

Middle Leaders

The term “middle leader” is often used as an overarching title to describe a leadership position in a school that involves additional responsibilities outside of the classroom. Middle leaders in schools may have different areas of responsibility. These may include pastoral leadership, curriculum leadership, leadership of additional student supports, leadership of a team who are delivering a particular programme, or the leadership of a specific school improvement priority. Therefore, middle leadership in this context is being interpreted as those roles which have an ‘out-of-classroom’ remit and a leadership strategic remit. What has filled this middle leadership space has evolved over a number of years in different systems and is largely related to the hierarchical organisational structure of schools in that system.

The common theme running through most of the definitions of what this role constitutes, refers to it as the teachers who are the 'middle layer' in the school's organizational structure between senior leadership, i.e. the principal and deputy principal, and classroom teachers.

There have been many studies exploring the question of how to improve school systems so that schools become more effective. School leadership is currently recognised internationally as a vital factor in improving school effectiveness, teacher quality and student achievement. Dinham et al., (2013)¹ state that maximising leadership influence in schools is a collective responsibility. There is a growing belief that single-person leadership, such as that of the principal, is insufficient when it comes to leading learning and teaching in a complex organisation like a school. The effectiveness of principalship is of widespread and growing concern, hence the emphasis on collective responsibility for leadership in schools. Hargreaves & Fink (2006)² observed that the leadership of principals and the assumption that school leadership is synonymous with the principal has preoccupied educational leadership literature for too long.

Gurr & Drysdale (2013)³ acknowledge that the senior leadership team usually shapes the school's ethos, sets policies and establishes guidelines, and that the middle leaders, “...among them year heads, heads of subject departments, programme coordinators, and instructional coordinators work to apply and realize them.” Given the increasing reform agenda currently being experienced in Irish education, the development of this leadership layer in schools is particularly significant. Robinson & Aronica (2015)⁴ state that “when large-scale changes get under way, school middle leaders are increasingly the motivators and organizers of teachers while also serving as professional developers and mentors, working towards improving education outcomes.”

¹ Dinham, S., Collarbone, P., Evans, M. & Mackay, A. (2013). The Development, piloting and introduction of Australia's first national standard for principals. The American Educational Research Association Annual Conference, April 27-May 1, San Francisco, California.

² Hargreaves, A. & Fink, D. (2006). Sustainable leadership. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass

³ Gurr, D., & Drysdale, L. (2013). Middle-level secondary school leaders: Potential, constraints and implications for leadership preparation and development. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 51(1), 55-71.

⁴ Robinson, K., & Aronica, L. (2015). *Creative Schools Revolutionizing Education from the Ground Up*. Australia Penguin UK.

The Scottish College for Educational Leadership (SCEL) quotes Lynas' 2017⁵ definition of middle leadership as follows:

"Middle leadership relates to the kind of leadership functions and qualities demonstrated by those who, while modelling their own teaching skills, have formal leadership and line management responsibilities for a stage, departmental, pastoral or other team of colleagues within a school".

Middle leadership in schools is often characterised as "boundary spanning"⁶. The role often has tensions related to dealing with competing if not conflicting expectations and demands. Most middle leaders find their role rewarding. However, they experience the tension of being both teacher and leader. The challenge, particularly for newly appointed middle leaders, involves navigating these conflicting expectations as well as coping with the transition from peer to leader of others in a time of changing policy.

Harris & Jones (2012)⁷ also reinforce that the quality of middle leadership is heavily determined by the extent to which they have autonomy and responsibility to engage with teachers in supportive and innovative ways. (Fullan 2010)⁸ shows that the middle leadership role in schools is particularly challenging as it attracts pressure from both the top and the bottom of the organisation. Therefore middle leaders in schools need specific forms of support and development to maximise their potential.

⁵ <http://www.scotland.org.uk/what-we-offer/middle-leadership/into-middle-leadership-in-schools/>

⁶ Timperly H .2009 Distributing Leadership to Improve Outcomes for Students In Distributed Leadership According to the Evidence edited by K Leithwood, B Mascall and T Strauss 197-222 London: Routledge .

⁷ Harris, A., and M. Jones. 2012. Connecting Professional Learning: Leading Effective Collaborative Enquiry across Teaching Alliances. Nottingham: National College for School Leadership.

⁸ Fullan, M. 2010. All Systems Go: The Change Imperative for Whole system Reform. Thousand Oaks, C A: Corwin Press.