Middle Leadership in Irish Primary Schools: A Critical Analysis of Principals' Perspectives

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Abstract: This paper shares some preliminary findings from doctoral research exploring Irish primary school principals' views regarding middle leadership. This qualitative study used a grounded theory approach to investigating their perspectives, using interviews, observations, and extant documents. The findings reported here relate to interviews conducted with ten principals. Leadership's centrality to quality schooling is widely recognised, but the demands of school leadership have become too vast for individual leadership. Middle leaders (MLs), situated between senior leaders and teachers, are uniquely positioned to assist with this. Their proximity to the classroom enables them to influence teaching and learning more readily than principals. But their role remains under-researched. Investigating principals' perspectives is critical to leveraging the ML role because principals can decide its parameters and act as a barrier or support to the role. The findings in this paper relate to: 1: *How principals understand middle leadership: how it is defined and desirable ML qualities and skills.* Principals had difficulty defining the role, but most expressed an understanding that it did not only encompass formal titles. Informal middle leading was a source of leadership development and staff tension. 2: *How principals utilise middle leadership: duties and responsibilities, oversight, and accountability.* The scope of MLs' duties was inconsistent across settings, and descriptions of ML accountability were ambiguous. Levels of oversight varied, but most sought increased ML autonomy. The subject matter of this paper will be of interest to principals seeking to better understand and utilise middle leadership and MLs wishing to comprehend what principals require and desire from MLs. It also holds value for policymakers wishing to understand how leadership policy is enacted in Irish primary schools. This study relates to a field of leadership and management that is under-researched both in Ireland and internationally. Little is known about how middle-level leadership is utilised in Irish primary schools and principals' understanding of middle leadership practices.

Keywords: Middle Leadership, Grounded Theory, Middle Leaders in Primary Schools, Assistant Principals

1. Introduction and Background

There is a growing understanding that the single-person leadership of the principal is insufficient. The role of leading teaching and learning in complex organisations like schools is too great for one person, necessitating principals to engage with others (Odhiambo, 2014). The 'others' that principals ought to engage with are middle leaders (MLs). MLs are better positioned than principals to affect teaching and learning because their influence is exercised closer to classrooms (Grootenboer and Edwards-Groves, 2020). Research has outlined the potential impacts of MLs on teacher quality and attitudes, student outcomes and school improvement (Bufalino, 2017; De Nobile, 2021; Gurr and Drysdale, 2013)

Despite the role's potential, it remains under-researched, especially compared to the field of leadership in general. There is a crucial need to establish ways for schools to recognise, nurture and develop MLs, given the increasing responsibilities being bestowed upon them (Bufalino, 2017; Bryant and Walker, 2022; De Nobile, 2021; Lipscombe et al., 2021; Odhiambo 2014). They are not simply aspiring principals. It is a specific, crucial form of leadership currently being undervalued and underdeveloped (Bassett and Robson, 2016; Lillejord and Børte, 2020)

1.1 Who is a Middle Leader?

A single definition remains elusive. Two of the more extensive literature reviews in recent years give somewhat conflicting definitions. 'Middle leader' and 'teacher leader' are the dominant terms used in literature. While De Nobile (2021) suggests that these terms may be becoming interchangeable, Lipscombe et al. (2021) state that they are, in fact, distinct, though the boundary is blurred. Lipscombe et al. (2021) describe how some contexts tie the retention of a teaching load to the ML definition and that formal title and accountability distinguish MLs from teacher leaders. However, De Nobile (2021) views tethering the definition to a formal title as problematic because teachers without formal titles may perform ML roles. So, he places more emphasis on influence over titles/positions. Considering both reviews, the tentative definition used in this paper is; *a teacher who can influence policy, practice and staff, operating below the level of senior leaders, who may or may not hold a formal title, while retaining a significant teaching load.*

1.2 What do MLs do, and how can They be Successful in the Role?

Their specific responsibilities vary widely across contexts and so cannot be relied upon as a basis for a definition (Murphy, 2020). However, De Nobile and Ridden (2012) outline their duties under five broad categories. The *management* role involves organising human and physical resources like timetabling, planning events/activities and collecting student data. The *administrative* role involves developing procedures to efficiently use time and resources, such as organising file systems and databases. The *supervision* role includes staff evaluation. The *staff development* role entails building capacity and leading by example. The *leadership* role is about influencing others' attitudes and behaviours.

Specific characteristics are necessary for ML success. Personal attributes such as enthusiasm, drive, communication, and interpersonal skills are essential. They need the trust and respect of staff, strong content and pedagogical knowledge, and the ability to mediate senior leadership's vision for teachers. They require authenticity in the role, the ability to provide advice, work alongside teachers, and be accepted by them. This requires credibility, which comes from experience and access to professional development (De Nobile, 2021; Gurr, 2019; Jorgenssen, 2016). Principal support is another significant factor in MLs' success.

1.3 The Principal's Role

Principals are vital to advancing middle leadership because of their role in constructing it, deciding what tasks are distributed to MLs and what remains under the principal's purview (Gurr and Drysdale, 2013; Lárusdottir and O'Connor, 2017; Odhiambo, 2014). Unfortunately, MLs often lack a clear job description, with their work frequently determined by the principal's need, which can render the job overloaded, unclear, and ineffective (Lillejord and Børte, 2021)

If principals wish to share or distribute leadership rather than simply delegate, trust between them and MLs is key. They need confidence that ML decisions are consistent with school values and policy, and staff need to feel confident enough to enact leadership without fear of negative consequences. If they are granted some agency within broad accountability structures, distribution of leadership can occur. However, it can be constrained by principals' reluctance to share power (Bush and Ng, 2019).

In the future, there will be a greater expectation for MLs to take leading roles in improving teaching and learning. Therefore, principals must ensure MLs have the requisite development and support for this. Principals must identify aspirant MLs and support their development by providing quality professional learning, building a collaborative school culture, and enhancing organisational policies, structures, and processes (Gurr, 2019; Gurr and Drysdale, 2013)

This paper examines how Irish primary school principals understand and use middle leadership in their contexts. Formal leadership structures in a typical Irish primary school consist of a principal, deputy principal, and a number of assistant principals (APs), AP1s (who receive greater remuneration), and AP2s. APs have a full teaching load, whereas the other leaders may be non-teaching, depending on school size. In most schools, staff are employed by voluntary boards of management who oversee schools on behalf of the patron and the minister of education.

2. Methodology

A grounded theory (GT) approach was used, informed by case study. GT is a structured yet flexible methodology appropriate when little is known about a phenomenon that allows a broad focus to be guided by data into a narrower field (Charmaz, 2014; Tie et al., 2019). As this research explores an area in which there is comparatively little research, GT was the most suitable approach.

Context is integral to understanding middle leadership (Lipscombe et al., 2021); hence, incorporating case study allows a deeper exploration than interviews alone. It is a research method that can contribute to knowledge regarding complex individual, group, organisational and social phenomena (Yin, 2009). This study investigates the complex phenomenon of middle leadership and its meaning as held by individual leaders and groups of leaders, as well as how it fits into schools' organisational structures.

Five schools were initially sampled purposively (Teddlie and Yu, 2007). A key feature of GT is concurrent data collection and analysis, enabling the researcher to sequentially focus on the most significant emerging issues (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Analysis of each interview influenced the next. NVivo software was used to aid analysis, revealing the need for more data to develop emerging concepts further. Five additional schools were

recruited through theoretical sampling to explore the extent to which these concepts were present across contexts. Upon completion of these interviews, all ten were revisited and further analysed in relation to each other (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Data collection overview

The coding structure, taken from Charmaz (2014), used open coding primarily when analysing individual transcripts immediately post-interview, moving towards more focused coding as all ten interviews were completed. Other data sources from the broader doctoral research (field notes, school policy and inspection reports) have yet to be fully analysed. Therefore, theoretical coding of the entire data set has yet to occur. Some of the preliminary findings from the analysis of these interviews are reported here, giving an overview of how participants understand and utilise middle leadership in their contexts.

3. Findings

3.1 How Principals Understand Middle Leadership

3.1.1 Defining Middle Leadership

Some principals expressed an understanding that middle leadership could encompass the formal title of AP *and* informal leadership practices shown by teachers without formal titles.

> *'You'll always[…]have kind of natural leaders…who could just be very passionate about certain things and have I suppose, the personality and the attributes and the desire for leadership. So even without a formal role or title, can actually end up being MLs' Principal 1*

For these principals, the notion of middle leadership was fluid, with teachers without formal titles entering the middle leadership space at different times, depending on school needs.

However, not everyone understood this informal component. Four principals referred only to the AP title when asked to outline their definition of middle leadership. Two further defined the role by distinguishing between AP1s and 2s, designating AP1s as senior leaders and even meeting and communicating with them separately from AP2s, whom they identified as the MLs.

3.1.2 Informal Middle Leadership

There were many examples of teachers without formal titles assuming responsibilities unclaimed by APs. Principal support was crucial in enabling this. It was one of the primary ways teachers learned leadership skills and prepared for more formal leadership roles. However, the principal's role in developing these informal leaders is not without tension. While recognising their role, some were conscious of potential conflict regarding appearing impartial.

> *'I suppose one thing I was very conscious of was knowing that deputy and AP interviews would be coming up. You have to be very careful in terms of who you give responsibilities and opportunities to, without...because you don't want to be perceived as, as favouring people' Principal 8*.

Further conflict arose when these teachers without formal titles were perceived to take on more than the formal MLs (i.e. the APs).

> *'[The APs] were kind of saying "How dare they?", but at the same time, [the APs] weren't stepping up to do it […]they were sort of like "How dare they, who do they think they are, doing that?"[…]and kind of more or less said that to them, and that really upset the people who were stepping up' Principal 4*

> *'[Informal middle leading] can sometimes cause a bit of jealousy, I think on a staff, if perhaps somebody with responsibility for that feels that they're being overshadowed' Principal 6*

3.1.3 Middle Leader Qualities and Skills

In addition to their efforts to define the role, principals' understanding of middle leadership was further illustrated through their descriptions of desirable ML qualities and skills. Those they communicated in the most detail are reported here.

Principals described varying examples of **initiative.** Essentially, they meant identifying issues before the principal, working independently and taking ownership of issues by finding solutions without rigidly sticking to assigned responsibilities.

> *'Okay you can have a good manager but it's not necessarily a good leader, and I suppose the difference is where they see that it has to be done, they go outside their comfort zone, to make sure that it is looked after that it is done and not everyone has that' Principal 2.*

> *'You take ownership, you take responsibility. Initiative. Being able to go and do it without having to check everything with me or others' Principal 9*

They described a specific **commitment** to their school's context and vision, putting the school's needs above personal ones.

> *'Passion for what we do, belief in what we do […] We are who we are, as a school […] and so you have to buy into that, you know, warts and all. There's probably easier gigs' Principal 9*

> *'I think commitment to the school is probably the best and most important, and that's very broad, but it means making every decision for the good of the school, and that might not be popular, and it might not be the best for any one individual, but it will be the best for the school' Principal 6*

Co-operation, collaboration, and the ability to coalesce as a team and work collectively towards a common goal were important. MLs' ability to see beyond their area of responsibility to the school's wider needs was key to this.

> *'And understanding of the team, that collaborative, I think it's important. That it's not just me in my role, that it's understanding the collaborative piece of leadership and management within the school' Principal 7*

Lacking this collaborative quality can lead to competition rather than cooperation among MLs; this was of particular concern in some larger schools.

> *'It's just that there's an awareness there, that it's the overall running of the school […], that's what the team are meant to be doing, helping run the school. So, by having the competition there, going off on tangents or on a solo run, it's not really happening' Principal 2.*

Principals listed **soft skills,** like communication and interpersonal skills, emotional intelligence, persuasion, and influence.

> *'Liaising with people as well and networking with people in the school, that you don't rub people up the wrong way. So that, interpersonal skill is very important. The emotional intelligence of how to handle people, bring them along' Principal 9*

Adaptability, readiness to *'roll with the punches' (Principal 9)* and willingness to grow and upskill while being reflective were also outlined.

> *'But do people have the skills? Naturally, perhaps. Do they learn them as they go? Yes, if they can be reflective' Principal 1*

MLs were not expected to be experts in specific areas. General leadership skills and the ability to access expertise were preferable.

> *'That's the thing; the MLs are sort of expected, I suppose to have a wider range of skills not just to be able to do one particular thing because you need that flexibility' Principal 8*

Loyalty and trust were highly regarded. One principal described MLs' influential position, which made loyalty essential.

> *'[MLs have] nearly more of the ear of the staff […]I would consider them my biggest asset in a way because of the people that have, I would like to think, would have my back'. Principal 5*

The ability to discuss issues confidentially with the middle leadership team and unity regarding decisions was important.

> *'I would love to be able to go into every meeting and speak freely, openly about things and say that this shouldn't go any further. That doesn't always happen. You know, you can, you can say something to somebody, and next thing it will be up the corridor, and others will know […]I think trustworthiness is very, very significant' Principal 9*

> *'We have to talk about the philosophy of the management team […] that if we agree to something and we present it to the staff, the management team has to have a united front on things' Principal 8*

Principals clarified that 'good' MLs were not homogenous. They valued varying combinations of qualities and understood that an effective team needed a broad array of attributes.

3.2 How Principals Utilise Middle Leadership

3.2.1 Duties and Responsibilities

The work of formal MLs can be grouped under the headings *curriculum and related initiatives*, *policy* and *planning, coordinating special education provision, staff support and development*, *student-related* duties, and *other* duties (see Appendix A). As duties and responsibilities ought, according to policy, to be shaped by schools' needs, it was unsurprising that the specific duties varied across contexts. However, there was also a lack of consistency regarding the number of duties expected of MLs. Even accounting for differences in school size, the differences in expected workload across schools were significant. The duties of an AP2 in some schools resembled that of an AP1 or deputy principal in others.

When deciding duties, most principals referenced consulting the school community regarding the school's needs. In many cases, this was a formal process, an element of which involved gathering information from staff. However, its effectiveness depended on staff engagement, which was not always forthcoming.

When assigning duties, there was a recurring idea of matching these to individuals' strengths.

> *'There's no point in my sports mad [AP] taking on technology[…]They can do it, but they'll do a bad job, or they won't be authentic, you know, they might do a fine job, but it won't be a brilliant job because it's not their passion. Your passion exudes from you, and I think that that's infectious' Principal 2.*

This usually worked well, but challenges arose when a school need could not be matched to an AP. Additionally, this individualisation of roles can only be facilitated if role holders are flexible. In schools where they are not, duties stagnated, and discrepancies appeared between official duties and what APs did in reality, creating a gap between what they did and what the school needed them to do. Narrowly defined duties can cause difficulties regarding workload.

> *'But agreeing the duties, discussing the duties, the narrowness, sometimes of the roles rather than freedom […] And what I mean is, if it says [co-ordinating special education], that's what I'll do, and I won't do anything else.' Principal 10*

3.2.2 Accountability and Oversight

When accountability concerning formal MLs' duties and responsibilities was broached, principals referenced accountability to the board of management. Although they were nominally accountable to the board, this did not translate into real accountability in most cases.

'[MLs] officially are accountable to the board, but I don't even think my board would even know who's [an AP] in my school[…]I reckon one of them is gagging to say, "What's [an AP]?" So, they're not, I don't think they're accountable to the board really' Principal 2

Most referred to MLs being accountable to the principal, but when asked about addressing MLs' role performance, most described feeling ill-equipped and reluctant to appraise MLs' work.

> *'There's no mechanism[…] There's no way to pull rank, really, you know, without just being straight with someone saying […] "I don't think you're doing a really good job", particularly if the person doesn't agree with you […]then you're gonna be really in a tricky situation, and we don't have the tools' Principal 3*

Levels of oversight varied across schools, but all felt they gave MLs some freedom, with most requiring them to check in.

> *'There has to be an oversight and accountability. I'd like to have that because you never know. You know, ultimately, you're meant to know what's going on' Principal 2*

> *'At the end of the day, I need to know what's going on, of course, and the buck does stop with me, but I'm quite happy for senior members of staff and all middle management to actually take the lead' Principal 9*

Principals recognised the importance of ML autonomy and sharing leadership but found embedding it challenging.

> *'I think it's important to share these things. Am…I don't find it easy to give over control of things unless I'm sure' Principal 2*

> *'No, my main fault is delegation. I'm very poor at delegation […] I micromanaged a lot of things for a long time […] And have been trying to delegate more' Principal 6*

Factors that appeared to influence their willingness to give over control were ML seniority, trust that MLs shared their vision, and their perception of MLs' competence, which is notable given the general reluctance to address underperformance.

4. Discussion and Analysis

No unequivocal ML definition was shared between these principals, reflecting previous research. Some principals saw a clear place for those without titles, as De Nobile (2021) did, while others tied it firmly to the title of AP in keeping with Lipscombe et al. (2021). Accountability, which Lipscombe et al. hold as a critical element of what constitutes a ML, appears absent from these principals' accounts.

This lack of accountability presents a significant challenge. Their unwillingness to appraise MLs hinders improvements in competence or confidence in MLs, which in turn hobbles the type of ML autonomy and leadership sharing described by Bush and Ng (2019) that these principals claimed to want to cultivate. Bush and Ng describe MLs as needing the ability to act without fear of negative consequences, but in this research, it was many of the principals who feared acting to address ML underperformance due to possible adverse outcomes. This is significant as Bassett and Robson (2016) described that a balance of appraisal and development is needed for improvement.

Principals tended to control the work of MLs and limit delegation, as in Lillejord and Børte (2020). Trust in MLs, a pivotal component to sharing leadership (Bush and Ng 2019), was not strongly evident in most of the principals' accounts, meaning they could not give over control even when describing a desire to do so. This could also be linked to the issues surrounding accountability.

As stated, most principals shared De Nobile's (2021) understanding that middle leadership can be aligned with demonstrating influencing behaviours rather than a title alone. However, De Nobile (2021) did not sufficiently detail the potential tensions between ML leaders with titles and those without, as experienced by some of these principals. While developing informal MLs can add an additional dimension to school leadership, it requires careful management to complement rather than undermine formal leadership structures. Schools where formal roles were less rigid were better able to incorporate informal middle leadership. If principals could endeavour to provide relevant professional learning and collaborative school culture as outlined by others (Gurr, 2019; Gurr and Drysdale, 2013), this could be an antidote to this tension. Some principals fulfilled their ML development role and identified aspirant MLs, as described in the literature (ibid.), by providing opportunities for those without formal titles to lead. Still, caution needed to be exercised to avoid the appearance of favouritism.

More of a shared understanding of middle leadership was evident when principals connected their understanding to desirable ML qualities and skills. Influence, communication and interpersonal skills, and the need for collaboration have been discussed by others (Grootenboer and Edwards-Groves 2020, Gurr 2019) and were echoed here. Notably, content and pedagogical knowledge, which were highly valued elsewhere (Jorgenssen, 2016), were less valued by these principals, who preferred more generalised leadership skills over expertise.

ML duties somewhat corresponded with the categorisation outlined by De Nobile and Ridden (2014), with the notable absence of evaluating other staff. However, there was no consistency in the amount of work expected

of MLs across schools, confirming Murphy (2020). Rather than the ML role being based on principal needs, as Lillejord and Børte (2020) described, efforts were made to link it to school needs. However, most roles were tailored to the role holders, either their strengths or what they were willing to do. In some schools, rather than MLs being overloaded, some principals had difficulty getting MLs to take on work if their roles were too narrowly defined. While role clarity and clear expectations are important, flexibility is needed to prevent this. Other principals, in contrast, overwhelmed the ML role with various tasks, which was conspicuous when comparing the roles in similar schools.

5. Conclusion

This research provides insights into principals' perspectives on middle leadership. Though these findings are preliminary, they can make a valuable contribution to the field if they are viewed in the context of the study's limitations in terms of its small scale, singular focus on principals' perspectives and the incompleteness of the analysis at this stage. Although further analysis is needed, some tentative conclusions and recommendations can be offered for policy, practice and professional development, as well as some implications for further research.

The lack of a shared definition of a ML and the inconsistency regarding their workloads were apparent. There was some shared understanding of desirable ML qualities and skills and a desire to share more leadership with MLs. However, principals' ability to do so was limited, possibly due to the lack of accountability measures related to the roles and responsibilities of MLs and the reluctance and discomfort expressed regarding appraising MLs' work or addressing underperformance.

These findings suggest the need to seek a shared understanding of middle leadership. More precise guidance is needed at a policy level regarding defining the role and its parameters, including the number of duties assigned to APs, to ensure consistency across schools. Whether informal middle leadership should be included in this understanding should be explored. If it is to be included, principals require guidance on nurturing it, both for the inherent value it contributes to schools and as a cradle for future leadership. Policy needs to clarify the role of informal middle leadership and how principals can incorporate it in addition to formal middle leadership rather than in competition with it. Clear guidance and procedures are also needed to enable principals to ensure fairness and transparency regarding development opportunities for all staff.

The extent to which MLs are accountable for their work is an issue that needs further investigation. In practice, principals should make efforts to link the work of MLs to the board of management to increase accountability by requesting periodic reports and board meeting attendance. In terms of professional development, principals require training and guidance appraisal of ML performance. Better training in this regard would make it easier to delegate or distribute to MLs they develop confidence in. For MLs, training should seek to cultivate the desired qualities and skills outlined by principals, particularly collaboration and cooperation, as principals who described high levels of this described more examples of informal middle leading, less difficulty with distribution and fewer concerns regarding underperformance. What has been uncovered so far points to the need for further research, particularly into how principals view their role regarding staff appraisal, the source of this reluctance, principals' awareness of common management concepts (e.g. feedback and performance reviews) and whether these could be adopted in the context of Irish primary schools to address the accountability issue thereby improving principals' ability to facilitate increased ML autonomy.

Findings so far indicate some unrealised potential regarding the ML role. However, they also show a willing principal population that is eager to enhance their use of this level of leadership though they feel unable to do so in some respects. The next stages of analysis will enhance and advance what is reported here.

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Appendix

Overview of ML duties and responsibilities outlined during participant interviews.