

Key Roles of Educational Middle Leaders

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Abstract

Successful schools rely on outstanding teachers and leadership who work both effectively and collaboratively. Leadership is normally made of senior and middle leaders. This paper has derived from qualitative academic research, aimed at increasing an understanding on the professional performance of educational middle leaders, who can best impact the learning outcomes of students for having a direct influence on teachers and classroom teaching. The research questions included one focused on identifying the roles played by them, applied to the context of a Brazilian private school, within the timeframe of 2021. The purpose of this paper is to outline how the topic was approached in the study. Through an electronic questionnaire and individual face-to-face interviews, supported by a robust body of literature, it was possible to find evidence that effective middle leaders play mainly four broad roles: leading and managing curriculum; leading and managing the teaching and learning processes; building, leading and developing teams; and leading change and improvement initiatives. It has been concluded that middle leaders should have clarity about the roles and tasks assigned to them and be encouraged to gain expertise on how to perform them with efficacy within their contexts, which seems to be possible when they are fully supported by their school senior leadership. Finally, this support should include the provision of a well-structured permanent professional development program (in service).

1. Introduction

Effective school leadership has become a policy priority in the education agenda of many countries focused on adapting their educational systems to the needs of contemporary society.

Bush and Middlewood [1] remark that the longstanding appreciation of the vital role of teachers is finally being matched by an understanding that effective school leaders are also essential. Hence, committed and skilled educational leaders [2] have been in high demand worldwide, as effective teaching and school leadership are seen as the foundations of a world-class education system from preschool to university levels [3].

This paper derived from an academic dissertation,

centred on the professional performance of educational middle leaders, and carried out by the same researcher in 2021.

Despite of an increasing interest in the topic 'middle leadership in schools' [4], since effective middle leaders are regarded as key elements in terms of increasing the school leadership capacity [5], in a new era characterised by "*dispersed leadership and school change focused on the personalisation of learning and introduction of 21st century curriculum and pedagogy*" [6], it is still an under-theorised and under-researched area [4] [7].

The empiric research was undertaken in Brazil, where middle leaders often face several obstacles that prevent them from realising their full potential, such as not having their roles well-defined. By not having clarity on the key responsibilities pertaining to the sphere of the position they hold, they frequently waste a lot of time doing all kinds of tasks on a daily routine that keeps them too busy and overwhelmed to focus on their most important roles.

Thus, this paper aims at outlining one of the topics approached in the academic study, consisting in identifying the roles that pertain to the sphere of the work of educational leaders. The complexity faced by school middle leaders requires from them a set of knowledge and skills that are quite different from that of the classroom teachers, as underlined by Irvine and Brundrett [5], such as on how to carry out the professional development of the teaching staff under their care, which is one of their key roles.

A study carried out by Pont et al. [8] for the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) shows evidence that a teaching background does not in itself provide educators with the necessary repertoire to perform the roles of school middle leadership with efficacy.

Aaltonen [9] states that studies undertaken recently, such as the OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) released in 2019, have demonstrated that the landscape of teaching and school leadership has changed since 2008, in terms of the profiles of these professionals, and on how they should be encouraged to develop themselves (OECD, 2019). Hence, a first step that leads middle leaders towards a good professional performance is the provision of an adequate outline of

their roles, accompanied by full support on how to play them properly, in accordance with the particularities of the school setting. By having their roles and tasks well-defined and clearly assigned to them, middle leaders tend to be naturally encouraged to pursue their self-development continuously whilst performing their duties, which would likely impact their professional performance in a positive way.

This research work help to shed light in an area that is still obscure due to scarce research-based studies, through uncovering the roles that are likely essentially important for educational middle leaders to best contribute with the smooth run of the context under their responsibility within the school. Hence, the research question underpinning this paper is as follows: *What are the key roles of educational middle leaders?*

2. Literature Review

Gurr [10] remarks that educational middle leaders are professionals who hold a middle-level leadership position and lie hierarchically between the senior leadership and the teachers (and/or other staff members), in contexts where they are accountable for leading and managing departments, programmes, projects, processes, and staff members, as well as for implementing policies and improvement initiatives set by senior leaders.

Research on middle leadership undertaken by authors like Dinham [11] and Fleming [12] point out that these professionals commonly receive titles such as department head, school division coordinator, subject coordinator, curriculum coordinator, year-level coordinator, educational coordinator and so forth.

In Brazil, educational middle leaders are still predominantly known as 'pedagogical coordinators' nationwide, a terminology employed for decades, although new titles for the same profession have been created lately, as observed in jobs advertised in social media, including those of *pedagogical supervisor*, *educational coordinator* and *pedagogical counsellor*.

Middle leaders can be non-teachers or teachers who still engage in classroom teaching, as noted by De Nobile [4], often strive to promote the smooth run of the area in their care and, above everything, have a strong focus on students and their learning across academic, personal, and social dimensions [14].

It is complex to define middle leaders in terms of the roles that they perform, since these are not necessarily implied in the title of the position they occupy, because there are no conventional criteria to categorise them yet [6].

De Nobile and Ridden [7] claim that categorising the same position into different hierarchical levels is justified when the focus is on the nature of the roles assigned to the person holding the position, and share

that they themselves have seen, while carrying out research, in different education systems, *"deputies who were given mundane administrative duties in one school, and coordinators who had significant strategic roles, similar to senior leaders, such as leading school change, in another school"* (p.3).

Irvine and Brundret [5] claim that middle leaders play a hybrid set of roles that are complex, ambiguous, inter-dependent and overlapping within a commonly devolved school structure, different to that of the classroom teachers; whilst authors like Bennett et al. (2007) remind that middle leaders both lead and manage, as not only they need to lead the curriculum design and its implementation, and the teachers, but they are also expected to ensure that administrative and managerial issues are properly taken care in their areas within the school.

Back in the late 1990's, empirical research centred mainly upon the positions of 'subject leader' and 'department head', whilst research undertaken throughout this millennium has expanded to include a broader variety of middle leadership positions, roles, and perspectives, as remarked by Harris and Jones [15].

2.1. Key Roles of Educational Middle Leaders

Based upon the literature underpinning this study, the four key roles of educational middle leaders identified were as follows: 'Leading and Managing the School Curriculum'; 'Leading and Managing the Teaching and Learning Processes'; 'Building, Leading, and Developing Teams'; and 'Leading Change and Improvement Initiatives' (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. The Four Key Roles of Educational Middle Leaders

2.1.1. Leading and Managing Curriculum. Heng et al. [15], in their research on curriculum leadership by middle leaders in Singapore, claim that, as curriculum specialists, these professionals can contribute with the implementation of school policy and initiatives at the

school and classroom levels, since they work closely with teachers and students, facilitating their day-to-day teaching and learning matters.

The authors argue that educational middle leaders have built bridges not only between teachers and senior leaders, but between policy and practice, theory and practice, idea and implementation.

Although Singapore has drawn the attention of many countries toward their curriculum and pedagogical practices, the authors [15] share that their education system is not concerned about external exams anymore; rather than that, their conversations are *“around a holistic, student-centred and values-driven education”*, and that their curricula have been enriched with the development of soft skills, such as creativity and collaboration, and socio-emotional learning, in addition to the traditional content.

In Australia, Gurr and Drysdale’s study [16] featuring an analysis of the doctorate thesis undertaken by Cotter [17], on the role of ‘curriculum coordinators’, provides good insights.

Firstly, the role is linked with the support to the teaching and learning processes suited to the local context, so that they can match the needs and aspirations of the school’s students and their families. Besides that, it is predominantly managerial; and the way it is performed varies considerably across schools.

Additionally, the study uncovers that middle leaders who lead the design and implementation of school curriculum are expected to be knowledgeable about the latest curriculum innovations, and be able to filter these to help teachers not to become overwhelmed by change; be capable of managing people and curriculum processes and, in doing so, hold people to account, whilst maintaining good interpersonal relationships; and have a clear vision for learning and teaching within their particular contexts.

At last, the study also identifies that the middle leaders need to ensure the school’s alignment with externally imposed curriculum guidance and eventual changes.

2.1.2. Leading and Managing the Teaching and Learning Processes. ‘Leading the teaching and learning processes’, which essentially means being (co)responsible for all the activities and events concerning the implementation of curriculum, is a central activity of any school.

Since middle leaders play a key role as teachers’ leaders to ensure that curricula are developed, delivered, and assessed; academic programmes, courses and projects are created, implemented, and evaluated; and teachers appraised [12] [18], they are seen as the driving force at enhancing the quality of the teaching and learning processes.

Research has shown that middle leaders can have a greater impact on the quality of the teaching practices when they build strong professional learning communities through which teachers can interact and develop together [19].

Leithwood and Reihl [20] argue that effective teacher leaders can help other teachers embrace goals and understand changes that are needed to strengthen teaching and learning.

Gurr and Drysdale [6], in their review of a decade of research on middle leadership, uncover the potential of middle leaders to impact student learning outcomes through influencing the work of teachers.

More recently, in Australia, Gurr [10] carries out a review of research on middle leaders in schools undertaken since 2006, mostly in England and comparable countries (Australia, Canada, New Zealand, The Netherlands and the USA), and concludes that educational middle leaders have been increasingly viewed as key personnel in improving teaching and learning, highlighting that *“when they have well-defined roles and sufficient expectation and support, they likely impact the student outcomes through providing direction, leading professional development, and focusing on improving teaching practice”*.

2.1.3. Building, Leading and Developing Teams. Middle leaders commonly inherit a team rather than having the opportunity of building their own, as pointed out by Adair [21], who suggests that, when arising the need of team building, they should consider three key factors to selecting people: their technical knowledge and skills and professional experience; their ability to work as good team members; and the presence of desired personal attributes.

Fleming [12] recommends a distinction between true teams and groups who happen to be together because they teach the same subject, as also noted by De Nobile [4].

Adair [21] argues that effective teams need to have characteristics that include defined membership; common goals; clear communication, good interaction amongst its members; and interdependence to link the individuals together.

Jones [22] contends that effective team leaders assist their team members to achieve their full potential. The author also implies that middle leaders who have a strong focus on developing staff members in their care become more likely to influence them to fulfil their roles with efficacy when nurturing their interpersonal relationships.

Also, she argues that outstanding team leaders set high yet realistic performance goals, not only for themselves, but also for their colleagues; find ways to improve existing policies and practices; and make efforts to exceed current standards of learning, teaching, and

student achievements [22]. It is not difficult to foster teamwork or co-operation between a group of people, but it can be quite challenging to establish a high-achieving team – as highlighted by Adair [21], because high-performance team leaders have personal and functional qualities in both the task and team areas.

In face of contemporary organisational structures in which leadership has sometimes been distributed horizontally among employees holding different hierarchical positions, enabling teachers to lead projects [23], for example, middle leaders often need to lead diverse profiles of people across subject areas in which sometimes they are not quite knowledgeable, and even using different levels of formality in their interactions [12].

Additionally, middle leaders have been increasingly expected to lead and manage the professional development (PD) of teachers and other staff members, such as interns and assistants.

Guskey [24] defines teacher PD as “*the set of activities and processes designed to enhance their professional knowledge and skills, which also involves learning how to design educational structures and cultures*”. The author claims that the major forms of PD include: 'training', 'observation', 'study groups', 'inquiry/action research', 'individually guided activities', 'coaching', and 'mentoring'.

Souza [25], through his analysis of the historical trajectory of Brazilian Education from Colonial Brazil to the implementation of the most important education law named 'Lei de Diretrizes e Bases (LDB)' [26] recognises the educational middle leaders as the main mediators in the PD of teachers, arguing that the reflexive actions taken by them express the dialectical relationship between theory and practice.

Likewise, Miziara et al.'s research [27], consisting in an analysis of thirty-eight academic studies on the roles of middle leaders undertaken in Brazil within the period between 2000 and 2012 nationwide, identified that middle leaders frequently play an essential role as mediators of the teacher PD by assisting the teaching staff, in a non-authoritarian way, to organise their practice and to resolve sensitive issues emerging daily within an environment often full of tensions and conflicts.

Also in Brazil, a small-scale study [28] reporting on how a PD program has been created and implemented successfully by the teaching staff and their educational middle leader, within the English Department of a private school, shows that the combination of different forms of PD tends to foster effective opportunities for teachers to enhance professionally and best impact student learning.

Aaltonen [28] shows that their PD program was enriched with the creation of well-structured teacher study groups, grounded in daily teaching practice, and

using student data to guide instruction, which led to other forms of PD, such as class observation followed by formative feedback and mentoring.

2.1.4. Leading Change and Improvement Initiatives.

Moore [29], in a study for the National College of School Leadership (NCSL), in England, has founded that there is considerable literature on how senior leaders lead and manage change, but less research on how middle leaders address the school improvement agenda, although these are currently seen as pivotal to the successful implementation of any change in an educational institution, as they frequently lead a large number of change processes initiated by the school principals.

Fullan [30] claims that the change process consists of three overlapping phases: 'initiation', 'implementation' and 'institutionalisation', whose particularities need to be known by middle leaders committed with leading it successfully.

Busher [31] reminds that good interactions with staff members are essential for middle leaders to secure sustainable change, and that they need to adopt a leadership style(s) that is appropriate to achieve the desired ends in each phase of the change.

A leadership style expresses the type of relationship that individuals holding leadership positions maintain with their subordinates, including the way they use power and authority, arrive at decisions, and interact with their colleagues [32].

Styles of leadership have an impact on social cohesion and the culture of the staff with whom middle leaders interact [31]. Although typologies of leadership styles are constantly multiplying, Leithwood et al.'s study [32] featuring a division of the main styles into eight broad categories remains helpful.

Exemplifying, the 'managerial or transactional' style gives a centrality to the work or task to be done according to pre-established structures and procedures with little consideration of people.

In the opposite side lies the 'transformational leadership', considered more adequate for both leaders and subordinates to respond productively to the demands upon them in challenging circumstances [32]. The transformational leadership style helps to build coherent policies, as it involves staff in decision-making, and fosters effective collaborative work [31].

Transformational middle leaders are commonly good role models of value-driven educators, by providing staff members with individualised attention and support, opportunities for their intellectual development and good performance at work. For these reasons, they apply strategies that include identifying and meeting teachers' needs, recognising their efforts and valuing their talents, and fostering a positive school culture in which the best practices are shared. [33].

Authors like Busher [31] also highlights that every

middle leader must cope with staff resistance to change, so he/she needs to learn how to identify the reason(a) why people resist to change, to help them accommodate to it when necessary.

3. Methodology

To fulfil the purpose of the scientific research, a qualitative educational case study was undertaken, in the year of 2021, to enhance an understanding on how to maximise the professional performance of middle leaders, applied to the context of the lower elementary school division of a Brazilian K-12 school.

Merriam [34] defines an educational case study as *“an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a bounded phenomenon such as a program, an institution, a person, a process, or a social unit”*.

Yin (2009) argues that case studies call for an intensive and in-depth focus on a specific unit of analysis, so they generally require a much smaller sample size than other methods.

All the ethics related issues were considered carefully throughout the development of the case study. The Ethics Form was submitted and approved upfront by the University College London (UCL). The main ethical aspects considered included: Invitation Letter and Formal Consent, Information Letter, Informed Consent Form, Right to Withdraw, Confidentiality and Anonymity, Harm or Discomfort Arising from Research, Data Storage and Privacy of Participants, Dissemination and Use of Findings.

The names of the participants used in this paper are not their real names. The study followed the ethical guidelines provided by the British Educational Research Association (BERA) [36].

For the electronic questionnaire, all the middle leaders were invited, whilst for the interviews, the researcher used her own judgment to select three interviewees among the five middle leaders available, as well as their senior leader, so a purposive sampling has been carried out [37].

The interviews were all conducted on the same day, and the researcher recorded them by using two different electronic devices. Prior to each interview, the researcher spent 5-10 minutes fostering a good climate by thanking each interviewee, explaining the purpose of the study, reading the instructions on how to respond the questions, and clarifying aspects previously stated in the informed consent form. Then, the researcher asked for permission to voice record the conversation for transcription, and to take notes.

4. Data Presentation and Analysis

Research data gathered from the electronic questionnaire, in Portuguese, were translated, coded, and

analysed. After that, data collected from interviews, also in Portuguese, were transcribed in the original language, then translated into the English language. Afterwards, data gathered from both research tools were analysed simultaneously, along with notes of non-verbal content taken during the interviews, aiming at answering three research questions which included the following: *“What are the roles of educational middle leaders?”*.

In the electronic questionnaire, the five middle leaders claimed that they played all the roles presented: 'leading and managing curriculum', 'leading and managing the teaching and learning processes', 'building, leading and developing teams', and 'leading and managing change and improvement initiatives'.

The three middle leaders, referred to as **Anna**, **Ellie**, and **Bea** in the dissertation report, provided detailed information on how such roles were performed in their school division.

During the interviews, when they were asked whether they played additional roles, they argued that they did not know other roles besides those. Also, when they detailed how they used to play their roles, they ended up describing tasks which would likely fit within the sphere of each role, which has been interpreted as a relevant contribution for a possible sub-division of the roles of middle leaders into a set of tasks (see Table 1).

Eve, the principal, shared that the leadership teams across all divisions and departments were engaged in a school-wide change aiming at revising and improving aspects about the same four roles: *“We’ve been working on the review of all these fronts that you raised”*.

Anna, who was working in the context for about eighteen months, shared that she was the year-level middle leader responsible for all matters related to grades 1 and 2. This organisational characteristic about their school, consisting in having duties and responsibilities split among the middle leaders, was seen as highly beneficial to optimise their time. She placed a special emphasis on her role of leading the development of teachers, for which she was 'co-responsible': *“This is one of my main roles, but I am not alone on this... there is a part that is mine, but there is also a whole schoolwide work focused on teacher training”*.

Ellie, who worked at the institution since its foundation in 2005, claimed that she was used to playing the four roles for many years, while overseeing the After School Program. In her discourse, the idea of 'leading by example', which is a characteristic of the transformational leadership style, was constantly present: *“I believe that the middle leaders should exercise their leadership by being a role model for the teaching staff they lead, not only in terms of performing*

their roles with competence and responsibility, but also by having a positive attitude”.

Transformational leaders act like role models who demonstrate high standards of ethical and moral conduct, are considerate with the needs of others, have empathy for others, and avoid using power for personal gain [38].

Bea, who worked as a middle leader for a year, argued that: “*All the four roles are key for the smooth running of the work carried out by middle leaders*” [which she defined as] “*a possibility to promote an integration*

between the curriculum and the teacher's work”. She classified as challenging the role of 'leading a teaching staff' formed with diverse individuals' who had been recently her peer teachers, due to her 'lack of previous experience as a team leader', which she tried to compensate by working closely to her colleague Anna. In her discourse, there was evidence that she was unconsciously yet apparently successfully applying features of the four leadership styles known as 'instructional', 'managerial', 'transformational' and 'moral' [32].

Table 1. Roles and tasks of educational middle leaders

Roles	Tasks
1. Leading and managing curriculum	- Leading the design of written curriculum - Revising/leading the revision of curriculum (every year) - Engaging in discussions about curriculum across the school community and in external events - Presenting the school curriculum at meetings - Leading the implementation of taught curriculum - Supervising the delivery of taught curriculum
2. Leading and managing the teaching and learning processes	- Communicating with stakeholders through different communication channels (face-to-face, telephone, mobile phone, online conference calls, email) every day - Planning and conducting (individual and collective) meetings with teachers, students and parents - Supervising and supporting activities and events related to the teaching and learning processes - Working on timetables, class schedules, and other documentation - Reading, revising and contributing with improvement of teacher's plannings, lesson plans, evaluative activities etc. - Mediating conflicts - Observing classes - Receiving and providing feedback - Organising different learning environments - Working collaboratively with other professionals (psychiatrists, neurologists, speech therapists etc.) who accompany students
3. Building, leading and developing teams	- Providing teachers with training, guidance and support - Identifying and meeting teachers' needs - Carrying out appraisal of teachers
4. Leading and managing change, projects and improvement initiatives	- Designing and leading the design of projects - Leading change/projects/improvement initiatives - Allocating resources for the implementation of projects - Monitoring the implementation of projects - Evaluating the effectiveness/validity of projects

Source: Table created by the researcher with the tasks pertaining to the sphere of each role, based on the data collected in the interviews

She claimed, for instance, that needed to put, on the side, the singularities of each individual in her team for the sake of the collective work, and that she used to imposing a line of doing things desired by the institution (managerial/transactional); whilst trying to be a good role model for her team, by encouraging them to reflect on their practices, by firstly looking for them when she arrived at work to check whether everyone was there and well (transformational); and by helping her teachers to improve their lesson plans and projects, assisting them,

as an experienced former classroom teacher, in their routine of delivering the taught curriculum (instructional). Also, **Bea** emphasised the importance of underlying her leadership practices with a set of core values: “*I have a strong focus on ensuring that what we state as our principles be truly reflected in the teacher's planning [written curriculum], in the classroom [taught curriculum] and in our [interpersonal] relationships*” (moral leadership style).

An aspect that came across strongly in the interviews,

and mainly during the data analysis phase, was the difference perceived on how Ellie, the extracurricular activities coordinator outlined her roles and tasks in comparison with the description provided by Anna and Bea, the school division coordinators, regarding the same topic, as if the three of them were not working in the same school setting, under the supervision of the exact same senior leader.

Ellie claimed that she had been playing the four roles and provided examples of a wide range of tasks pertaining to the sphere of each role. Unlike that, Anna and Bea shared that the roles and tasks were split among them. The perception was that there was more support by the senior leader to the middle leaders who worked in the area closer to her within the school.

The statement made by the principal, in the beginning of the interview, that there was an improvement change being implemented that consisted in the review of the four roles was a signal that she was aware that such initiative was in need in their context. Surprisingly, none of the middle leaders interviewed mentioned such improvement change at any time, although it has been stated by their principal that the change involved the whole institution.

5. Discussion of Research Findings

The data collected, analysed, and presented seemed to be good enough to answer the research question that has been permeating all the sections of this manuscript concerning the identification of the key roles played by middle leaders in schools, based upon the supporting literature underlying it.

The four roles identified and investigated – 'leading and managing curriculum', 'leading and managing the teaching and learning processes', 'building, leading and developing teams', and 'leading and managing change and improvement initiative' – were recognised by all the middle leaders that participated in the study as the only ones that they performed in their workplace.

Additionally, their senior leader claimed that middle and senior leadership teams were engaged in a school-wide change focused on improving aspects related to the same roles.

'Building, leading and developing teams' was classified by most middle leaders as more challenging than the others. In the literature, Jones [22] claims that effective school leaders lead the development of their teachers by helping them to achieve their full potential; whilst Adair [22] argues that, to achieve such aim, high-performance team leaders commonly have a relevant professional experience, in addition to certain personal qualities, and specific knowledge related to their roles, as well as to the areas of their team members.

While detailing their routine, the middle leaders might have helped to identify a set of tasks which could

be allocated within the sphere of each role. Thus, a possible sub-division of each role into several specific tasks might have been significant research finding since a similar categorisation has not yet been found in the literature.

On this matter, De Nobile [4] argues that the existing ambiguities concerning a coherent categorisation of the roles of middle leaders are a result of their roles be "either quite broad, or specific to a given position, or not organised into conceptually coherent domains of practice".

Another possible research finding has emerged from the idea that, despite of both teachers and middle leaders being two different professional categories, whose effective performance depends on a distinct set of knowledge and skills, as highlighted in the literature [5], [8], a solid and successful experience in classroom teaching would provide the middle leaders with important tools, mainly to maximise their ability in 'building, leading and developing teams'. Hence, the specific set of knowledge of middle leaders was perceived as a need to expand their repertoire rather than to replace it.

Following this line of thinking (which has not been yet identified in the literature by the researcher), it is relevant to remark that, when a high-performance and experienced teacher is appointed to a middle leadership position, he or she will likely need to acquire and develop a new set of knowledge and skills pertaining to the sphere of the new position, at the same time of making use of the previous repertoire acquired and developed in classroom teaching.

On the other hand, as highlighted by one of the middle leaders, it is also true that several outstanding teachers might not succeed as middle leaders for not having a leadership profile, even when other essential enablers to a professional performance of excellence are provided.

The team of middle leaders expressed a high level of self-confidence in performing their roles, maybe for holding a formal leadership position for many years in their context, except for Bea, who was working as a middle leader for the first time for a year or so, but after having worked as a classroom teacher for 35 years (15 years in that school division).

They seemed to hold a formal and valued position in their context, where their roles and tasks had been clearly assigned to them, and they expressed motivation to keep playing them the best way possible.

Two significant barriers pointed out during the interviews were identified as if having a negative impact on their professional performance, which were: insufficient knowledge and skills in middle leadership and management (such as in identifying and meeting the needs of staff, time management skills, and leading improvement change), and a lack of effective support by

their senior leader.

However, the demand for effective support by their senior leader, mainly in the form of the provision of professional development opportunities in service, was discreetly pointed out by the three middle leaders who work closer to their principal, sharing even the same room in their segment. It has been noted that the only middle leader who was not a peer colleague that worked in the same area within the school felt herself more comfortable to express her needs.

At last, relevant contributions were given relating to the specific set of knowledge and skills that middle leaders should have, which include: specific knowledge in curriculum and children development; knowledge and skills in leadership and management; and a leadership profile, synthesised by an expanded vision to embrace different perceptions and diversity; being liked and trusted; having tolerance, empathy and emotional intelligence; as well as flexibility to resolve controversial situations without getting into conflicts with people. It seems coherent to emphasise that a structured professional development plan, in service, especially tailored to address the needs of these middle leaders, is highly advocated here as key to help them improve their knowledge, skills and attitudes base, whilst fostering the enhancement of their practices, and interpersonal relationships.

6. Recommendation for Further Research

Some questions were raised, mainly by the middle leader Bea, who engaged with the researcher into a deeper reflection and discussion about the topic. She complained that one of her main frustrations was to end up almost every day of the week not being able to execute all the tasks listed in her diary. Then, she asked: *"How could my peer colleagues and I improve our time management skills through restructuring our roles, in order to optimise our time?"*

The improvement of time management skills has been recognised by middle leaders in previous research (e.g.: Irvine and Brundrett, 2017) as crucial. Therefore, it seems pertinent to recommend a study focused on investigating how the work routine of educational middle leaders could be best planned, maybe through innovating some aspects relating to the execution of roles and tasks, as a means of enhancing their performance and overall well-being.

7. Conclusion

This paper has derived from a qualitative educational case study carried out by the same researcher in 2021 and submitted to the University College London (UCL) in 2022, in partial fulfilment of the Master's Program in Applied Educational Leadership and Management. The

scope of the academic study was the professional performance of educational middle leaders applied to the context of the lower elementary school division of a Brazilian private K-12 school.

The purpose of this research work is to outline how the topic 'key roles of educational middle leaders' was approached in the academic study. As a qualitative study, it relied mostly on non-numeric data, collected through an electronic questionnaire and semi-structured individual face-to-face interviews, with an emphasis being placed on meanings, experiences and descriptions provided by five middle leaders and their senior leader.

The four key roles of middle leaders that were identified and investigated were as follows: leading and managing curriculum; leading and managing the teaching and learning processes; building, leading and developing teams; and leading and managing change and improvement initiatives.

It has been concluded that the roles of educational middle leaders are both complex and demanding, which implicates that a specific set of knowledge, skills and attitudes need to be acquired and developed by these professionals, who must be provided with effective support by their senior leadership while performing their duties.

In addition to having a formal middle leadership position, clarity about the roles assigned to them and how they are supposed to play them in their school context, they need daily support. A PD program in service would be key in the provision of such support as it would help them to overcome barriers, whilst encouraging them to develop themselves continually, both individually and collectively.

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