

THE PREDICAMENT OF MIDDLE LEADERSHIP IN SCHOOLS-NAVIGATING THE TENSIONS BETWEEN PEDAGOGY AND ADMINISTRATION

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Abstract

Middle leadership (ML) in schools epitomizes a critical yet a contested vital area where teaching and learning priorities and leadership and management accountabilities overlap. Middle leaders are sandwiched between the school management teams (SMT) and classroom teachers and expected to advocate for teaching and learning while fulfilling leadership and management and perform administrative duties at the same time. This amphibian expectation frequently builds constraints that dent who they are as professionals, task distribution, and ability to effect meaningful educational influence and change. This paper draws on both international and South African viewpoints to critically scrutinize the predicament of ML by traversing the tensions between pedagogy and administration. The discourse is anchored on three main theories of distributed leadership, role conflict, and concepts of instructional leadership. It foregrounds the attempt by middle leaders to reconcile their pedagogical obligation with the increase of administrative responsibilities, often resulting in the attention and priority of one area over the other. The international literature highlights common obstacles across numerous schooling systems. In South Africa unique challenges shaped by policy restructuring, unequal resource distribution and access, and systemic accountability frameworks are exposed by the literature review. The conclusion of the paper proposes strategies to support middle leaders through dedicated professional development, clearly defining their roles, and introducing policies that bring a balance between administrative responsibility and pedagogical leadership. In so doing, the paper contends that when properly supported, ML has the potential to change school culture and improve teacher leadership contributing and leading to enhanced learner academic outcomes.

Keywords: *Middle Leadership (ML), distributed leadership, role conflict, emotional labour, pedagogy.*

1. Introduction

Schools are increasingly expected to improve learner outcomes while responding to policy demands and socio-economic challenges. Within this context, middle leaders play a pivotal role in bridging the divide between SMTs and classroom practice (Bush, 2019; Harris, 2020; Grootenboer et al., 2023). Their responsibilities include supporting teachers, monitoring curriculum implementation, and facilitating professional development, while simultaneously managing administrative and compliance-related tasks (Grant, 2017; Mestry, 2017).

This dual responsibility creates a persistent tension between pedagogical leadership and administrative accountability. These competing demands affect middle leaders' professional identity, time allocation, and ability to contribute meaningfully to school improvement (Gurr & Drysdale, 2013; Msila, 2014). In South Africa, these challenges are intensified by systemic inequalities, resource constraints, and accountability pressures (Naicker & Mestry, 2015).

Understanding this predicament is critical, as middle leaders directly influence teacher development and learner achievement (Day et al., 2016). This paper examines how middle leaders navigate these tensions and proposes strategies to enhance their effectiveness.

2. Conceptual and theoretical framework

2.1. Conceptualising middle leadership

Middle leaders, such as heads of department, occupy an "amphibious" position within school hierarchies, mediating between leadership and classroom practice (Grootenboer et al., 2023; Tapala, 2023).

Their role encompasses curriculum leadership, teacher development, and administrative accountability, placing them at the centre of school improvement efforts.

2.2. Leadership, management, and their integration

Leadership involves influencing and guiding individuals toward shared goals, while management focuses on planning, organising, and monitoring processes (Bush, 2019). Middle leaders are required to integrate both, often prioritising compliance and administrative tasks at the expense of pedagogical leadership, thereby generating role tension.

2.3. Distributed leadership

Distributed leadership emphasises shared responsibility and collaboration (Harris, 2020; Spillane, 2006). While this framework positions middle leaders as key agents of change, their effectiveness is often constrained by limited authority and increased accountability, particularly in hierarchical systems such as South Africa's (Grant, 2017).

2.4. Instructional leadership

Instructional leadership foregrounds teaching and learning as the core of school leadership (Hallinger, 2011). Middle leaders are well positioned to influence classroom practice; however, administrative demands frequently limit their engagement with instructional work (Mestry, 2017).

2.5. Role theory and emotional labour

Role theory highlights the tensions arising from conflicting expectations and unclear responsibilities (Anglin et al., 2022). Middle leaders often experience role ambiguity and conflict, leading to stress and reduced effectiveness. These challenges are compounded by emotional labour, as leaders must manage relationships while meeting organisational expectations (Hochschild, 1983; Msila, 2014).

3. Literature review: Global and South African perspectives

Research consistently highlights the central role of middle leaders in linking policy and practice while shaping school culture (Leithwood et al., 2020). Internationally, middle leaders are recognised as key drivers of instructional improvement but face challenges related to workload, role ambiguity, and limited autonomy (Gurr & Drysdale, 2013).

In South Africa, these challenges are intensified by contextual factors such as resource disparities, overcrowded classrooms, and rigid accountability systems (Mestry, 2017; Naicker & Mestry, 2015). As a result, middle leaders often prioritise administrative compliance over pedagogical leadership, limiting their impact on teaching and learning.

The literature further emphasises the emotional and relational dimensions of middle leadership. Leaders act as intermediaries between SMTs and teachers, managing expectations from both sides while supporting professional development (Msila, 2014). This “in-between” position contributes to stress, workload intensification, and professional vulnerability.

4. Navigating the tensions between pedagogy and leadership and management

4.1. Workload and time pressures

Middle leaders face significant workload pressures, often balancing teaching responsibilities with extensive administrative duties (Day et al., 2016). In South Africa, systemic constraints exacerbate these pressures, leading to reduced focus on instructional leadership.

4.2. Role ambiguity and conflict

Unclear role expectations create tension between pedagogical and administrative responsibilities. Middle leaders are frequently evaluated based on compliance rather than instructional impact, reinforcing the prioritisation of managerial tasks (Lumby, 2013).

4.3. Emotional labour

Middle leaders must navigate complex interpersonal relationships, balancing accountability demands with support for teachers. This emotional labour is intensified in contexts of inequality and resource scarcity, contributing to burnout and reduced job satisfaction (Hochschild, 1983; Msila, 2014).

4.4. Strategies for reconciliation

To address these tensions, three interrelated strategies are proposed:

- Structural strategies: Clear role definitions, delegation of administrative tasks, and distributed leadership practices (Harris, 2020).
- Relational strategies: Strengthening mentoring, collaboration, and trust among staff (Day et al., 2016).
- Personal strategies: Developing emotional intelligence, resilience, and reflective practice among middle leaders.

These strategies collectively enable middle leaders to balance competing demands and enhance their instructional impact.

5. Implications for practice and policy

5.1. Professional development

Targeted professional development is essential to equip middle leaders with both instructional and managerial competencies. Programmes should include mentoring, curriculum leadership, emotional intelligence, and time management (Day et al., 2016; Grant, 2017).

5.2. Role clarity and workload management

Clear job descriptions and protected time for instructional leadership are critical. Reducing administrative burdens allows middle leaders to focus on teaching and learning, thereby improving school outcomes (Mestry, 2017).

5.3. Policy and systemic support

Policy frameworks must recognise the strategic role of middle leaders and provide adequate resources, authority, and support. In South Africa, targeted interventions are needed to address systemic inequalities and strengthen leadership capacity at the middle level (Bush & Glover, 2016).

6. Conclusion

Middle leadership represents a critical yet complex component of school leadership, characterised by tensions between pedagogy and leadership and management. These tensions, shaped by structural, relational, and contextual factors, significantly influence middle leaders' effectiveness.

This paper has shown that while middle leaders are central to school improvement, their potential is often constrained by workload pressures, role ambiguity, and emotional demands. Addressing these challenges requires a holistic approach that includes professional development, role clarity, and supportive policy frameworks.

When adequately supported, middle leaders can act as powerful agents of change, enhancing teacher development, strengthening school culture, and improving learner outcomes. Recognising and addressing their challenges is therefore essential for advancing educational quality and equity.

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