

The Critical Role of Middle Leaders in Schools: Cultivating a Culture of Trust and Supporting Educational Reform

Xingyun Fang Jianli Wang

Wuhan Donghu University, Wuhan, Hubei, 430212, China

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ABSTRACT

This research delves into the often-underappreciated role of middle leaders in educational organizations, highlighting their significance as the linchpins between senior leadership and classroom teachers. Utilizing qualitative research methods, the study investigates the multifaceted responsibilities, challenges, and contributions of middle leaders in schools. Findings indicate that middle leaders foster a culture of trust within the institution by providing mentorship and guidance to new teachers. They undertake substantial tasks, such as team coordination, grade direction, and student supervision, in addition to their teaching duties. Despite their pivotal role, middle leaders often face mounting pressures and heavy workloads. This research underscores the need to recognize and support middle leaders in educational settings, acknowledging their vital role in fostering cohesion and facilitating the implementation of educational reforms.

1. Introduction

The role of middle leaders in the organization cannot be ignored and can sometimes be called the pillar of productivity. However, their roles and characteristics are often the most overlooked. Middle leaders are the bridges and ties between the executive and frontline personnel. The same is true in the field of education, where middle leaders play a crucial role in educational reform in schools (Bryant and Rao, 2019). In the school, middle leaders appear in the form of experienced teachers, grade coordinators, teaching directors, etc. to build a distributed leadership between the principal and class teachers. Conversely, middle leaders may also encounter difficulties and challenges during their work. For example, the expectations of senior leaders for middle leaders are increasing, and the work pressure of middle leaders may be increasing. The organization may disregard the significant function of middle leaders and not give help

(Heng and Marsh, 2009; Koh et al., 2011; Floyd, 2016; Thompson and Wolstencroft, 2018).

2. Background and Rationale

My rationale for choosing middle leadership research is based on the role of middle leaders as the mainstay of the organization when I took the leading learning module. This is something I hadn't thought of before. As many people think, I think the role of senior leaders in the organization is decisive. Nevertheless, the fact is that middle leaders change the organization from top to bottom. Since I didn't think of teaching experience, I asked my original teachers for advice and explored their knowledge and views on the position. Fortunately, most of them are currently in the position of middle leaders^[1].

Based on interviews with them, I chose qualitative research to explore and gain a deeper understanding of the meaning of middle leaders, the character of middle

*Corresponding Author:

Xingyun Fang,

Wuhan Donghu University, Wuhan, Hubei, 430212, China;

Email: Xingyunfang2020@yeah.net

leadership for the entire organization, and the challenges that may be encountered when serving as middle leaders. The purpose of this research is to explore the role of middle leaders in schools by focusing on the following questions:

What positions do middle leaders play in schools?

What are the tasks assigned by middle leaders in schools?

What are the challenges encountered by middle leaders during their tenure?

I will interview six educators and conduct a sample survey based on their experiences and opinions ^[2].

3. Literature Review

3.1 Who are the Middle Leaders?

In schools, common middle leadership positions include principal assistant, assistant principal, year co-ordinator, stage co-ordinator, etc., and the setting of middle leadership positions in elementary and junior high schools may also be different. De Nobile's (2018:397) popular definition of a middle leader is a layer of managers between senior leaders and lower-level grassroots managers. However, these managers have supervisory functions but do not have the special responsibilities that senior leaders have (Robbins and Barnwell, 2006; Samson and Daft, 2012). Busher et al. (2007) and Dinham (2016) also believed that middle leaders operate between principals and teachers. It is worth noting that the definition of middle leadership and middle managers cannot be generalized. The work of middle leaders is not only administrative but also increasingly inclined to do things that have an impact on strategy. Therefore, the middle leader can be defined as a fluid concept, which is an alternate concept between senior leaders and the lower (Anderson and Nixon 2010) ^[3].

Middle leaders may be controversial. Danielson (2007) believed that middle leaders may be a formal position or informal. Especially for experienced professional teachers, they may not get the title of leader, but they will informally play the role of middle leader. Moreover, it is also controversial to define who is the middle leader. For example, Cranston (2006) defined the vice principal as a middle leader. However, Brooks and Cavanagh (2009) and Gurr and Drysdale (2013) considered it to be part of the senior leadership. De Nobile and Ridden (2014:23) also suggested that middle leaders may hold ordinary administrative positions in some schools, but in other school, they may serve as strategic coordinators similar to senior leaders. Therefore, middle leaders may need to be viewed critically in nature ^[4].

Although middle leaders may differ in the definition of

each document, all scholars have also put forward their views on the role. Collinson and Cook (2007) believed that middle leaders are expert teachers. Glover et al. (1998) also agreed with their views that middle leaders are excellent course teachers. Bennett et al. (2007:462) positioned middle leaders as buffers and bridges between lower-level teachers and senior leaders. Dinham (2007) and Groves et al. (2016) also explained the role of middle leaders in teamwork. The former believed that middle leaders can unite the team, and the latter believed that middle leaders can promote trust between teachers and form a trust culture on campus ^[5].

Busher (2005) specifically divided the effective work of middle leaders into six functional areas. The first is to have a long-term view of the department; the second is the leader's willingness to exercise his power; the third is to be able to take effective action with his subordinates; the fourth is to be able to effectively mobilize employees to perform tasks together; the fifth is to mediate the environment; the sixth is to be a role model for colleagues. Fletcher and Kirkham (2005) conducted further research on the quality requirements of middle leaders. They believed that effective middle leaders are enthusiastic and confident, willing to share their professional knowledge, willing to listen to colleagues' suggestions and value their opinions, be able to work with colleagues to formulate future strategies, can communicate sincerely, build a culture of trust and respect and has its clear educational values and philosophy. However, there will inevitably be challenges when middle leaders come into play. The first is that the scope of the rights of middle leaders will be limited by the scope of the tasks they are dispatched (Fletcher and Strain, 2009:5). Secondly, Eacott (2015) showed that leadership will be affected by the environment in the context. Therefore, middle leadership also needs to look at the actual situation when it plays a role ^[6].

3.2 Where does the Power Lie?

Gronn (2000:322) explained more about power, influence, and authority. Power represents structural authority. Authority is the root of the organization and can determine the overall role system. And influence is leadership. In the school, the principal has absolute authority and can obtain the support of subordinates and staff, which is also a manifestation of influence. Gronn (2000:333) also analyzed middle leadership. He believed that middle-level leadership means that members of the organization become managers so that the followers of senior leaders have the possibility of becoming leaders ^[7].

Gold et al. (2003) understood power as power is a kind of value-driven leadership, which is driven by leaders

through their values. Wright (2001:280) believed that power is no longer to lead the school's moral and value system, it should be at the political level. It is suggested that power can be changed according to local conditions. Day et al. (2000:139) believed that effective leadership is driven by power and is simply understood as the resulting tension management, which can provide daily life for school life, but should comply with policy interventions. Without policy and legal intervention, no matter how perfect the decision-maker's value system is, it is difficult to have space to explain the policy (Day et al., 2000:177).

When using power in schools, bureaucracy may occur. Moore et al. (2002:182) gave a case of the principal in the study. The principal at school will use her influence on force employees to do things according to the operation method she has designated. Besides, she also abused her power to package it into trust and valuable work, which is only to realize the interests of decision-makers. However, according to Chapman (2003:101), the autocracy of power may be necessary for school reform. When the leadership team believes that it is necessary to promote the school in a good direction, but when it is difficult to implement in the process, the leader may consider adopting policy-driven change^[8].

3.3 What is the Role of Middle Leaders in Leading Learning?

Since the concept of distributed leadership is to establish an open culture in the organization, everyone in the organization can be empowered to exercise their talents. Therefore, distributed leadership should be developed from within. Therefore, middle leaders are an indispensable component of distributed leadership. Moreover, middle leaders can promote the improvement of learning ability and leadership ability in the shared environment of branch leadership. Senior leaders can help middle leaders at the leadership level, while middle leaders can help the grassroots teachers in the leading learning, and they can also make changes to the reflection work during the help process (Leithwood and Reihl, 2003:3).

Bryant and Rao (2019) analyzed the impact of teacher leadership on educational reform by analyzing three schools in southeast China. Their research found that teacher leaders without position of authority have a significant influence on education reform. Teacher leaders without authority are middle leaders. Therefore, it can be understood that middle leaders can promote educational reform.

However, the organization may make leaders more subtle in controlling employees when middle leaders and senior leaders jointly govern (Blasé, 1999). Moreover,

using teachers to manage teachers may be considered a way of control. Such a management culture may threaten teachers' professional beliefs. Collaborative leadership formed by too many middle leaders may lead to excessive negotiation or slow response when faced with external challenges (Wright, 2003). Therefore, while middle leaders may be indispensable for distributed leadership, there are drawbacks. Therefore, the school is still a leadership model with the principal as the core leader, and it is also the main source of development and advice (Gold et al., 2003)^[9].

The increased dependence of subordinates on the principals and the tendency of principals to share leadership skills make the role of middle leaders more and more prominent (Wallace, 2001:157). Middle leaders need to establish values, improve learning outcomes under pressure, and be active in building schools. However, middle leaders may also face challenges and requirements in the leadership process. Koh et al. (2011) found that organizations have higher and higher expectations for middle leaders. First, they must be able to be a professional teacher in the classroom, and secondly, they need to be the link between the leader and the class teacher. Middle leaders are also required to have a broad vision and strategic thinking skills. Nevertheless, in some schools, organizational culture is not friendly to middle leaders. School leaders may overlook the role of middle managers, leaving leaders without support (Floyd, 2016). Moreover, some schools have chaotic recruitment, training, and management systems that prevent the role of middle leaders (Thompson and Wolstencroft, 2018)^[10].

4. Methodology and Ethics

4.1 Research/PBI

PBI is a research method of mutual circulation of reflection and action, from "Reflection IN Action to Reflection WITH Action, Reflection ON Practice to Reflection FOR Action" (Ghaye, 2010:6). In the process of doing research, I need to always maintain critical thoughts and a rational skeptical attitude towards myself and others (Poulson and Wallace, 2003:18). Then through a skeptical attitude and open mind to achieve a more valuable point of view. Although it is easy to say, it is not easy to do. The process of reflection on the critical incident is to first consider what happened, when and where, and why it contributed to the critical incident and the thoughts and reactions at that time (McAteer et al., 2010:107). According to Moon (2004:202–203), a deeper self-reflection sign is the metacognitive process of reflection, looking at the views of others and considering

whether there is a second scheme. Deeper reflection also needs to consider the importance of the time factor for reflection and learn to reconstruct the consciousness of the incident and then review and reflect.

Poulson and Wallace (2003:18) proposed “Tools for thinking and the creation of three kinds of knowledge about the social world: theoretical knowledge, research knowledge, practice knowledge”. The theoretical knowledge is obtained through systematic thinking, the research knowledge is obtained through systematic investigation, and practical knowledge is obtained through action. Three types of knowledge construct the social world through tools such as concepts, theories, assumptions, models, and ideologies. Lewin (1946:35) believed that only theoretical research is not enough, so there is a need for practical cooperation. Moreover, Stenhouse (1981:110) indicated that in the field of education, few theories can be trusted without teacher guidance and testing. Using research theory also means conducting research. Therefore, in the study, it needs the support of practical knowledge. However, research is used to assist in judging theory, and research cannot be used as the Master of Theory (Pring, 2010:141).

Lewin (1946:35) first proposed that action research is a research method that compares the conditions and effects of various social behaviors. Later Carr and Kemmis (1986:162) defined behavioral research. They defined behavior research as a form of reflection on behavior, the purpose is to improve the rationality and fairness of behavior. McNiff and Whitehead (2006:41) believed that behavior research is formed from the development of critical theory, and it is beyond the definition of critical theory. Critical theory is mainly to understand what is happening, while behavioral research is a way of giving concrete actions and thinking about changes. Although it seems that behavior research is a process of self-isolated thinking, the research of Kemmis and McTaggart (2005:277) believed that participatory behavior research is best conducted collaboratively. Behavioral research also provides researchers with a tool to share experiences (Phelps and Hase, 2002:514).

Many research scholars have proposed research models, such as the research model suggested by Blaxter et al. (2010:8), which divided the research into the “pre-empirical stage” and “empirical stage” two stages. The previous stage is the preparation stage, selecting research topics and questions, and doing background research. The latter stage is the data collection stage, where the analysis data is collected, and conclusions are drawn after design problems. Although this method seems simple and intuitive, it lacks in the reflection process, which may

lead to overly arbitrary conclusions. Though the models of Townsend (2012:19) and McNiff (2013:61) may repeatedly emphasize the importance of reflection during the research process, the research methods may seem too rigid and formal. Besides the actual method of collecting evidence may be lacking (Hopkins, 2008:55–58). Therefore, this research will not use behavioral research to study the problem but will use the practice-based inquiry cycle to inquiry-based on practice and practice based on inquiry, allowing practice and research to interact.

When considering the use of evidence-based or evidence-informed practice, because the education field is different from the medical field, the results may not only be based on research evidence, this essay also needs to consider contextual factors (Hargreaves, 1999:246). Therefore, we need to use evidence-informed practice. This research will not need to use meta-analysis. Meta-analysis is analytical analysis, which is to collect statistics and analyze the results of a large number of studies and then integrate the analysis to conclude (Wiliam, 2016:78). This may require a large amount of data collection on similar topics, and then need to assess whether the quality of each data is meaningful. Therefore, this research will not apply to meta-analysis.

4.2 Paradigms

In terms of paradigm, this research conducts a study from the perspective of interpretation. Interpretations consider the compound of the causality of the development of things, and the essence of reality is also compound. Interpretations find and study meanings more from subjective personal experiences and feelings. Interpretations believe that objective research cannot be done. Afterward, although postpositivism seemed objective, it believed that the essence of reality was objective, and there was a causal relationship between things Creswell (2014). Nevertheless, postpositivism may seem too rigid on the subject of this article (the role of middle leaders in schools). Although Creswell’s four worldviews are not used, this research adopts the framework for the research proposed by Creswell (2014:5), designs research through a philosophical worldview, and selects research methods that conform to philosophical ideas. The philosophical viewpoint of research should be carried out throughout the research, and the research method should also be matched with the research design. Therefore, to explore the role of middle leaders in more aspects, this research uses the theory of interpretation to study.

4.3 Strategies

This research will use the method of research sample

survey. Denscombe (2014:3) believed that in the research process, there is a need for unique research logic and clear research questions. The main purpose of this study is to examine the role of middle leaders in schools. The research in this paper is a process of empirical data in the social sciences to conclude, which may not apply to strategies such as grounded theory, action research, and systematic reviews. Moreover, since the situation of each school may be different, the research strategy does not apply to the experiment method (Denscombe, 2014:4). Thus, this research is more suitable for sampling research, which tends to obtain large-scale data from representative samples (Cohen et al., 2007:206). The type of survey for this article belongs to the exploratory survey. Before the study, it was not believed that the middle leaders had a specific relationship or model with the school environment or other factors, and no assumptions or models were made (Cohen et al., 2007:207). At the same time, due to limited data collection, this research cannot temporarily do a relatively large number of quantitative surveys. Therefore, the research strategy of this research is qualitative exploratory samples. Although the sample range is small, it does not affect the conclusion. This research also uses convenience or opportunity samples, but Denscombe (2010:23–24) believed that the method of asking the easiest person to get the question should be avoided, but because of the Coronavirus, the number of people who can ask questions is limited, so this research only this option can be used.

4.4 Qualitative Method

This research will use qualitative research methods. In research, the validity and reliability of research quality need to be investigated (Cohen et al., 2007). Creswell and Miller (2000:126) also believed that qualitative researchers need to prove that the research is credible. Due to the situation (Coronavirus), this research may be no approach to triangulation. However, the reliability of the interviewees is trustworthy. Because I have established trust in the question with the interviewee. Trust and cooperation make it easier to produce more accurate and frank data (Attia and Edge, 2017:40–41). First of all, the participants and I have a teacher-student relationship, a friendly relationship and a foundation of trust. Secondly, I have described them specifically in the research project. The more specific the action is described, the more likely it is to reveal different situations (Elliott, 2007:238). After that, I regard them not only as my research object but as an active partner (Elliott, 2007:234). Increase the participation of interviewees, to obtain more supporting

evidence and obtain trustworthiness.

The research will use e-mail interviews. I will send the questions to the participants in the form of attachments in advance, allowing participants to control their time and space flexibly. Besides e-mail interviews also provide respondents with space to reflect on their profession and work area. Likewise, email interviews can provide a more equal relationship and allow participants to respond in a more prudent manner (James, 2016:159–160).

However, the e-mail interview also has some shortcomings. Compared to oral interviews, respondents may be less willing to discuss issues in-depth because they need to write. Moreover, when answering questions, they may be answered in relatively simple and short words. Therefore, after collecting the email response, I will review the completeness and depth of the data, and then revisit the respondents who have relatively incomplete answers. However, the premise is that the participants are willing and have time to communicate and discuss with me verbally. The research will fully respond to the interviewees' emotions and demands.

In terms of ethics, I will introduce the research content and question content to the participants in detail. All participants have the right to withdraw at any time and will allow the interviewees to provide ethical participant consent, allowing them to give full consideration before conducting interview questions. I will also protect all interview data and use all anonymous methods to ensure that the privacy of all interviewees will not be violated.

5. Analysis and Interpretation of Evidence

When analyzing data, this research uses inductive methods to analyze conclusions from data and evidence. In the process of reasoning the data, we use the ladder of inference (Robinson and Lai, 2006:46) to check our claims. Then this inference ladder is very suitable for studying teachers' daily professional dialogue activities. Therefore, when making inferences in this paper, I first select the required evidence from the available databases, describe, explain, evaluate, and then theoretically draw conclusions and take action. However, contexts, assumptions, and values should be considered during the selection, description, and evaluation stages. This research uses the data analysis method of qualitative research proposed by Denscombe (2010:240). This research will summarize the questions raised and compare the different views or similar points of participants on the same question. Nevertheless, when participants mention content on other topics, not on topics related to middle leaders, they do not need to be analyzed.

Findings

Promote the Culture of Trust

“I’m not a middle leader, I’m just a class teacher. But my grade leader gave me a lot of help when I first entered school. I did not meet with the principal alone. It can be said that I have not had time to meet the principal during the two years since I entered the school. So, I think my grade group leader is my mentor and guide.” (Miss. Liu; 24; Middle School; Headteacher)

“Although I was rated as a disciplined leader at a young age, I still have many deficiencies in management. To a large extent, I still rely on the encouragement and trust of the senior team leader. I think the grade group leader is like a rope that can bring together all our grade teachers.” (Mrs. Song; 29; Middle School; Senior Academic Leader)

It can be seen that for the new teachers who have just entered the school, the middle leaders are the bridge between the new teachers and the senior leaders, such as the principal, and help to guide them. This can help build a culture of mutual trust in the school.

Middle Leaders Have Heavy Tasks

“In addition to my regular teaching work, I also need to act as the team leader and grade director. I need to meet with grade teachers every week to discuss the teaching tasks of this week. Every morning and afternoon, I need to patrol students in all classes of the grade, especially in the early self-study. If I encounter students who are naughty and disobedient, I need to educate and guide them with the headteacher of the class where the students are and follow up the guidance.” (Mrs. Huang; 50; Middle School; Dean of Academic Affairs)

Early self-study is a unique learning model in Chinese schools. This is a course content that students read early in the morning, mainly in Chinese and English subjects, and in the form of recitation and reading. It can be seen that in addition to the teaching tasks that Mrs. Huang needs to complete as a middle leader, she also needs to check the student’s learning status and conduct a teaching guide for grade subjects every morning and evening.

6. Conclusions

The role of middle leaders in schools has many manifestations. Their roles may be informal, and some may not have special duties, but they have undertaken corresponding work (Danielson, 2007). The position of middle leaders is no longer just a simple administrative position, and even many middle leaders have undertaken several times more workload than ordinary teachers. Besides most middle leaders are also professional teachers

and experienced teachers as Glover et al. (1998) said. Due to the tight time, the data collected is relatively simple, and the conclusions obtained are relatively few. However, it can be found in the only data that middle leaders have an important role in the formation of team cohesion on campus. Furthermore, as Groves et al. (2016) and Bennett et al. (2007:462) believed, middle leaders, form a bridge between senior leaders and class teachers and play a role in promoting trust in the organization. However, as the survey data shows middle leaders have a lot of tasks, and they are also under great pressure. However, no data has been collected to support Floyd’s (2016) data on organizations neglecting the role of middle leaders.

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