ensure that I adequately justified my choice of paradigm and approach. The E822 methodology section was helpful; I completed activities and forum posts to decide on methodology and then looked at similar studies that had used these methodological approaches and built this into my write up to ensure I was

	Both pieces of feedback suggested that I needed to research more widely around the specific topic of agency and conduct searches into how paradigms and conceptual frameworks have been adopted in a wide range of scenarios in order for me to be able to choose and justify my choice of a particular stance. I also thought more closely about how I could link my personal experience as an insider researcher to the approaches I thought were most relevant. This was driven by the course literature for E822 which provided wider reading for the different research approaches.	including enough justification of my choices.
3. **Links to professional practice:** Targets, reflections or feedback relating to: designing and/or applying research methods; developing ideas from previous research and frameworks; reflecting and making adaptations during the research and writing process; addressing	Initially, I reflected upon my choice of topic to identify the implications for the research topic - I considered what real impact could this research have to justify the necessity for this research. The key feedback I received at the initial stage was what	Within the final dissertation, I ensured that I situated the importance of this research within the context of school-led school improvement reforms. I developed my proposal to take more of a critical approach to look at the underpinning discourses of educational reform as there was a clear absence of this approach in existing research. I wanted the

problems in research design; identifying implications for practice and professional debate; challenging your own assumptions; managing workload and personal motivation.	benefit would middle leader research have and could I justify its importance. I used the literature review to support my research question and topic. I identified in the literature that middle leader research has fallen out of favour more recently. Which raised questions prior to the development of the final proposal: Why is this? Is there a valid reason why middle leader research is a low priority? Drawing upon my own insider position, I know from my own professional practice that there are some issues with middle leader roles, particularly in academy schools. Is there valuable knowledge to be gained from investigating middle leader positions? These were questions I discussed with my tutor and professionally with my colleagues to understand whether there was a gap for this type of research question.	research to have a transformative outcome as middle leader research is lacking, particularly when the role is viewed against the backdrop of educational reform.

4. **Structure, communication and presentation:** Targets, reflections or feedback relating to using academic style and referencing; presenting, managing and sharing information in different modes; communicating concepts, findings and ideas for different audiences.	Writing in a style suited to a Masters level was a real challenge and I received feedback throughout each module to help refine my writing style. E822 TMA01 Feedback - referencing style - “make sure to italicise correctly.” As a result of this feedback, I carefully reviewed the rules of referencing and then ensured TMA02 was submitted with correctly italicised references. EE831 TMA01 Feedback - “use of subheadings to structure writing.” Early on in the modules, my tutor advised that my writing would be clearer and more logically structured if I used a greater number of subheadings. From EE831 TMA02 onwards I ensured that appropriate subheadings were included in my assignments. EE831 EMA Feedback - “Reading contemporary and peer-reviewed Journal	Reflecting and acting on feedback had the following positive changes on my final dissertation: 1. It ensures that my references list was appropriately formatted to meet the required style by the Open University. 2. The use of subheadings created more structure and made my argument more logical to follow by the reader. I was able to group important topics and concepts together, particularly in Chapter 2, which made ordering and reflecting on the key themes of the literature more straightforward. 3. It increased my reading of literature both related to my topic of interest and reading around my topic. Added another filter to my Literature spreadsheet for studies that had particularly strong write up styles that supported the development of my own work.

	articles from the Open University library in areas that relate to your interests would expose you to the style of writing and academic standards expected at this level. Consistent research of peer review journals will help you to develop your critical thinking and writing skills." I utilised this feedback by increasing my reading of peer review journal articles and by adding an additional column to my database of literature to enable me to filter and return to literature that I thought had a particularly strong style of writing and structure. I used this to guide me when writing my dissertation. During EE831 I undertook the Open Learn course Introduction to Postgraduate Study which helped me practice and understand how writing style should adapt from undergraduate to postgraduate study.	

Appendix 3 - Dissertation Feedback Form First Chapter Submission

File uploaded in submission.

Appendix 4 - Dissertation Feedback Form Second Chapter Submission

File uploaded in submission.

Appendix 5 - Dissertation Feedback Form Third Chapter Submission

File uploaded in submission.

Appendix 6 - EMA Ethical Appraisal Form

E822 Ethical Appraisal Form

Masters: Education, Childhood and Youth

NB: it should be noted that The Open University is unable to offer liability insurance to cover any negative consequences students might encounter when undertaking 'in-person' data collection. It is therefore very important that you follow appropriate research protocols not least in seeking Gatekeepers' permissions to undertake any data collection within your setting and adhere to ethical principles for the safety of yourself and your participants.

Because ethical appraisal should precede data collection, this form should be included with TMA02 for those developing a Small-Scale Investigation and included as part of the submission for the EMA for those submitting an Extended Literature Review and Research Proposal.

Fill in section 1 of this document with your personal details and brief information about your research.
For section 2, please assess your research using the following questions and click yes or no as appropriate. If there is any possibility of significant risk please tick yes. Even if your list contains all "no" you should still return your completed checklist so your tutor/supervisor can assess the proposed research.

Section 1: Project details

a.	Student name	Anne McMillan	
b.	PI		
c.	Project title	A critical analysis of middle leaders' perceptions of professional agency in an English academy secondary school	
d.	Supervisor/tutor	Ray Chatwin	
e.	Qualification	Masters in Education	X
		Masters in Childhood and Youth	☐

f.	MA pathway (where applicable)	Teaching and Learning
g.	Intended start date for fieldwork	N/A
h.	Intended end date for fieldwork	N/A
i.	Country fieldwork will be conducted in *If you are resident in the UK and will be conducting your research abroad please check www.fco.gov.uk for advice on travel.*	N/A

Section 2: Ethics Assessment		Yes	No
1	Does your proposed research need initial clearance from a 'gatekeeper' (e.g. Local Authority, head teacher, college head, nursery/playgroup manager)?	X	
2	Have you checked whether the organisation requires you to undertake a 'police check' or appropriate level of 'disclosure' before carrying out your research?[1]	X	
3	Have you indicated how informed consent will be obtained from your participants (including children less than 16 years old, school pupils and immediate family members)? Your consent letters/forms must inform participants that they have the right to withdraw from the study at any time.[2]	X	
4	Will your proposed research design mean that it will be necessary for participants to take part in the study without their knowledge/consent at the time (e.g. covert observation of people in nonpublic places)? If so have you specified appropriate debriefing procedures? [3]		X

[1] You must agree to comply with any ethical codes of practice or legal requirements that maybe in place within the organisation or country (e.g. educational institution, social care setting or other workplace) in which your research will take place. If required an appropriate level of disclosure ('police check') can obtained from the Disclosure and Barring Service (England and Wales), Disclosure Scotland, AccessNI (Northern Ireland), Criminal Records Office (Republic of Ireland), etc.

[2] This should normally involve the use of an information sheet about the research and what participation will involve, and a signed consent form. You must allow sufficient time for potential participants to consider their decision between the giving of the information sheet and the gaining of consent. No research should be conducted without the opt-in informed consent of participants or their caregivers. In the case of children (individuals under 16 years of age) no research should be conducted without a specified means of gaining their informed consent (or, in the case of young children, their assent) and the consent of their parents, caregivers, or guardians. This is particularly important if your project involves participants who are particularly vulnerable or unable to give informed consent (e.g. children under 16 years, people with learning disabilities, or emotional problems, people with difficulty in understanding or communication, people with identified health problems). There is additional guidance on informed consent on the Masters: Education and Childhood and Youth website under Project Resources.

[3] Where an essential element of the research design would be compromised by full disclosure to participants, the withholding of information should be specified in the project proposal and explicit procedures stated to obviate any potential harm arising from such withholding. Deception or covert collection of data should only take place where it has been agreed with a named responsible person in the organisation and it is essential

5	Does your proposed design involve repetitive observation of participants, (i.e. more than twice over a period of more than 2-3 weeks)? Is this necessary? If it is, have you made appropriate provision for participants to renew consent or withdraw from the study half-way through? [4]		X
6	Are you proposing to collect video and/or audio data? If so have you indicated how you will protect participants' anonymity and confidentiality and how you will store the data?	X	
7	Does your proposal indicate how you will give your participants the opportunity to access the outcomes of your research (including audio/visual materials) after they have provided data?	X	
8	Have you built in time for a pilot study to make sure that any task materials you propose to use are age appropriate and that they are unlikely to cause offence to any of your participants?		X
9	Is your research likely to involve discussion of sensitive topics (e.g. adult/child relationships, peer relationships, discussions about personal teaching styles, ability levels of individual children and/or adults)? What safeguards have you put in place to protect participants' confidentiality?	X	
10	Does your proposed research raise any issues of personal safety for yourself or other persons involved in the project? Do you need to carry out a 'risk analysis' and/or discuss this with teachers, parents and other adults involved in the research?		X
11	Will financial inducements (other than reasonable expenses and compensation for time) be offered to participants?		X
12	Will the study involve recruitment of patients or staff through the NHS or the use of NHS data?		X

If you answered 'yes' to questions **12**, you will also have to submit an application to an appropriate National Research Ethics Service ethics committee (http://www.nres.npsa.nhs.uk/).

to achieve the research results required, where the research objective has strong scientific merit and where there is an appropriate risk management and harm alleviation strategy.

[4] Where participants are involved in longer-term data collection, the use of procedures for the renewal of consent at appropriate times should be considered.