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**MIDDLE LEADERS IN EDUCATIONAL REFORM:
A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF DEFINITIONS, ROLES, AND
CHALLENGES (2020-2025)**

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Abstract:

The integration of information technology is reshaping the organizational structure and management of schools. In this context, as the key link between senior managers and teachers, middle leaders face increasing responsibilities and challenges. However, systematic research on them is still limited. This article reviews 29 empirical and review articles in the Web of Science and Scopus databases from 2020 to 2025, focusing on the definition, roles, and challenges of middle leaders. The study found that middle leaders are both educators, executors, and change agents, but they generally face problems of role ambiguity, insufficient resources, and imbalance of power and responsibility. Although few studies have directly explored their digital capabilities, most literature still implies that they need to be highly adaptable in technology integration and organizational reform. Future research should further focus on their development paths and support mechanisms in the context of digitalization.

Keyword:

Digital Capabilities; Information Technology; Middle Leaders; Organizational Reform; Role Ambiguity



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Introduction

As the global education system continues to promote digital reform, educational leadership research is constantly expanding its theoretical depth and practical breadth. The academic success of a school is inseparable from the support and supervision of the management team and other middle management positions (García-Martínez et al., 2020). The decentralization of school management has led to the expansion of the principal's responsibilities, which further distributes leadership responsibilities to middle leaders (Bryant, 2019). The role of middle leaders in schools has received increasing attention, especially from researchers in the field of leadership (Rasidi et al., 2020). Previous studies have focused on explicit leadership roles such as principals or teachers while paying less attention to middle leaders who are in the middle of the organization and have dual functions of execution and support (Grootenboer et al., 2020). Without the participation of the middle level, the top level will not be able to obtain first-hand information on the current situation of the school (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2020).

Leadership is not the same as teaching, and middle school leaders must possess distinct skills from classroom teachers. Middle leaders are essential in teaching reform, management coordination, and policy implementation because they can connect decision-makers with teachers (Reid, 2020; Henderikx & Stoffers, 2022; Highfield & Rubie-Davies, 2022). Middle executives' responsibilities are getting increasingly complex, particularly as education's digitalization accelerates. They must not only have professional teaching skills but also comprehend organizational methods and be capable of guiding instructors, coordinating resources, and promoting reforms. Despite this, most current leadership research has not comprehensively examined the job positioning and skill requirements of middle-level managers in this process (Henderikx & Stoffers, 2023).

Middle managers are critical to the organizational structure because they stand between the operational core and senior management (Mintzberg, 1989). They are individuals with responsibilities that exceed those of teachers, as opposed to executives or principals in the school's administrative hierarchy (Netolicky, 2020). They hold formal positions within educational institutions (Gear & Sood, 2021; Lipscombe et al., 2023). Middle executives, such as subject directors and department heads, play an undoubtedly important role in the efficient operation of schools. Conversely, experienced educators must assist students in meeting their academic commitments. Subject directors function within academic departments (Moeketsane et al., 2021). Netolicky (2018) underlined that middle leaders frequently see themselves as educators with leadership responsibilities, rather than as leaders focused on educational development or pedagogical revolution.

The "middle leaders" mentioned in this article are typically department directors, grade leaders, and topic coordinators (Highfield & Woods, 2024). They play an important role in the school's organizational structure, connecting senior management with front-line teachers. Existing research indicates that this group has a significant impact on teacher professional growth, the formation of teaching leadership (Bush, 2023), school change, and student learning outcomes (Bryant et al., 2020; van Niekerk et al., 2022; Highfield et al., 2022). Middle leader's positions may be formal or informal (De Nobile, 2018). Middle leaders frequently have role conflicts and execution challenges as a result of unclear responsibilities, roles, and limited resource support (Gear & Sood, 2021; Zadok et al., 2024). To properly perform these vital duties, middle executives must be strengthened through professional development to deal with the complexities of their roles.

Notwithstanding the expanding corpus of research on middle leaders, substantial deficiencies persist in the literature (Harris et al., 2019), particularly regarding a systematic review of middle leadership, the planning, execution, and assessment of school improvement as a continuous long-term endeavor (Koh et al., 2023), and a comprehensive comprehension of their leadership efficacy and obstacles, particularly in the milieu of digital transformation or educational reform. Although a few studies have attempted to explore the changing role of the middle level in technology integration, such as Henderikx & Stoffers (2022); Henderikx & Stoffers (2023). But overall, the relevant literature has not yet formed a mature theoretical system.

The definition, roles, and challenges faced by middle leaders in the context of continuous educational reform are not well integrated or analyzed in the current body of research, despite the recent surge in studies on the subject. In the current educational setting, this prevents a more thorough comprehension of their placement and practical problems. Therefore, this paper aims to systematically review relevant research from the past five years to clarify the definitions, roles, and challenges of middle leaders and further explore the development potential of research on middle leadership in the digital age. This paper mainly discusses the following three research questions:

RQ1: How are middle leaders currently defined in the education field?

RQ2: What roles do middle leaders play in educational organizations?

RQ3: What challenges do middle leaders face in the context of current education reform?

Methodology

This study employs a systematic literature review methodology and utilizes the PRISMA framework to standardize the processes of identification, screening, and analysis. PRISMA offers three primary advantages as a framework for online educational environments: it establishes a systematic search methodology, serves as a standardized guide for educators, and aids readers in comprehending the systematic review process (Mohamed et al., 2020).

This research utilized two reputable databases, Web of Science (WoS) and Scopus, which encompass high-quality peer-reviewed literature in the domain of education (Zhu et al., 2020). The data collection period extended from April 23, 2025, to April 26, 2025. The systematic search technique was primarily categorized into three phases: identification, screening, and qualification evaluation (Figure 1).

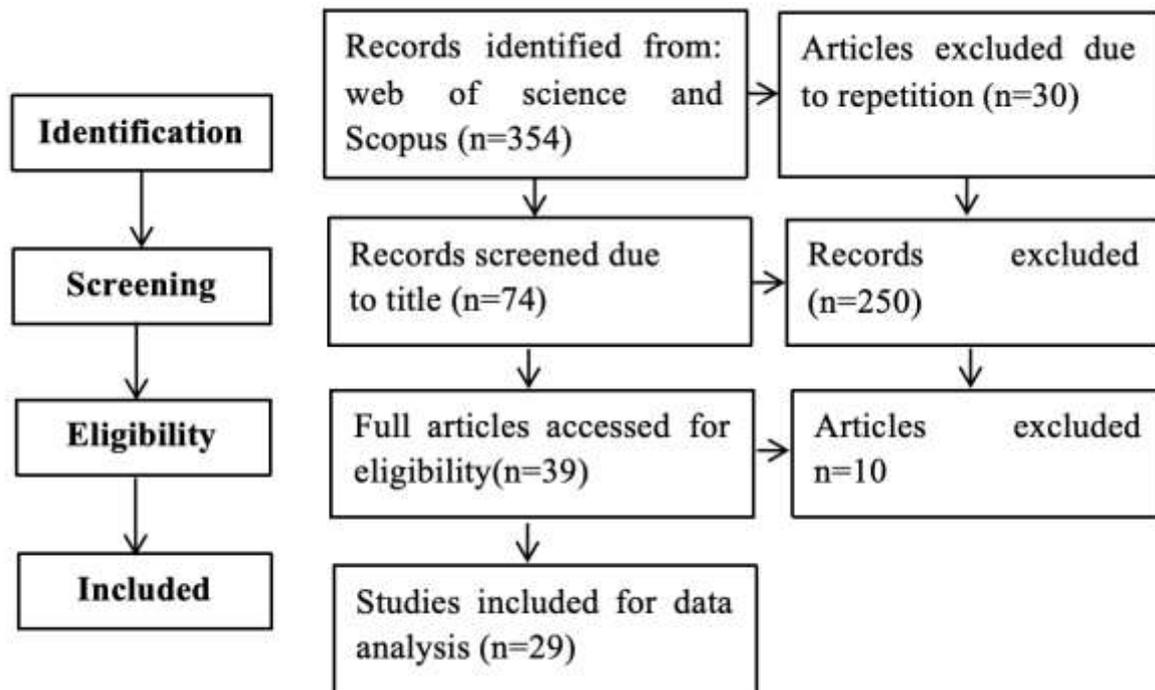


Figure 1: Research Flow Chart

The initial phase is identification, utilizing the terms "Middle Leaders" AND "Education" via Boolean operators. This ensures that research related to the field of education and middle leaders is addressed. A total of 354 documents were obtained, comprising 63 from the Scopus database and 291 from the WoS database, as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1: Keywords Used in The Systematic Review Process

Database	Keyword Used
WOS	(Middle Leaders) AND (Education)
SCOPUS	"Middle Leaders" AND "Education"

The researchers carefully examined the Scopus and WOS databases for duplicate publications. All 354 articles satisfied the inclusion criteria. The publications were selected according to the research topics of this study. The search results indicated several studies on middle leadership characteristics since 2020. Nevertheless, there have been limited systematic assessments of middle leadership since that time. Consequently, publications published between 2020 and 2025 were one of the inclusion criteria.

This study established explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria to guarantee the quality of the research and the pertinence of the literature (refer to Table 2). The included articles must meet the following criteria: The publishing period is from 2020 to 2025, encompassing only journal papers or review articles published in English. This review exclusively chose publications about middle leadership in education. This procedure removed 250 duplicate articles and those that failed to satisfy the inclusion criteria according to the predetermined screening standards for the study context and domain.

Table 2: Inclusion Criteria for the Systematic Review

Criterion	Exclusion	Eligibility
Time period	<2020	From 2020 to 2025
Article type	books, conference proceedings, meeting abstract etc.	Article, Reviews article
Language	Non-English	English
Field	Not related to Education and Educational research	Education and Educational research

A total of 39 articles were received in the third stage of qualification review. More importantly, this stage will conduct a comprehensive review of the main contents of the articles, such as research questions and results. Ultimately, 10 articles were eliminated because they did not study middle leaders in the field of education. Ultimately, 29 studies that met the criteria were included in the analysis stage. The entire screening process is shown in Figure 1. Based on the content analysis method, we coded the important information paragraphs that contained answers to the research questions.

Results

Definition Of Middle Leaders

Overall, the definition of middle leaders varies greatly depending on the situation, as shown in Table 3. The literature typically argued that they are in the "middle ground" between principals and teachers and play an important role in top-down and horizontal coordination (Sukoco et al., 2022; Li & Zhang, 2024). Another type of research explicitly defines middle leaders as roles with formal titles and delegated tasks. Such as grade group leaders and topic coordinators (Beram et al., 2023; Bryant et al., 2020). This type of function has some institutional legitimacy, but its scope is limited by organizational empowerment and institutional constraints.

Another type of research stresses that middle teachers' identities stem from their practical performance rather than their titles and that the middle level is a communal identity generated by various formal roles in practice (Chalwell et al., 2024). Edwards-Groves et al. (2025) introduced the concept of teachers play a leading role at the middle level, emphasizing that influence stems from teaching practice. Ho, Kang, & Shaari (2021) also noted that despite the high position of the Singaporean vice president, he plays a typical middle leadership coordination role in the organization, and his role reflects the diverse characteristics of middle leaders in different cultural and institutional contexts (Lipscombe et al., 2023).

Table 3: Definition of Middle Leaders

NO.	Author	Definition
1	Stone & Stone (2024)	Emphasis on informal titles of middle managers rather than sets of roles
2	Highfield & Rubie-Davies (2022)	Relational leaders at critical intersections.
3	Chalwell et al. (2024)	Not a job title, but an umbrella term for a variety of formal leadership roles.
4	Beram et al. (2023)	Including positions such as teaching assistant, class teacher, and department head.
5	Edwards-Groves et al. (2025)	Teachers who practice leadership “at the middle level”.
6	Highfield et al. (2024)	Responsible for course leadership, usually the Head of Department.
7	Bryant et al. (2020)	A formally appointed leadership position in a school.
8	Zadok et al. (2024)	Intermediary between senior management and teaching staff
9	Tang et al. (2023)	Teaching Research Group (TRG) Leader
10	Egorov & Platonova (2023)	Department chairs, college deans, and heads of research institutes.
11	Li & Zhang (2024)	The middle level is the middle supervisor between the upper and lower levels.
12	Zhang et al. (2022)	TRG Leader or Subject Coordinator.
13	Zadok et al. (2024)	Heads of Department, Year Coordinators and Subject Leaders
14	Lipscombe et al. (2023)	A formally appointed leader between senior management and the faculty
15	Gramaje & Buenviaje (2023)	A formally appointed instructional leader.
16	Reid (2020)	Principals are considered middle leaders in teacher evaluations.
17	Highfield et al. (2024)	The course leader, usually the head of department.

18	Ho et al. (2022)	Middle leaders are guides who support teachers' innovation.
19	Van Niekerk & Rensburg (2022)	Non-academic positions such as deputy director and assistant director.
20	Sukoco et al. (2022)	Middle management positions are below senior management and above entry-level employees in the organizational hierarchy.
21	Li et al. (2021)	A manager between the principal and the teachers.
22	Henderikx & Stoffers (2023)	Management between top and bottom.
23	Ho et al. (2021)	The Middle leaders role of the vice-chancellor in Singapore.
24	Creton & Heard-Lauréote (2021)	Academic heads such as HoD are key Middle leaders officials.
25	Henderikx & Stoffers (2022)	Middle leaders managers need to have digital intelligence and soft skills.
26	Zhou et al. (2021)	The roles of academic administrator and lecturer overlap.
27	Ghamrawi et al. (2024)	Middle leaders positions such as vice president and department head.
28	Liu & Hallinger (2024)	Department Chair as Multidimensional Influencer.
29	Lipscombe et al. (2020)	Senior teachers with extra responsibilities.

The Role Of Middle Leaders

Middle leaders have an important role in teaching improvement and curriculum implementation, as shown in Table 4. They are in charge of arranging teaching content, overseeing curriculum implementation, and encouraging teachers' professional development by offering direction, feedback, and resource support. They play a significant role in maintaining instructional quality (Bryant et al., 2020; Liu & Hallinger, 2024). Furthermore, Middle leaders play an important role in implementing school policies and promoting strategic initiatives. They turn superior policies into operational procedures, serve as "bridges" and "cultural translators" in the system implementation process, and assist front-line instructors in understanding strategic concepts (Sukoco et al., 2022; Creton & Heard-Lauréote, 2021).

Furthermore, Middle leaders play a crucial role in fostering a collaborative culture inside schools and facilitating teacher growth. Research indicated that they not only direct pedagogical methods but also undertake other tasks, including relationship coordinators and facilitators of learning organizations (Edwards-Groves et al., 2025; Gramaje & Buenviaje,

2023). Their communication leadership is essential, requiring continuous reconciliation of expectations between senior management and educators (Stone & Stone, 2024), while also exhibiting implicit leadership to foster interdisciplinary collaboration and cultural innovation (Ho et al., 2022).

Table 4: Roles of Middle Leaders

NO	Author	Role
1	Stone & Stone (2024)	Teaching guide, bridge of communication between upper and lower levels
2	Highfield & Rubie-Davies (2022)	Teaching reform negotiator and relationship builder.
3	Chalwell et al. (2024)	Teaching influencer, faith demonstrator, community builder, etc.
4	Beram et al. (2023)	Organizational goal executor and colleague relationship coordinator.
5	Edwards-Groves et al. (2025)	Develop program implementers and teacher supporters.
6	Highfield et al. (2024)	Policy communicator and department change leader.
7	Bryant et al. (2020)	Coordinate teaching, design courses, and facilitate conversations.
8	Zadok et al. (2025)	Curriculum and teacher development facilitator.
9	Tang et al. (2023)	Direction setter, atmosphere creator, course promoter
10	Egorov & Platonova (2023)	Strategic implementer and administrative task undertaker.
11	Li & Zhang (2024)	Responsibility definer and coordination bridge.
12	Zhang et al. (2022)	Teachers are learning guides, coordinators of teaching and development work, and disseminators of knowledge.
13	Zadok et al. (2024)	Transformational leader, professional development and curriculum development facilitator, etc.
14	Lipscombe et al. (2023)	Teacher team leader and teaching facilitator.
15	Gramaje & Buenviaje (2023)	Professional mentor, team builder, learning facilitator, performance navigator
16	Reid (2020)	Teacher performance evaluator and policy coordinator.

17	Highfield et al. (2024)	Leader in curriculum development, implementation and teacher assessment.
18	Ho et al. (2022)	Create a supportive environment and assist innovative practices.
19	Van Niekerk & Rensburg (2022)	Strategic change executor and promoter.
20	Sukoco et al. (2022)	Strategy executor, strategy initiator, cross-level communication bridge, organizational change promoter, etc.
21	Li et al. (2021)	Instructional leader, curriculum strategist, administrative coordinator.
22	Henderikx & Stoffers (2023)	Strategic executors, digital transformation leaders and supporters, etc.
23	Ho et al. (2021)	Cross-border connector, coordinator and translator.
24	Creaton & Heard-Lauréote (2021)	Promote policies and shape the environment for institutional discussions.
25	Henderikx & Stoffers (2022)	Digital transformation enabler.
26	Zhou et al. (2021)	Strategist and implementer.
27	Ghamrawi et al. (2024)	Promoter of reform and coordinator between upper and lower levels.
28	Liu & Hallinger (2024)	Curriculum leader and resource integrator.
29	Lipscombe et al. (2020)	Key leaders in teaching and pastoral care.

Challenges Faced By Middle Leaders

Despite the significant roles of middle managers, they typically lack adequate power support, as shown in Table 5. Highfield et al. (2024) noted that they possess responsibilities in form, yet frequently occupy a nebulous position regarding power. Bryant et al. (2020) observed that certain middle leaders adopt a more passive stance in executing teaching support duties, failing to actively intervene or direct teaching practices, thereby undermining the leadership role and initiative that middle managers ought to exhibit in professional development. Middle managers frequently assume many roles, including educators, administrators, and reform leaders, resulting in significant role conflicts. Gramaje & Buenviaje (2023) indicated that they must simultaneously address classroom instruction and team management, frequently encountering conflicting objectives, while assuming managerial roles.

Zhou et al. (2021) highlighted that, in the realm of advancing technological reform, notable disparities in motivation and acceptance persist between educators and middle administrators. Middle managers must endure increased duties, although their initial tasks remain unchanged. In the lack of official authorization, middle leaders frequently depend on informal relational

networks to advance teacher development, which concurrently renders them more susceptible to institutional constraints (Tang et al., 2023). During organizational reorganization, individuals frequently encounter the simultaneous pressures of heightened responsibilities and diminished authority, leading to job ambiguity and emotional suffering (van Niekerk & van Rensburg, 2022).

Table 5: Challenges Faced By Middle Leaders

NO.	Author	Challenge
1	Stone & Stone (2024)	Lack of autonomy, easy to be ignored, and unclear role positioning.
2	Highfield & Rubie-Davies (2022)	The pressure of accountability and the burden of coordination from top to bottom.
3	Chalwell et al. (2024)	There is ambiguity in roles, heavy workload, and lack of institutional support.
4	Beram et al. (2023)	Between superior instructions and co-worker relationships.
5	Highfield et al. (2024)	The responsibilities are diverse and need to cope with practical challenges in the process of change.
6	Bryant et al. (2020)	Passively perform tasks and are unwilling to interfere with other people's practices.
7	Zadok et al. (2024)	Extraversion and openness may have a negative effect on collective teacher effectiveness when resource support is low.
8	Tang et al. (2023)	Requires close interaction with multiple levels of personnel
9	Egorov & Platonova (2023)	Administrative burden increases and communication of change is inefficient.
10	Li & Zhang (2024)	Need to respond to structural changes and survival challenges.
11	Zhang et al. (2022)	Practical inertia, misunderstanding, and institutional deficiencies
12	Zadok et al. (2024)	School culture and role positioning are unclear
13	Lipscombe et al. (2023)	Need leadership teaching and communication collaboration space.
14	Gramaje & Buenviaje (2023)	Role perception bias, positioning as a manager.
15	Reid (2020)	It is difficult to balance the differences between observation and cognitive evaluation.

16	Highfield et al. (2024)	Responsibilities are unclear and resources need to be integrated to support teaching.
17	Ho et al. (2022)	Formal development opportunities are limited and roles remain restricted.
18	Van Niekerk & Rensburg (2022)	Unclear roles, high pressure, and lack of confidence.
19	Li et al. (2021)	Responsibilities are complex and roles are easily confused.
20	Henderikx & Stoffers (2023)	Need to cope with rapid changes in digital transformation, culture and external environment.
21	Creaton & Heard-Lauréote (2021)	Often lack management experience and face role tension.
22	Henderikx & Stoffers (2022)	Digitalization theory lacks a Middle leaders perspective
23	Zhou et al. (2021)	Differences in motivation, lack of ability and lack of institutional recognition.
24	Ghamrawi et al. (2024)	There are many tasks and the role tension is obvious.
25	Liu & Hallinger (2024)	Institutional culture dimensions influence leadership practices.
26	Lipscombe et al. (2020)	The roles are dispersed and six core conditions are required: principal support, professional development, culture, passion, motivation and knowledge

Discussion

In the context of contemporary education reform, the research indicated that middle leaders are exceedingly complex and dynamic (Amey & Eddy, 2018). On the one hand, it is anticipated that they will fulfill multiple roles within the organization (Grootenboer, 2018; Bryant & Walker, 2024), and simultaneously advance instruction, management, and development (Kieran et al., 2020). Nevertheless, their actual leadership space is restricted by the power structure, resource allocation, and policy environment. Only two articles (Henderikx & Stoffers, 2022; Henderikx & Stoffers, 2023) explicitly identified digital transformation as the primary concern in this study. As these articles emphasize, middle executives must assume the dual responsibilities of technology integration and organizational change in the absence of institutional support, and they must cultivate soft skills to maintain organizational trust and a collaborative environment.

An additional article investigates the disparities in motivations between academic administrators and lecturers during the adoption of digital technologies (Zhou & Milecka-Forrest, 2021). Furthermore, the majority of literature continues to concentrate on the teaching of leadership, organizational change, and teacher professional development, with digital

context systems being infrequently integrated into the analytical framework. Nevertheless, certain studies also implicitly address the influence of information technology reform on middle leaders responsibilities when discussing the development of teaching or change management. Egorov & Platonova (2023) also underscored that technological change has emerged as a significant source of pressure for middle administrators in the context of implementing higher education strategies.

Effective school leadership, often comprised of middle and senior leaders, is regarded as a critical component for school success in the twenty-first century (Aaltonen, 2024). It is clear that, while digital challenges have not yet become the primary focus of middle leaders research, their impact on the governance logic and functional transformation of middle leaders has steadily spread into educational practice. Future research should focus on expanding the integration of middle leaders with technology. This includes establishing role recognition, professional progression paths, and training mechanisms for middle leaders in AI teaching environments. By augmenting quantitative research with cross-national comparisons, the true organizational worth of middle leaders in organizational transformation can be confirmed.

Conclusion

This study conducted a systematic review of the pertinent research on middle leaders over the past five years, highlighting its critical role in organizational development and reform education. It also exposed the intricate obstacles it encounters, particularly the leadership role dilemma that arises in the face of resource constraints and reform environment changes. This paper develops an analytical framework for middle leaders in the context of educational reform based on the three dimensions of definition, role, and challenge. It also identifies the theoretical gap in the framework concerning the issue of digitalization, thereby broadening the scope of educational leadership research. It is advised that educational administrative departments and schools establish institutional authorization and clarify the boundaries of middle leaders responsibilities; enhance their training support in technology integration and technical capabilities, and conduct future research to further investigate the leadership behavior paths of middle leaders in the process of educational reform, particularly in technology integration and digital teaching environments.

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Appendix

Table 1: Details Of Final Literature

No.	Author	Title	Country
1	Stone & Stone (2024)	Professional development leadership: the importance of middle leaders.	England
2	Highfield & Rubie-Davies (2022)	Middle leadership practices in secondary schools associated with improved student outcomes.	New Zealand
3	Chalwell et al. (2024)	Christian middle leadership: how the faith of middle leaders shapes and is shaped by school culture and community.	Australia
4	Beram et al. (2023)	Professional Leadership Competencies for Malaysian Educational Middle Leaders.	Malaysia
5	Edwards-Groves et al. (2025)	Relational coherence in middle leading for school based professional development.	Australia
6	Highfield et al. (2024)	Culturally responsive middle leadership for equitable student outcomes.	New Zealand
7	Bryant et al. (2020)	How middle leaders support in-service teachers' on site professional learning.	China
8	Zadok et al. (2025)	School middle leaders' personality traits and collective teachers' efficacy: the moderating role of resource support.	Israel
9	Tang et al. (2023)	In search of the middle influence: how middle leaders support teachers' professional learning	China
10	Egorov & Platonova (2023)	Perception of strategies by university middle managers: is there any relationship with actual universities' operations?.	Russian
11	Li & Zhang (2024)	Role of middle managers in dealing with hierarchy and network logics: exploration in the context of Sino Foreign Cooperative University.	China
12	Zhang et al. (2022)	How do the leadership strategies of middle leaders affect teachers' learning in schools? A case study from China.	China
13	Zadok et al. (2024)	School middle leaders' transformational leadership and organizational resilience: The moderating role of academic emphasis.	Israel
14	Lipscombe et al. (2023)	Middle leaders' facilitation of teacher learning in collaborative teams.	Australia
15	Gramaje & Buenviaje (2023)	The roles of middle leaders in reinforcing academic optimism.	Philippines
16	Reid (2020)	School principals acting as middle leaders implementing new teacher evaluation systems.	the US state
17	Highfield et al. (2024)	Curriculum middle leader practices and teachers perceptions of their effectiveness: A study in New Zealand	New Zealand

		Zealand secondary schools.	
18	Ho et al. (2022)	Capturing interactions between middle leaders and teacher entrepreneurial behaviour: an examination through a person-environment fit model.	Hong Kong
19	Van Niekerk & Rensburg (2022)	Middle managers' strategising practices to effect strategic change.	South African
20	Sukoco et al. (2022)	Middle manager capabilities and organisational performance: the mediating effect of organisational capacity for change.	Indonesia
21	Li et al. (2021)	Does middle leadership matter? Evidence from a study of system-wide reform on English language curriculum.	Hong Kong
22	Henderikx & Stoffers (2023)	Digital transformation and middle managers' leadership skills and behavior: a group concept mapping approach.	Netherlands
23	Ho, Kang & Shaari (2021)	Leading from the middle: vice-principals in Singapore as boundary spanners.	Singapore
24	Creaton & Heard-Lauréote (2021)	Rhetoric and reality in middle management: the role of heads of academic departments in UK universities.	UK
25	Henderikx & Stoffers (2022)	An exploratory literature study into digital transformation and leadership: Toward future-proof middle managers.	/
26	Zhou et al. (2021)	Two groups separated by a shared goal: how academic managers and lecturers have embraced the introduction of digital technologies in UK Higher Education.	UK
27	Ghamrawi et al. (2024)	Department heads' professional agency: investigating self-perceptions and deans' perspectives through vignette-based analysis.	Lebanon
28	Liu & Hallinger (2024)	The effect of department leadership on teacher professional learning in China: A multilevel moderated mediation model.	China
29	Lipscombe et al. (2020)	Middle leading in Australian schools: Professional standards, positions, and professional development.	Australian