



The Role of Middle-level Leaders in Improving Schooling

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Abstract: Middle managers have a significant and pivotal function in the administration of educational institutions and in collaborating with educators to foster initiatives to enhance school performance. Nevertheless, the precise nature of their responsibilities could be more explicit and complex. The cultivation, reinforcement, and enhancement of their leadership skills are vital. The primary impetus behind this research endeavor was to enhance comprehension and comprehensively examine the responsibilities and impact of middle leaders within educational institutions. Initially, a comprehensive examination of existing literature about middle leadership was undertaken. Additionally, an analysis has been conducted on the obstacles, complexities, and expectations faced by middle leaders in their professional roles, and appropriate recommendations have been provided to address these issues. In conclusion, we provide a concise overview of the whole text.

Keywords: Middle-level leaders, leadership, improve schooling

1. Introduction

With the development of society and education, instructional leadership is gaining importance globally. It is now widely accepted that instructional leadership in schools is not limited to the headmaster alone but functions in conjunction with other school leaders, such as deputy headmasters, middle leaders, and teachers (De Nobile, 2018; Dinham, 2007; Hallinger et al., 2018). Despite the significant impact of principals on schooling, there is an interplay between them and other leaders and an interactive relationship that requires effective collaboration mechanisms to improve teaching and learning. One study showed that improved teaching and learning were the most significant

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outcomes that principals shared with other leaders (Costanza et al., 1987; Ogina, 2017). In particular subject programs that underpin teaching and learning effectiveness, principals work closely with middle leaders to deliver instructional leadership tasks (Bush, 2015). Therefore, middle managers play a crucial role in schools. Without the involvement of middle leaders, who serve in various capacities as the schools' engine and have a significant influence on the institution as a whole, successful operation and improvement of schools cannot be achieved (Fleming, 2019). Each middle leadership role in a school is different and has distinct duties. Department heads are examples of someone with tasks linked to topic development, whereas academic leadership is an example of someone with tasks related to student welfare and behavior (De Nobile, 2018).

Even though middle leadership functions frequently overlap, this study focuses on the role of middle-level leadership in enhancing education.

2. Literature review

2.1 The context of middle leadership

In the following sections, I will first introduce the context of middle leadership through frequent references to Fleming (2019). Since the number of schools in many towns and geographical regions, it is customary to perceive schools as an inherent component of local or regional authority structures. Because schools are subject to national legislation, centralized accountability systems like the Education Standards Authority may impact their operations. These mechanisms are likely to have an impact as schools are subject to national legislation. Based on Fleming (2019), the geographical location of each institution plays a significant role in developing its own identity. Due to the legacy of different national pay systems, most schools still maintain a hierarchy, although it is only on paper (Fleming, 2019).

According to Fleming (2019), middle-level leaders in secondary schools must have in-depth knowledge and a thorough understanding of the challenges the school encounters. Even without collaborative efforts, influential team leaders can comprehend the broader scope of the situation and demonstrate steadfast commitment toward attaining the institution's universally acknowledged objectives. The reason for this is that the objectives of schools are established based on consensus. According to Fleming (2019), competent senior leaders work with middle leaders and other colleagues to define the school's vision and goals to ensure that ownership is maintained and that there is a clear purpose, which, when met, enables better management of the school while contributing better to teachers' teaching and students' learning.

Middle leaders work in schools that have links with multiple external agencies (Fleming, 2019). It seems probable that individuals in this role could need to build connections with various stakeholders in the field of education, including national education leaders (NLEs), specialist education leaders (SLEs), professionals involved in school development, local authority officials,

social workers, educational psychologists, tutors responsible for junior teacher training, university researchers, and employees affiliated with examination boards.

Few schools exist in isolation, and middle leaders must be able to transition easily into various settings and communicate in a way that is consistent with their goals (Fleming, 2019). Flexibly adapting personal styles and approaches to different situations and contexts when dealing with colleagues is essential. At the same time, the ability to communicate both in writing and verbally, as well as the ability to adapt language to the audience, is essential.

2.2 The definition of a middle-level leader

For the review's objectives, a precise definition of a term is often necessary. Nevertheless, doing so in the middle leadership field involves several obstacles (Gurr, 2023). A person with formal leadership and management responsibilities within the senior leadership and mentoring staff is referred to by Gurr and Drysdale (2013) as a "middle manager." The definition provided originates from the authors of the academic paper titled "Middle Manager." This particular expression is prevalent in a substantial body of literature about early education, as well as in the realm of commerce. According to Fleming (2019), the phrases "middle leadership" and "middle management" are occasionally used interchangeably, even though they do not have the same meaning in either case.

In order to achieve effectiveness, middle school leaders must be able to lead and manage (Fleming, 2019). Middle leaders serve as a layer of leadership between the senior leadership team and classroom teachers. They must be able to motivate and challenge colleagues and have a clear vision of greatness for their field or team. Additionally, they must oversee the school's daily operations and keep an eye on staff performance and student achievement (Fleming, 2019). Thus, middle leaders are responsible for education, research, and other aspects of the school and ensuring that the school functions appropriately and meets society's requirements. As most middle leaders are also tasked with teaching, middle leaders in schools must demonstrate role modeling in the classroom (Fleming, 2019). Despite the difficulty of these responsibilities, many teachers and senior leaders view them as the "voice of reason" in schools because they have high expectations for their students and subjects while maintaining a grounded approach to all aspects of their work (Fleming, 2019). They also make a significant contribution to education in schools.

In the contemporary education landscape, there is a growing presence of individuals assuming middle leadership roles. Irrespective of their designated titles, most of these positions focus on the education domain and on enhancing teaching and learning standards and student performance (Fleming, 2019). Middle management plays a vital role in the overall school system, not only dealing with day-to-day tasks but also coordinating with supervisors to ensure the efficient running of the school. Therefore, middle managers are one of the most challenging and productive groups

for schools. According to Gurr and Drysdale (2013), middle leaders play a crucial role in enhancing education. They may hold positions such as director of teaching and learning, curriculum coordinator, subject coordinator, department head, student welfare coordinator, or grade coordinator. The research conducted by Glover et al. (1998) examines how middle managers take part in operational activities spanning from higher-level to lower-level duties, as well as the efficacy and efficiency of training methods implemented at this organizational level.

2.3 The role of mid-level leaders

Overall, the role of middle managers includes ensuring educational improvement (this role is often limited), bridging and brokering (a transmit that connects from the top to the bottom); subject managers; formal oversight and assessment of classroom setting (Glover et al., 1998). The following are some detailed methods middle managers might use to enhance teaching and learning. First and foremost, middle leaders can foster common standards, harmonious relationships, and a collaborative environment to build and maintain a healthy culture. These tactics encourage teachers to adjust their teaching methods (Leithwood, 2016), share information and creative ideas, and draw lessons from their and other peoples' experiences (Forde et al., 2018). Some subject leaders have 'tailor-made' responsibilities, taking on additional responsibilities across the school. The capacity of middle managers to inspire, motivate, and support staff teams was a constant theme in the interviews, and this ability is crucial for successful education and instruction (Glover et al., 1998). Also, middle leaders foster a culture of sharing that enables teachers to exhibit leadership by identifying their strengths and limitations as a foundation for professional development (Dinham, 2007). Second, different levels of middle leadership impact how students view the organization, which raises their knowledge of and interest in management. Middle leaders also encourage cooperation, group learning, and communities of practice (Grootenboer et al., 2014). They promote collegial interactions (Edwards-Groves et al., 2018) and a climate of shared accountability where teachers have confidence in their leaders (Gurr, 2018). To encourage collaboration among multiple stakeholders, middle leaders and instructors uphold a constructive working relationship (Edwards-Groves et al., 2018). Middle leaders develop relationships, nurture and support networks, and look for associations that will benefit both parties through such a process (Poultney, 2007).

On the other hand, middle-level leadership can support the growth and development of teachers' knowledge and skills (Tang et al., 2022). The body of research in this field is expanding as more and more studies have been conducted to examine the connections between middle leadership and teacher professional development (Edwards-Groves et al., 2018). The critical role of middle leaders in improving teaching and learning through teacher development has received much attention in the literature. This phenomenon is often associated with promoting and facilitating teachers' professional development, creating opportunities for teacher advancement and cultivating a culture

of continuous learning among educators. According to Ogina (2017), middle leaders provide instructional support to teachers. Middle leaders can also contribute to creating a productive organizational culture in schools that will boost teachers' motivation, teamwork, and feelings of participation. In addition, they serve as mentors by leading by example and performing classroom observations (Dinham, 2007; Ogina, 2017). To foster continuous improvement in the quality of instruction and educational outcomes, middle leaders also facilitate peer evaluation among teachers, promote dialogue on effective strategies, and encourage the acceptance of constructive comments. Teachers adjust their behavior and tactics in light of their circumstances on this basis as well. They support teachers in improving their teaching methods and encouraging reflection on their classroom procedures (Ogina, 2017).

Most middle managers acknowledge the need to be involved in staff education and improvement. In contrast, others overwhelmed by school commitments or administrative requirements seem less proactive and less imaginative. A study by Turner (2000) investigated the most successful ways for department heads to improve education and teaching in their departments. The research took place through a survey to investigate the most effective strategies employed by department heads to enhance the educational and instructional quality within their respective departments.

In addition, the former middle leaders with whom they had worked were considered extremely important. The significance of informal gatherings was also emphasized, with most respondents citing the excellent impact of daily formal and informal sharing (Turner, 2000).

Gurr and Drysdale (2013) conducted a study on middle leaders, which revealed that the productivity of these individuals has a significant impact on the design of their roles. According to Gurr and Drysdale (2013), some are anticipated leaders who impact teaching and learning. However, there are frequently minimal requirements or chances for leadership responsibilities for teachers in these critical positions. In their work, Gurr and Drysdale (2013) provide recommendations pertaining to the construction of leadership within educational institutions, with a specific focus on the significance of middle leaders and strategies for their enhanced preparation and support.

While many have the potential to become leaders of education and instruction, others are still determining how they can influence teaching and learning. Secondly, according to senior leaders and middle leaders, middle leaders can affect outcomes for student learning and advance education. Glover et al. (1998) highlight four characteristics of the middle manager's evolving role as experienced by middle managers in their conclusion. These characteristics are the transition from administration to leadership and management, the decreasing transfer of tasks across the school, the growing role in oversight and assessment, and the comprehension of changes started by senior management. However, the nature and significance of this function vary greatly depending on the setting. For instance, some middle leaders collaborate with teachers to enhance teaching and

learning, while others merely deal with concerns related to supplies, textbooks, and schedules (Gurr & Drysdale, 2013). Finally, Gurr and Drysdale (2013) conclude that while middle leaders can result in improvements in education, senior leaders' lack of comprehension and organizational support, middle leaders' lack of professional training and leadership development, and their lack of capacity and expertise all result in missed opportunities to transform schools.

According to Fleming (2019), middle leaders are crucial to the progress of schooling, and competent leadership is essential to the effectiveness of schools. Good leaders must not have all the answers to the problems that arise in their work, but they do have the ability to reflect clearly on the situation, and they can make sound decisions based on sound judgment. Any secondary school's intermediate leadership position should be concerned with developing a distinct sense of purpose for their division or year group, effectively utilizing groups, persons, and other resources to accomplish set goals, and ensuring efficient and effective day-to-day administration Fleming (2019). The skills needed to be an effective middle leader are varied. However, people management skills (such as a commitment to helping teaching assistants who work together in teaching teams to be as effective as possible) are central to getting the most out of teachers and students for maximum achievement. It would help if you were ambitious for the teachers and teaching assistants in your team, helping them to be the best practitioners they can be to facilitate teaching and learning, not only to benefit the students and improve their learning but also to give them a sense of satisfaction and pride and to fulfill any career aspirations they may have, ultimately in achieving good outcomes in life. It is, therefore, essential to build a culture of continuous learning and to make staff development a critical aspect of your role Fleming (2019), ultimately improving schooling across the school.

3. Discussion

3.1 The Importance of Identifying Middle Managers

The research shows that successful instructional leadership needs to be divided and managed according to different levels (Leithwood et al., 2020). If we can clearly understand what is meant by middle leadership, then we will understand how to go about implementing effective management. Although the definition of middle-level leadership is complex, and the content and nature of its work depend on its role in the school, the prediction and identification of these factors are uncertain (Gurr & Drysdale et al., 2013). Most studies agree that good middle leaders effectively improve teacher performance and can contribute to student achievement, the organization of various school activities, and student academic outcomes (Fleming, 2019). According to Fleming (2019), including middle leaders in educational institutions leads to notable advancements. However, these leaders must rely on interpersonal contacts and foster tight collaboration with their team members to attain exceptional outcomes. Otherwise, it is not easy to achieve the desired outcomes when middle leaders only make decisions according to their wishes and without the advice and support of team members.

Teaching and learning are at the heart of all schools' operations (Fleming, 2019). The effectiveness of teaching and schooling lies in the ability of pupils to be deeply aware of the values it implies, to actively engage and ask relevant questions, and thus to demonstrate excellence in the learning process. In a high-quality school, all students will be actively involved in their learning and inspired and enlightened, culminating in outstanding learning outcomes. It is, therefore, essential that middle leaders have excellent leadership skills and can place themselves at the heart of educational activities and become leaders in the development of education (Fleming, 2019). And they can only make smooth progress in improving schooling if they have the appropriate teaching and learning skills as leaders in teaching and learning. As middle leaders in the overall structure of the school, they have the opportunity to ensure the flourishing of subjects and the efficient implementation of teaching and learning, thus breathing new life into the development of the school (Fleming, 2019).

Before taking up the position, most middle leaders usually receive promotions because they have an excellent teaching record, which provides a strong foundation for their future (Fleming, 2019). They must demonstrate excellence in the classroom, as well as a deep love for the subject they are studying, as middle leaders must have the ability to lead by example as a role model. Only when they show a keen interest and seriousness in the subject they are teaching will students change their attitude towards learning and take their studies seriously, leading to better results. Therefore, when dealing with students in their learning, middle leaders should be an example of student learning rather than a manager (Fleming, 2019). At the same time, they should offer students a good learning environment and help them develop the correct values. Their noteworthy point is that their colleagues respect them as middle leaders, but this does not mean they have to be the best teachers in their department. Therefore, we cannot expect every middle-level leader to be an exceptional educator, but we should focus more on whether each leader is competent for the job (Fleming, 2019). At the same time, the effectiveness of teaching and learning depends on a combination of factors, and no one person can achieve the highest level of excellence in all areas. If a middle leader has gained outstanding teachers in his or her team, then he or she should be proud of their abilities and ensure that they are being used effectively for the development of the rest of the group.

At the same time, it is vital to develop a shared vision for the entire department, as doing so provides a strong foundation for the organization's future direction (Fleming, 2019). Therefore, to drive everyone's success, middle leaders must clearly identify and implement shared educational goals and personally take the lead in achieving them. This phenomenon will lead to improved teaching and learning outcomes. Before developing a shared vision for the department, the following questions can be asked of department members (Fleming, 2019): What insights and competencies will students gain by studying the topic that will drive their continued growth? What kinds of things will students learn through their engagement with this curriculum? What talents, knowledge, and

understanding will they gain through exposure to the topic that they would not have gained through other means? What impact will what students learn in your classroom have on the rest of their lives? It is necessary to consider this before making any final choices and ensure it stays front and center. Setting common development goals and considering their contribution to improving the quality of teaching and learning is essential in making decisions about change and direction when acting in a middle leadership capacity for school links.

As a middle leader, it is essential to be ambitious and support to the teachers and teaching assistants in a team to help them become the most outstanding practitioners they can be (Fleming, 2019). This move will not only benefit the students by maximizing their academic support. However, also inspires a sense of satisfaction and pride in the team members to achieve their potential career goals, thus enhancing the quality and effectiveness of the middle leaders' work and, ultimately, the development of the school as a whole. Therefore, it is crucial to establish a positive and mutually supportive collaborative environment in terms of interpersonal relationships in your team and to develop staff as an essential part of your work process and right-hand man. Leaders achieve great things through others. Good middle leaders know that the teaching and management they do directly only impact some students. In contrast, the effect on others is achieved indirectly through the other team members, so the environment and collaboration in the team are essential when middle leaders are managing (Fleming, 2019).

In addition, teaching assistants are a valuable resource, and their effective use can have a tangible impact on student learning and support the classroom teacher in their teaching. However, just like any other teacher on the team, they must be nurtured and developed (Fleming, 2019). Without proper training, teaching assistants may work in a way that inadvertently hinders the development of the school. They ensure that teaching assistants are essential in the middle leader's improvement plan for the school. The middle-level leader should be committed to assisting teaching assistants who work closely with the team to ensure teaching assistants maximize their work's effectiveness (Fleming, 2019). At the secondary level, as departments do not usually assign teaching assistants to specific departments, some are hired because of the needs of a typical student, which triggers additional support for that student, which can present some difficulties. Even so, the Department for Education (2011) clarifies that teaching assistants ought to deploy effectively to teach and build effective professional relationships with colleagues, knowing how and when to use advice and specialist support. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the middle leader to take appropriate measures to implement an efficient operational strategy and to ensure that the instructors within the team possess a comprehensive understanding of the optimal methods for utilizing teaching assistants.

3.2 Factors that challenge the middle leader

According to Gurr and Drysdale (2013), middle leaders may have noticed to promote success by focusing on students and their learning, being highly sought after for their high-level interpersonal skills, which tend to be widely recognized and trusted; having high levels of professional skills and strategic resourcing to drive wider publicity and promotion of their department while building external solid relationships; influence the planning and organization of the department; develop a sense of shared purpose, collaboration, and teamwork within their department to drive teacher learning and foster a culture of shared responsibility and mutual trust; demonstrate a clear vision and set high expectations for themselves and others, while fostering a culture of success. However, even though middle leaders can succeed in these ways and skills, they still encounter some challenging career challenges.

None of the newly hired participants could adequately explain the parameters of their work when questioned about their experiences with middle leadership, as evidenced in Irvine and Brundrett's (2016) study. One teacher in that study stated, "The overall nature of this job is ambiguous." This thought would be similar to the issues mentioned by Gurr and Drysdale (2013), who similarly felt that the definition of middle leadership was unclear. Although they both acknowledged the existence of middle-level leadership and expressed affirmation of the significance of the position, they could not clearly define where the role fits in. The leadership skills of many teachers have limitations due to the presence of role ambiguity. This condition puts pressure and difficulty on the work of middle leaders and their team members. Participants found the lack of a clearly defined organized function, especially in the early phases of their appointment, problematic because the middle leader's role in school work is frequently reactive and unexpected (Irvine & Brundrett, 2016). Some interviewees referred to how the school had always positioned itself for the role, with one representative comment being: "..... We have always done it this way", implying that the positioning of middle leaders is similar across the school. This situation could be difficult since new middle leaders are eager to advance in their careers but may feel restrained by the inertia of other employees or departmental members. When questioned in Irvine and Brundrett's (2016) study what they found most challenging about the post, a sizable proportion of participants mentioned managing the department's members. The research conducted by Gurr and Drysdale (2013) examines the role-generation process and its significant influence on the responsibilities and tasks performed by mid-level leaders. Additionally, the study implies that certain persons who took part in the research were anticipated to possess leadership qualities that impact the teaching and learning process. Moreover, it is proposed that these individuals have the potential to be cultivated and provided with necessary support.

Unfortunately, however, the research shows that there are still many instances where faculty members have little opportunity or expectation to demonstrate their leadership skills. The advent of a "flattened" organizational structure in schools has led to a need for more internal promotion

opportunities, as evidenced by the prolonged tenure of a significant number of teachers inside the same school (Irvine & Brundrett, 2016).

Furthermore, people who do not possess the skills, attitudes, or competencies required to lead are forced into middle leadership positions with high expectations because they do not want to be leaders (Gurr & Drysdale, 2013). On the other hand, the entry of people who lack middle leadership traits can have a negative impact and create difficulties in the school's educational process.

In an intricate and fast-moving school environment, middle leaders are forced to take on a massive amount of work due to the vague definition of their responsibilities and the reactive nature of their role. At the same time, the lack of time puts excellent pressure and challenges on them. Furthermore, middle-level executives encounter the challenge of optimizing the utilization of their finite resources to attain their objectives effectively. As participants in the (Irvine & Brundrett, 2016) study said: "There is never enough time to do the job"; "..... Your day can be hijacked by anything very quickly". As a result of their heavy teaching loads and the expectation that they will be leading practitioners, mid-level leaders often find themselves unable to participate as fully as they would like in departmental meetings (Irvine & Brundrett, 2016): "You do not get to see them (department members) as often as you should." Therefore, according to Davies (2009) and Brundrett and Terrell (2004), time pressure appears to be just as significant at this independent school as it is in other departmental studies. The study's participants also discussed how unprepared they thought they were for the role. As another participant in the (Irvine & Brundrett, 2016) study stated, "I was unprepared in terms of my induction as a department head", while some interviewees talked about the challenges they faced in the stages of their first middle leadership role: "one of the steepest learning curves I have ever experienced".

3. Conclusion

This article builds on previous research by examining the context, influencing variables, and barriers experienced about the article's theme, namely the function of school middle leaders in improving school education. Everyone in a middle leadership position ultimately faces challenges, complications, expectations, and barriers. According to Tang et al. (2022), middle leadership has the potential to be mind-boggling and even demoralizing at times. However, also has the potential to be uplifting, challenging, fulfilling, and satisfying. According to Fleming (2019), middle leaders who effectively assist their team or department in cultivating a distinct identity and fostering group cohesion while nurturing a sense of purpose and contributing to enhancing educational quality are likely to experience a reasonable level of satisfaction. Mid-level leaders who help their team or department build a unique identity and group loyalty should feel the sense of accomplishment they deserve.

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