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EXPLORING MIDDLE LEADERSHIP IN VIVO: FROM SELECTION TO
EVALUATION IN A PUBLIC K-12 SCHOOL DISTRICT

Dissertation
By

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CAPTURING THE "MIDDLE" THROUGH A BI-DIRECTIONAL APPROACH:
EXPLORING MIDDLE LEADERSHIP AT A SINGLE K-12 DISTRICT

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Abstract

This study aimed to explore middle leadership from a single K-12 district. To accomplish this, an exploratory, embedded single case study (Yin, 2018) was utilized. The district was the case while one elementary, middle, and high school were embedded "sub-units" in the case. A principal, middle leader, and 2 middle leader colleagues further represented each school. This method was employed in order to illuminate how middle leadership was experienced through multiple perspectives and contexts but within the same district. This dissertation also took a narrative approach, beginning in understanding the conditions that led to the creation of middle leadership roles, to the selection, conceptualization, and evaluations of middle leaders. Then, middle leaders were asked about how the district can further support their roles.

Results indicated that external (standardized tests, changes in standards or curriculum) and internal (desire for district consistency and cohesion) and factors influenced the creation of middle leadership positions. Middle leaders were selected based on their teaching and leadership experiences. However, conceptualization of middle leaders in the district extended beyond teaching. In addition to teaching, middle leaders were also conceptualized as strategic planners, people with good interpersonal and communication skills, managers, coaches, and evaluators. Evaluation of middle leaders were based on state-based evaluation frameworks for teachers or administrators

that showcased a misalignment of responsibility and evaluation processes. To support their roles in the district, middle leaders suggested a combination of internal and external support. Internally, they suggested the creation of a within-district, middle leader-specific professional learning community in order to have opportunities to share best practices and collectively think about problems and solutions. Externally, they would also appreciate the district's support in attending formal professional development such as courses or certification programs.

These results indicate that there is a need for middle leadership-specific classes, programs, and evaluation frameworks and that middle leaders would also benefit greatly in the creation of mentorship programs or professional learning communities.

DEDICATION

This study is dedicated to

The intergenerational, interfamilial project. To our ancestors and our progeny, familial and vocational.

Paul Edward Madden
My partner, best friend, and the best human I know

Lucy Tee Vera Cruz
Antonio Vera Cruz
My parents, for their unconditional love, sacrifices, and support.
Thank you for the heritage and the wisdom.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Problem and Purpose Statement

In the United States, widespread concern over the quality of student learning experiences and outcomes in K-12 schools has led to unprecedented support for and implementation of several, interrelated, and national reform movements including the Common Core State Standards, the Next Generation Science Standards, and the Race to the Top Initiative (Berry, 2010). Central to the assumptions of these intertwined reform movements was the notion that more rigorous content standards will result in higher quality teaching, which in turn will lead to improved student achievement and outcomes (Hanushek, 2002; NCTAF, 1996). While teachers are the greatest school-based factor influencing student learning (NCTAF, 1996), arguably, too little emphasis is placed on studying those who directly support teachers in improving student learning, that is, middle leaders (Brown & Rutherford, 1999).

In contrast, within business management literature, the efficacy and performance of both executives and non-managerial employees remains an interest. However, middle leaders are widely recognized and increasingly studied due to their strategic importance for actualizing organizational goals (Antonioni, 2000; Ahearne, Lam, & Kraus, 2014; Ouakouak, Ouedraogo, & Mbengue, 2014; Sayles, 1993). Specifically, middle leaders are valued in business contexts for their ability to both visualize the company's overall goals and concretize these into daily practices (Marshall, 2012). As such, their impact is bi-directional and iterative, contributing directly to the decision-making efficacy of their superiors who necessarily have less time on-the-ground and the efficacy and productivity of their own teams by refocusing, framing, and redirecting their colleagues' efforts

towards organizational goals (Marshall, 2012). Due to this indispensable work, middle leaders—who they are, what they do, and how they can be supported— are studied to a great extent in business contexts (Antonioni, 2000; Ng & Chan, 2014).

Surprisingly, middle leaders within schools, for example, instructional coaches, curriculum specialists, or community liaisons who perform analogously important functions in relation to improving student learning and outcomes are largely understudied and underdeveloped, particularly in the United States. First, although there is an emerging body of evidence that middle leadership in schools empirically improves student performance and teacher efficacy (Elish-Piper & L'Allier, 2011; Piper & Zuilkowski, 2015; Vogt & Rogalla, 2009), middle leaders remain understudied within the United States. Rather, leadership studies in the United States continue to focus on either principals or teacher leadership. Second, in the United States middle leaders are underdeveloped as, unlike their peers in other English-speaking educational settings, such as, Singapore (Koh, Gurr, Drysdale, Ang, 2011), Britain (Bennet, Woods, Wise, & Newton, 2007), and Hong Kong (Choi, 2013), middle leaders in the United States lack both a formal pathway and licensure to practice. Finally, and broadly speaking, the existent literature on middle leadership lacked both a consistent definition of middle leadership (de Nobile, 2017) and, when it was articulated, under-constructs the complex nature of middle leadership.

The purpose of this dissertation was to further understand middle leadership in a single, bounded context. Specifically, the intent was to understand middle leadership not just from a single middle leadership or senior leadership perspective but rather, to include the various stakeholders and contexts that surround middle leadership. This approach was

unique because few, if any studies found, focused entirely on a single district that spanned a K-12 setting and involved a multi-perspective approach. The specific qualitative method utilized was an exploratory, embedded single case study (Yin, 2018). In this study's context, the district will serve as a case and the schools within the district—one elementary, middle, and high—will be "sub-units" of analysis. Then, a middle leader within each of these schools was selected, along with his or her nominated administrator/s and colleague/s. Each school was first analyzed before finding patterns across schools and participants in the district.

In doing so, this study aims to open up the field of inquiry for more rigorous theorizations of middle leaders in support of improved teacher efficacy and student learning experiences. As such, this study aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. What were the conditions that gave rise to the creation of academic middle leadership positions?

2. How were middle leaders selected in the district?

3. How was middle leadership conceptualized within the district?

4. How were middle leaders evaluated in the district?

5. How can the district support middle leaders?

Conceptual Framework

Middle Leaders, as the name suggests, are leaders. Situated between school-wide leadership and teachers, middle leaders occupy the unique position of both being leading (a group of teachers) and being led (by the principal). They undertake a variety of roles and responsibilities, ranging from small-scale teams of grade level coordinator, subject

matter specialist, to school-wide curriculum directorship, occupying a strategic position (Ahearne, Lam, & Kraus, 2014) in the planning, implementation, and assessment of various school and state initiatives. In particular, middle leaders are known to be [1] strategic planners, [2] managers, and [3] mentors.

Middle Leaders as Strategic Planners

Because middle leaders are structurally between administrators and teachers, they were able to view the school in both a broad (school-wide/grade-level) and specific (day-to-day/classroom/teacher) way. Thus, they had a unique knowledge of the broader school systems and culture and the more specific teacher or classroom knowledge that is useful for planning. Planning, in most organizations, typically involves long-term outcomes divided into short-term, more manageable outcomes. Marshall (2012) wrote that because of middle leaders' specialized knowledge of both content and implementation, they were able to inform school stakeholders and decision makers of feasible alternative outcomes as well as help reason through the different options, often fusing relevant concerns and considerations among the options. This was similar to Beck and Plowman's (2009) findings that state that middle leaders encourage divergent interpretations of problems and solutions yet synthesize this divergence in later stages of change.

This strategic skill set was significant because it allowed organizations to review available information in order to make the "best" possible choice for decision-making. As schools often face high-stakes consequences such as decreases in funding or school closings, it was important that administrators make decisions that promoted the highest level of teaching and learning, as reflected in the quality of instruction, curriculum design, and assessment (Gurr & Drysdale, 2013), within the feasibility of the context.

Another aspect that significantly contributes to being strategic planners was middle leaders' knowledge of organizational networks (Marshall, 2012) and school culture (Gurr & Drysdale, 2013; West, 1995). Because middle leaders serve as important interfaces between disconnected actors and domains (Conway & Monks, 2011), middle leaders have a great potential to be agents of change—to be committed to high quality teaching and learning (Gurr & Drysdale, 2013) as well as plan for organizational change. Their knowledge of organizational networks allowed for less confrontational and abstracted change, working with teachers, yet accountable to administrators (Marshall, 2012).

This dual, specialized knowledge, reflective in their organizational position between administrators and leaders, was useful for strategic planning (Ahearne, Lam, & Kraus, 2014l Conway & Monks, 2011; Marshall, 2012; and De Nobile, 2017). Their influence in both directions helped administrators in planning for change and teachers in implementing these changes.

Middle Leaders as Managers

The relationship between strategic planning and management cannot be over-stated (O' Reilly et al. 2011). After all, strategies are only as good as the feasibility of its implementation. Research on middle leadership echoed its significance. When asked about their roles, middle leaders described themselves as having both leadership and management positions, often concerned with "getting things done effectively" as they maintained links between top management and their respective teams (Marshall, 2012).

Once administrators make decisions regarding a particular change or innovation, middle leaders were tasked with aiding its implementation. During the management

phase, middle leaders were tasked with "working with individual values and beliefs manifested in the ethos of the school" (Blandford, 1997, p. 3), constantly mediating, negotiating, and interpreting connections between the organizations' institutional (strategic) and operational levels (Conway & Monks, 2011). Thus, whole-school decisions were "translated" operationally depending on school stakeholders' values, beliefs, and practices in the pursuit of positive organizational change.

Because middle leaders needed to provide direction to their teams, they were responsible for creating and managing professional learning communities (PLCs) (de Nobile, 2017; Gurr & Drysdale, 2013) through professional development. Building the capacity of the staff not only informs teachers of the feasibility the school's overall goal but also the reflects how this change was applicable to teachers' day-to-day roles and responsibilities.

This was especially important to schools because teachers were more likely to engage in school improvements and innovations when they believed in its feasibility (Guskey, 1986). Thus, despite having made decisions at the administrative level, middle leaders needed to modify these decisions as necessary to fit teachers' beliefs, attitudes, and practices in the pursuit of successful implementation (Sayles, 1993), creating an iterative process and feedback mechanism between teachers and administrators that contributed to the overall school or district goal.

Middle Leaders as Mentors

While middle leaders do not strictly perform evaluations—as this is often a direct responsibility of administrators—they provided plenty of formative assessments to teachers. In a sense, they acted as supervisors or mentors by performing classroom

observations and providing feedback in one-to-one conversations or in a PLC (De Nobile, 2017). Because they were expected to have specialized knowledge (Ahearne, Kam, & Kraus, 2014) in a subject matter or skill set, middle leaders were framed as an example for other teachers and staff.

Overview of Methodology

This dissertation aimed to understand not only how middle leaders understand their roles and responsibilities but also gain insight on how these roles and responsibilities are shaped by the context—more specifically, by the principal (senior leadership) and teachers (who they lead). In order to answer the research questions, a qualitative exploratory embedded single case study research design method was utilized.

Yin's (2018) two-fold definition of case study involved its the scope and features. The scope of case studies "investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-world context." (Yin, 2018, p. 15). Functionally, case studies "benefits from prior development of theoretical propositions to guide design, data collection, and analysis, and as another result rely on multiple sources of evidence, with data needing to convert in a triangulating fashion" (p. 15). For this particular study, the bounds of the case (the district) were divided into school "sub-units" (Yin, 2018) in order to have representation from the elementary, middle, and high school.

Within each school, a middle leader was selected upon how well he or she represented the district through the recommendation of the assistant superintendent. Due to the purposes and limitations of the study, the middle leader was defined as academic (subject specific) leaders those who lead a teacher group. Then, selected middle leaders were invited to suggest colleagues, often administrators and teachers, to participate in the

study.

To reiterate, the district in this study served as a case while one elementary, middle, and high school as sub-units within the case. Within each school, there were administrator/s, one middle leader, and two colleagues. Each school was first analyzed as a case, then for the first level of cross-case analysis, then alike participants were grouped (ex. administrators across the schools) to see if there were any patterns across participant types. Then, a cross-case report of the schools was conducted.

Context, Participants & Selection

The context of the study occurred in one suburban school district (Hillside Public Schools) with four elementary schools, two middle schools, and one high school. For this study, all principals, middle leaders, and teachers were invited to participate. A flyer containing basic information about the research as well as my contact information was distributed through the district email. In return for participation, the principals were promised the results from their respective schools as well the research findings for the district.

Middle leaders were selected upon the recommendation of the assistant superintendent and if consent was provided. Then, the principal of the middle leader's school was invited to participate in the study. Then, a snowball sampling method was utilized to ask the middle leader regarding two colleagues that they closely work with. These colleagues were invited to participate and were selected provided consent was given. In total, there were 14 participants in the study, with 4 administrators, 3 middle leaders, and 6 colleagues.

Data Sources

In order to perform an exploratory, embedded case study design, Yin (2018) suggested creating a "replication" design where a sampling design and protocol for each case is followed in order to increase reliability between measures and procedures. Thus, for each school, the same sampling, data collection, and analysis were repeated. Interviews, field notes, observations, and memos constituted the data sources used to construct detailed case narratives.

Before the study occurs, Institutional Review Boards (IRB) forms in each respective district were submitted and reviewed. Upon approval and meeting the participants, formal consent forms were provided and explained. These consent forms contained information on the research topic and the procedures that will be followed. All participants were assured that they could withdraw from the study at any time.

Interviews. Distinct interview protocols were developed for the principals, middle leaders, and teachers. The interview for the principal focused on their overall experience of middle leadership in the district. These included distribution of leadership, conditions that led to the creation of the creation of the role, and the selection and evaluation of middle leaders. The interview for the middle leader largely focused on their experience as middle leaders in the district. Finally, the interviews for the colleagues involved asking about how they experience working with the middle leader.

Shadow Observations. A shadow study technique is a way of recording the daily actions of a person in an educational environment. In recording this information, I would be able to gain a snapshot of the middle leader from their point of view. For this task, I descriptively recorded notes regarding middle leaders' activities during the day.

Memos. Following any interview or shadow study, I wrote memos of my thoughts and reflections regarding the event. In doing so, I practiced reflexivity, or "the constant assessment of the relationship between knowledge and the ways of doing knowledge" (Calas & Smircich, 1999, p. 240). More specifically, I will attempt to be a self-reflexive researcher—or the practice of being aware of how judgment is formed based on my respective onto-epistemology (Malaurent & Avison, 2017). These not only allowed me to keep track of thoughts and observations but also to ensured the consistency and triangulation of the findings.

Analysis

All data retrieved will be stored in the university's server to ensure that it will not be accessible to others. Moreover, all schools, and participants were blinded in order to protect personal identities and information. For this study, middle leaders, schools, and the district were given specific names. Meanwhile, colleagues and administrators were discussed using their titles in order to lessen confusion among the 14 participants.

Yin (2018) recommended that multiple data sources be triangulated for a "convergence of evidence" (p. 129). In order to execute this, he further recommended [1] organizing multiple data sources in a case study database, [2] connecting citations to specific evidentiary sources, [3] linking research questions to the case study topics, and finally [4] relating the results to the research questions (p. 135). This dissertation generally followed these suggested methods for triangulation.

In order to analyze the interviews, field notes, and memos, I performed three levels of qualitative data analysis. The first will be a combination provisional coding and in-vivo coding. Provisional coding or "researcher-generated codes" (Miles, Huberman, &

Saldaña, 2014, p. 77) based on what is known about middle leaders conceptual framework. These included "middle leader as strategic planner", "manager" and "mentor". However, because this study uniquely aimed to understand how context shaped middle leadership, in-vivo coding, or "short words or phrases from the participant's own language" (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014, p. 74) were also be utilized. In using in-vivo coding, new codes or information not stated in previous research was illuminated.

Common patterns codes were identified based on patterns found in initial codes within each participant within a school. Themes, relationships, and/or explanations were determined. Following the identification of initial codes, a within-case analysis was performed for each school. Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) described the goal of within-case analysis as a way to "describe, understand, and explain what has happened in a single, bounded context" (p. 100). Thus, the themes, relationships, and/or explanations, which were inherent to the context, described the role and function of the middle leader based on the joint experiences of administrators, middle leaders, and colleagues.

Subsequently, a second level analysis, which was a cross-case analysis by participant type (administrators, middle leaders, colleagues), was conducted in order to identify themes across participant types. For example, themes across administrators could potentially illuminate commonalities for the first question of the study that involved the conditions that led to the creation of academic leadership position. Finally, an across-case analysis (Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, 2014; Yin, 2018) between schools was performed in order to make conclusions regarding middle leadership in the district. In this level of analysis, common themes across each of the schools were identified.

The table below (Table 1.1) summarizes how the research questions align with the

study's participants and methodology. It exhibits the research question in relation to each participant, the data to be collected and the process for analyzing data.

Table 1.1

Overview of Research Questions, Participants, Data, & Analysis

Research Question	Participant	Data	Analysis
What were the conditions that gave rise to the creation of academic leadership positions?	Assistant Superintendent, Principals	Individual Interviews Analytical Memos School and District Documents	Convergence of data sources for each case ▼
How were middle leaders selected in the district?	Assistant Superintendent, Principals	Separate Interviews Analytical Memos School and District Documents	Individual Case Report ▼
How do teachers conceptualize and experience the role of the middle leader?	Teachers Interview	Interview Transcription Memos Field Notes	Cross-Case Analysis ▼
How does middle leadership change across grade levels?	Middle Leader Principal Teacher	Interview Transcriptions Memos	Cross-Case Report

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study is threefold: [1] it responds to a gap in the literature on middle leadership in the United States, [2] it offers district leaders guidance on how to support middle leaders, and [3] it reveals incongruences between policy and practice. First, this study offers two unique contributions to the middle leadership literature base in the United States. Unlike prior research on middle leadership, this study focused on middle leaders across a single district, including both primary and secondary schools, which allowed for a clearer comparison between the grade-level bands, while taking

account of context. Further, unlike other studies that either looked at middle leaders' relationships between themselves and senior leaders or between themselves and teachers, this study looked at both sets of relationships (senior leadership and teacher) allowing for a more holistic view of how middle leaders translated across district's layered leadership structure.

Second, this study offered senior leaders insights into how they might better structure and support middle leadership roles. Starting with Table 4.7 and continuing with Table 4.10, this study's conceptualization of middle leadership provides senior leaders with clarity about the specific competencies needed to become a highly effective middle leader. Rather than just being an exceptional teacher with strong interpersonal and communication skills, middle leaders need to be strategic planners, managers, and coaches/evaluators. These are skills thought of as necessary for senior leaders, such as principals, but to varying degrees, relative to the middle leaders' title and prior experiences, are necessary for successfully supporting teaching initiatives. Understanding these required skills allows senior leaders to begin providing targeted position descriptions and professional development.

Finally, this study demonstrated the discrepancy between the lived experiences of academic middle leaders and current policies related to them. Although the skills necessary to become an effective academic middle leader involved both teaching expertise and senior-leadership-like qualities, the current policy of evaluating them either as teachers or as teachers and administrators does little to support the unique needs of middle leaders. Thus, if professional evaluation in education is to be a meaningful process for academic middle leaders it must take account of how they uniquely leverage

their expert pedagogical content knowledge, interpersonal/communication skills, and leadership skills to advance learning beyond what is capable by building-level supervisors alone.

Positionality Statement

As an international, multi-racial graduate student, my experiences with research in the United States have been limited. However, as I experience and understand how schooling is in the U.S., I realized how different my schooling experiences were in the Philippines. I noticed how school organizational structures were different as well as the approach for teaching and learning. The culture of schools also seemed to be different. My experiences from the Philippines positioned the teacher as the all-knowing authority, while students like myself were expected to listen and take notes.

My experiences as a curriculum specialist in the U.S. also showcased some thoughts and ideas regarding school organization and curriculum leadership. In my experience, there were few, if any, within-district curriculum specialists who could guide senior leadership appropriately for short- and long-term curriculum development. Often, curriculum leadership was distributed to coaches or teacher leaders who had minimal background in curriculum development. This gap led me to think about middle leadership in schools and their potential for curriculum leadership. However, upon looking more into this topic, I realized that there were few studies written about middle leadership.

My hope in writing this dissertation is that it could contribute to the overall understanding of what middle leadership is, but more importantly, support the needs of middle leaders, especially in curriculum development. I believe that if middle leaders are

trained in curriculum leadership, they will increase their self-efficacy and be able to serve

administrators, teachers, and students with confidence and great effectiveness.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

The purpose of this dissertation was to understand how a district conceptualized middle leadership. In this chapter, I examine empirical and theoretical research that frames and supports my research questions:

1. What were the conditions that gave rise to the creation of academic middle leadership positions?

2. How were middle leaders selected in the district?

3. How was middle leadership conceptualized in the district?

4. How were middle leaders evaluated in the district?

5. How can the district support middle leaders?

As the focal point of this dissertation is coming to understand middle leadership in an American context, middle leadership will be defined based on both a) existing understandings of middle leaders roles and responsibilities in the United States and b) the contextual factors that influence their work therein. Thus, the first section includes common titles of middle leaders and their corresponding responsibilities as well as their common functions in the Untied States. The second section summarizes factors that affect middle leadership. These factors included organizational constraints, the leadership style of superiors, middle leader's own previous experiences, and middle leader's professional competencies. Because the context of this dissertation is within one district and across all K-12 levels, each section highlighted key differences of middle leadership across the grade levels. Finally, common roles of middle leaders, irrespective of grade level and responsibilities found in the literature will be presented.

For this literature review, a broad systematic search was initially employed, followed by an in-depth snowball inquiry, driven by particularly illuminating articles and/or books related to middle leadership in education. First, to map the terrain of middle leadership literature in education, the terms "middle leaders", "middle leaders in school", "middle leaders in education", "educational middle leaders", and "middle leadership" were utilized in Boston College's online library. Initially, 24 articles were found. While the purposes of this literature review were educational, the majority of middle leadership studies found were from the field of business. As a result, a second round of systematic inquiry was pursued with search terms such as "middle leadership in primary schools" or "middle leadership in secondary schools."

The second round of literature review yielded 40 books and articles, which informed an in-depth snowball inquiry into related citations. In addition, given their relative frequency in relevant articles citations, the table of contents of Educational Management Administration and Leadership, School Leadership and Management, and the Journal of Educational Administration, from 1995 to the present, were searched for relevant journal articles. From these inquiries, articles were separated into three different categories: general middle leadership, middle leadership in primary schools (1-8), and middle leadership in secondary schools (9-12). Articles on middle leadership found at the tertiary level were discarded because the context of this dissertation is limited to the K-12 district level. As a result of the K-12 focus and the United States context, this literature review not only discusses the themes presented above but also further categorizes them by grade level (primary and secondary).

Defining Middle Leadership

Middle leadership (ML) is a complex concept. Although the position has been gaining attention in the field of education, differences in educational policies and cultures in global educational research inevitably generated inconsistencies in definitions and understandings of what middle leadership is. In the United States, the absence of formal licensure and career pathways towards the role further obscures its central characteristics. Nonetheless, it can be said in the broadest sense that middle leaders are those who operate between upper leadership and classroom teachers (Fleming & Amesbury, 2001). This very broad definition implies that a diverse set of school personnel are, technically, defined as middle leaders, yet their roles and responsibilities vary significantly.

Middle leaders more specifically defined, are those who are both leading and being led. Middle leaders "give and receive direction" (Ahearne, Lam, & Kraus, 2014)—directed by upper leadership, while being simultaneously "responsible for the operational work of others, namely classroom teachers" (Busher & Harris, 1999). De Nobile (2017) similarly offered two distinct yet related definitions of middle leadership. The first is with respect to the structural placement of middle leaders in schools and the other is regarding the role of middle leaders. According to his expansive literature review, middle leaders occupy "the general layer of leadership between senior leadership teams and classroom teachers and other staff" whose functions include "[being] teachers who have responsibility for other staff and/or an aspect of the work of the school, such as curriculum areas and policy" (de Nobile, 2017, p. 4).

More function-specific definitions of middle leadership included "curriculum responsibility, possibly leading a team of teachers in its planning and delivery, and

providing some assistance and in-service training" (Bennett, 1995, p. 83). Beyond the functional aspects of middle leaderships work, Fleming and Amesbury (2001) further specifies the leadership capacities required of middle leaders, for example, "having a clear vision for the area of which [they] are responsible for and being able to enthuse others with this vision", "being clear about what constitutes good practice and using it", "being an effective manager of people and resources", and "being able to put in place procedures to secure efficiency" (p. 3).

Differences in professional titles, school cultures, and educational policies affect research and the conclusions drawn from them. For example, countries such as Singapore (Koh, Gurr, Drysdale, & Ang, 2011), the United Kingdom (Bennet, Woods, Wise, & Newton, 2007; Hammersley-Fletcher & Kirkham, 2007), and Hong Kong (Choi, 2013) have formal structures for middle leadership and as a result, have some shared understanding of middle leaders roles and responsibilities. However, despite both having formal pathways to middle leadership, the way it is instantiated varied by context. In Bennett's (2003) study, common roles of middle leaders included "subject leaders, middle managers, heads of department, curriculum coordinators" (p. 1). Meanwhile, the Hong Kong context included vice principals, subject leaders, and non-subject leaders (Ng & Chan, 2014). Thus, even though formal pathways to leadership do exist in certain contexts, the role itself may be different in title and in practice.

Other countries such as the United States, New Zealand, Malaysia, and others, have no currently existing formal pathways to middle leadership. Because of this, most of the studies are about determining what middle leadership is and the roles and responsibilities associated with it (Hammersley-Fletcher & Kirkham, 2007; Javadi, Bush, & Ng, 2017;

Kafle, 2013; Ryng, 2000). Because each study is tied to a particular national context, there is similarly no singular conceptualization of middle leadership. As a result, one of the most confounding issues surrounding middle leadership, especially in America, was the lack of a consistent role definition (de Nobile, 2017).

Organizational Structure and Middle Leadership

In both secondary and elementary schools organizational structure often shapes the roles, responsibilities, and leadership skills required of middle leaders in school settings, in particular, secondary schools. Busher and Harris (1999) describes the varying departmental structures that affect the broadly-defined role of middle leadership. These are: 'federal' departments, 'confederate' department, 'unitary' department, 'impacted' department, and 'diffuse'.

Organizational Structure in Secondary School and Middle Leadership Roles

'Unitary' and 'Impacted' departments focused on one subject matter (Busher & Harris, 1999). The main difference between unitary and impacted departments lay in the part-time v. full-time status of the majority of the department's teachers, which in turn impacted the role of the middle leaders therein. In 'unitary' departments the majority of the department's teachers taught one subject matter, full-time, focusing the middle leaders work on content and pedagogical improvements or designs for a particular subject matter. These included subject matter specialists for science, math, English, and others. On the other hand, 'impacted' departments employed part-time teachers or full-time teachers who taught a subject outside the department (Busher and Harris, 1999). Some examples provided were music, history, and geography departments.

Because 'impacted' departments were less consistent than 'unitary' departments,

more studies have focused on 'unitary', academic middle leadership roles through instructional leadership. While instructional leadership was mostly associated with senior leadership (principals, assistant principals, assistant superintendents) (McNeill, Lowenhaupt, Katsh-Singer, 2018; Zapeda & Lanoue, 2017), some of this responsibility had been distributed to middle leaders (de Nobile, 2017). The most prominent examples of these roles in the middle leadership literature were instructional coaches, teacher leaders, and heads of departments.

Instructional coaches were subject-specific expert teachers who have a very high content and pedagogical content knowledge but also had an additional responsibility of mediating between teachers and administrators (Giamellaro & Siegel, 2018). For example, Giamellaro and Siegels' (2018) analysis of the construction of a STEM coach role indicated that coaches had three main roles—connector, planner, and teacher. The coach as a connector reflected the social aspect of being a coach. That is, interacting, communicating, and fostering relationship between with multiple actors in the community (i.e. teachers, administrators, community contacts). The coach as a planner involved curricular aspects of the role such as planning for teacher and student experiences or applying for grants in order to improve the curriculum or gain resources. Finally, the coach as a teacher included administering professional development for teachers, mentoring, and modeling instructional practices.

Instructional coaching in mathematics has similar roles. For example, the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM, 2018) promoted the use of elementary mathematics specialists (EMS), as subject-specific, instructional middle leaders in schools. They wrote:

At the school or district level, EMS professionals may work primarily with teachers as coaches, in a professional capacity or targeting school-wide improvement in mathematics. In this role, EMS professionals build capacity by strengthening teachers' understanding of mathematics and helping them develop more effective instruction and assessment….[These include] support on a day-to-day basis ranging from conversation in the hall to in-classroom coaching to regular grade-level and departmental seminars focused on how students learn mathematics—can be crucial to the teaching work life.

In general, positive effects, from math, science, and reading, seemed proliferous for subject-specific instructional coaching. Matsumura, Gariner, and Spybrook's (2013) study performed a longitudinal group-randomized trial in order to discover the effects of content-focused coaching (CFC) on student reading achievement with 2983 students and 167 teachers. Their results found a direct correlation between the coaching program and reading achievement. These results were mirrored by studies by Calo, Sturtevant, and Kopfman's (2015) national study on literacy coaches from K-12 as vital to student achievement and Elish-Piper and L'Allier's (2011) study that illuminated a relationship between coaching time and student achievement. In science, Giamellaro and Siegel (2018) wrote about the importance of coaches in improving instruction and supporting new initiatives.

In addition to instructional coaches, teacher leadership was another way middle leadership, specifically with respect to instructional leadership, manifested itself in secondary schools. Teacher leaders were "successful teachers [who] express interest in further developing their professional skills" (Klein, 1985, p. 36). Thus, they were highly

knowledgeable on the specific content they teach, instructional techniques, classroom management and curricular adaptations (Klein, 1985). Almedar, Cappelli, Criswell and Rushton (2018) further described teacher leadership as:

- An individual [who] gains a deep understanding of educational practice, and of her/himself in relation to that practice and to the system (both locally and more broadly) within which s/he operates.

- Through those understandings, the individual is able to work with others to develop a vision for producing innovation in the system, which, within school systems means improving the practice of teaching and learning.

- As part of realizing that vision, the individual is able to empower others to promote change, and is able to modify and marshal available resources in a manner that ensure that this change is both productive and sustainable. (p.3)

Based on these studies, teacher leaders were not only remarkably aware of the context but were also capable of creating a vision, through curricular improvements that improved teaching and learning.

Depending on the size and nature (single subject matter v. interdisciplinary), Head(s) of Department(s) may fall under "unitary" or "federal" departments. As mentioned earlier, "unitary" and "impacted" departments focused on a single subject matter. As such, a Head of Department for a single subject matter such as music, history, or mathematics fall under the "unitary" department. However, Busher and Harris (1999) recognized that Head(s) of Department(s) can also be interdisciplinary, such as science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) Directors, Humanities Directors, and etc. could exist within the same school and district. In this case, the Head of Department

can fall under the "federal" department, or departments that "contain and support the teaching of several subject areas" that "work closely together because their subjects and pedagogies are perceived as cognate and cultures are substantially homogeneous" (p. 309).

Unfortunately, the roles and responsibilities of heads of departments (HoD) were vastly understudied compared to senior leadership and teachers (Dinham, 2007). As a result, the conceptualization of the role was highly diversified. Historically, results from a survey conducted by Davies (1983), indicated that heads of departments believe their responsibility to be "stock ordering and equipment", "curriculum design for their particular department" and "allocation of staff to classes". Thus, HoD were traditionally responsible for the management and direction of their specific subject matter. However, studies (Brown, Boyle, & Boyle, 2002; Brown & Rutherford, 1999; Dinham, 2007; Mercer & Ri, 2006) on the subject implied that HoDs also had significant affects on teaching and learning, planning, and management.

In a study relating secondary HoDs with student achievement, Dinham (2007) found that the following characteristics of HoDs promoted positive student outcomes: [1] Personal qualities and relationships, [2] Professional capacity and strategy, [3] Promotion, advocacy and external relations, [4] Department planning and organization, [5] Common purpose, collaboration, team building, [6] Teacher learning, responsibility, trust, [7] Vision, expectations, culture of success, and [8] Focus on student learning.

Summarizing Dinham's (2007) study, HoDs had the highest impact on student performance when they were able to combine personal factors and managerial factors. HoDs, who had mastery of the content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge,

were able to clearly, enthusiastically, and collaboratively create, manage, and sustain a purpose and goal for the subject matter they were responsible for. In their roles, they guided and led teachers for high quality instruction through professional development, modeling, team building, and collaboration.

However, successful management of a team also implied the need for good strategic planning and organizational skills. Thus, in addition to having content and pedagogical content knowledge, HoDs needed to be equally knowledgeable on policy creation, teacher collaboration, policy implementation, and the management of resources. The combination of these factors, according to Dinham (2007), cumulatively and directly impacted exceptional student performance.

Similarly, Brown and Rutherford (1998) claimed that HoDs are critical in school improvement, directly impacting student performance. In their study, they suggested that HoDs must focus on teaching and learning and improve their capacity to "make and implement policy [in order to] facilitate the progress change" (Brown & Rutherford, 1998, p. 229). More specifically, they recommended that HoDs utilize an "evolutionary" approach where "vision, planning, action, and review" were given more importance than setting unattainable long-term goals.

However, Brown, Boyle, and Boyle (2002) further complicated the role and function of the HoD. They suggested that HoD roles were also influenced by the context (school type). They found that in a "collaborative" school, HoDs were "actively involved and fully consulted in whole-school decision making and policy making" (p. 35), and individual goals and professional development opportunities for teachers were collaboratively discussed between senior and middle leadership. Thus, even as HoDs

remained accountable for their specific subject areas, they were nonetheless engaged in school wide, interdisciplinary decision making processes characterized by active and constant communication pathways between senior and middle leadership. Further, although HoDs interviewed in the study highly valued their participation in such processes, they were very aware of the structural support necessary to actively keep them involved in the process.

In a "quasi-democratic" school, HoDs "had less frequent formal opportunities for collaboration with other heads of departments, fewer meetings with other colleagues in other departments and they were generally unaware of other departments' planning models" (Brown, Boyle, & Boyle, 2002, pp. 35-36). Rooted in the belief that school decision-making was the sole responsibility of senior leadership, HoDs had limited freedom in selecting professional development experiences and participating in school-wide decision making processes.

Finally, HoDs in an "authoritarian" school "demonstrated little formal collaboration between [other] heads of department and little or no co-operative working with other staff colleagues" (Brown, Boyle & Boyle, 2002, p. 36). In these schools, there was no evidence of whole school committees for curriculum and management. HoDs were not consulted for whole-school decision-making processes. Moreover, there were limited professional development guidelines for HoDs or official documents describing their roles and responsibilities.

However, descriptions of the roles and responsibilities HoDs were also tied to context and location. For example, in a study by Mercer and Ri (2006) regarding the role of heads of departments in Chinese secondary schools, they found that HoDs had very

limited responsibilities. They reason that this may be because of the centralized government structure, where all major decisions regarding education was made at the government level while head teachers and HoDs merely implement the fixed curriculum. Nevertheless, the researchers implied that as the Chinese government moved towards decentralization, HoDs would play a more crucial role in student performance.

To summarize, HoDs had immense potential in improving student outcomes. As leaders of teaching and learning in a particular subject matter, they were able to strategically direct teachers while supporting the overall goals of senior leadership. However, successful HoDs were affected by the school context. In order to reach their fullest potential in supporting student learning, they needed access to resources and be provided opportunities for professional development.

'Confederate' departments were "large, multi-subject departments [that] can be seen as an administrative experience, as in the case, of some design and technology departments" (Busher & Harris, p. 309). Thus, while both 'confederate' and 'federal' departments involved multiple subject matters, they differed in a sense that 'federal' departments were academically oriented while 'confederate' departments were more involved in supporting multiple subject matters based on a particular specialization. These roles included technology administrators, community liaisons, and the like. This was perhaps the most understudied type of middle leaders in schools, given that only two articles in this literature review specifically discussed or described middle leadership roles within confederate departments.

Specifically, the two examples cited herein involved instructional coaches. Typically, when instructional coaches lead a confederate department, they did so to

promote a particular pedagogical model across multiple disciplines, such as, the workshop model. Although not the typical (federal) department structure within which instructional coaches were commonly employed, there was evidence of the positive effects of instructional coaching within a confederate department structure on improving general teaching quality, and consequently, on increasing student performance (Piper & Zuilkowski, 2015; Vogt & Rogalla, 2009). For example, in an empirical study comparing student performance between a control group (no instructional coach) and experimental group (with an instructional coach), Vogt and Rogalla (2009) found that instructional coaching significantly increased teaching competency, which led to a higher learning outcome. Similarly, Piper and Zuilkowski's (2015) randomized control trial of instructional interventions in Kenya suggested that a lower coach to teacher ratio, that is, an increase in coaches relative to teachers, would be more beneficial for student learning.

The final department type is 'diffuse,' which are departments that "have no identifiable base in a school and may be taught by a wide variety of staff" (Busher & Harris, 1999, p. 310). This department could be curricular in nature, where a middle leader created materials for other staff to use. For example, educators who taught a debate elective may receive materials from a national or local non-profit promoting debate in schools. While the person creating the materials may have had a debate and/or curriculum background, the educators teaching a debate elective in schools typically teach another subject full time, such as, mathematics or biology or history. However, as these departments were not necessarily built into the department structure of schools, some middle leadership opportunities were temporary, depending on the length and support for a new initiative or program.

Curriculum leaders are middle leaders whose skills could be applied to any schools' department structures, but who were typically employed in high-status unitary (e.g., math or ELA) or federal (e.g., STEM) departments and less often, in order from most likely to least likely, in confederate (e.g., workshop model), diffuse (e.g., debate), and impacted department structures. Eponymously, curriculum leaders improved schooling through curriculum development. Depending on the school structure, curriculum leaders could create resources or lesson plans for one or more subject matters. More specifically, they

would plan and initiate curriculum change, assist other teachers in improving

classroom practices, work with parents and other community leaders to

communicate with them about curricular goals and practices and to facilitate their

ideas about needed curricular changes, and function as a liaison with appropriate

administrators regarding long-range curriculum planning. (Klein, 1985, p. 36).

Table 2.1

A Summary of Middle Leadership Roles in Secondary Schools.

Departmental Structure (Busher & Harris, 1999)	Title/Role	Description
Federal	Head of Department (HoD)	(Dinham, 2007) Good personal qualities and relationships Professional capacity and strategy Promotion, advocacy and external relations Department planning and organization Common purpose, collaboration, team building Teacher learning, responsibility, trust Vision, expectations, culture of success Focus on student learning.
Confederate	Community Liaison, Technology	(Busher & Harris, 1999) Provides interdisciplinary support depending on their specific role

	Director, Librarian, etc.	
Unitary	Subject Matter Specialist (ex. science specialist, math specialist), Instructional Coach, Teacher Leader	(Giamellaro & Siegel, 2018) Connector Planner Teacher (Almedar, Cappelli, Criswell, & Rushton, 2018) Deep understanding of educational practice Work with others to develop a vision for innovation in teaching and learning Empower others to promote change and manage resources
Impacted	Non-Specific	(Busher & Harris, 1999) Teaches one ore more subject matters Can belong to a larger federal department (ex. music, geography)
Diffuse	Non-Specific Curriculum Leaders	(Busher & Harris, 1999) Middle leaders working on a specific school initiative Curricular initiatives (Klein, 1985) Curriculum Development

In other words, curriculum leaders planned and developed curriculum through a social network between teachers, administrators, and community members. While curriculum leadership could be its own position, Klein (1985) noted that excellent teachers who have a talent for curriculum development often acquired the role. Thus, not all curriculum leaders were teacher leaders but teacher leaders were more often curriculum leaders.

Busher and Harris' (1999) departmental structure offered a framework for differentiating and describing middle leadership roles in secondary schools. Building upon this framework, Table 2.1 and aligns and summarizes middle leaders' departmental structure, title/role, and responsibilities.

Organizational Structure in Primary Schools and Middle Leadership Roles

Middle leadership (ML) in primary schools differed from secondary schools because of differences in organizational and academic structure. In the United Kingdom, like other English-speaking nations, the historical context of middle management was characterized and shaped by the historic absence of middle leadership. Historically, in elementary schools, the head of school (a.k.a., headmaster, principal) was solely responsible for all decision-making processes (Fleming & Amesbury, 2001). However, as leadership responsibilities further increased for school heads in the 1990s, they began to distribute their leadership to others (Fleming & Amesbury, 2001; West, 1995), resulting in the development of middle leadership in primary schools.

One significant difference between primary and secondary ML is the academic load. While some primary schools have subject-specific teachers, as in the Philippines (DepEd, 2019), most primary school teachers in English-speaking countries taught multiple subject matters. This difference in academic responsibilities (one subject vs. multi-subject) inevitably affected the nature of middle leadership in primary schools, with broad roles such as "key stage/foundation stage coordinator; special education needs coordinator; staff development coordinator; planning, assessment, recording, and reporting coordinator, and subject coordinator" (Bennett, 1995, p. 3). Thus, although middle leaders can be subject-specific, this may not always be the case (Hammersley-Fletcher & Kirkham, 2007).

Academically, it seemed like there are two general categories of middle leaders in Primary Schools. The first was content-based pedagogy and expertise. In this category, primary school middle leaders focused on a single subject matter and guided teachers in

improving curriculum and instruction. An example of this role was illustrated by the National Council of Teaches of Mathematics. Repack and Francis (2014) wrote that although this role has various titles (e.g. math coaches, elementary math specialists, etc.), they had a common goal of "[being] a support system for teachers, students, and administrators, with the purpose of improving the teaching and learning of elementary mathematics" (p. 557). However, they noted that success was much more than content expertise. Thus, collegiality and trust were equally important factors in promoting improvements in curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment.

Similarly, the International Reading Association (2006), although ostensibly focused on English Language Arts, developed standards for literacy coaches that comprised of broad tenets for promoting instructional leaders who could support curriculum and instruction more broadly. They wrote,

The leadership standards apply to literacy coaches without regard to the content area in which they are assisting teachers. The content area literacy standards apply to the demands literacy coaches face when assisting in a specific content area such as English language arts, mathematics, science, or social studies (p. 5).

Thus, it was implied that their roles and responsibility were not limited to content expertise, but rather expanded to support other subject matters. However, others did focus more on literacy coaches' disciplinary backgrounds and foci, for example, Calo, Sturtevant and Kopfman (2015) argued that literacy coaches' responsibilities were a composite of content expertise, school service, and leadership.

The other category of middle leaders in primary schools included academic middle leaders were also primary school teachers that taught multiple subject matters.

What led to them being middle leaders was their strength in a specific subject area (Bennett, 1995; Klein, 1985; West, 1995). Defined, teacher leaders, in subject-specific areas:

> plan and initiate curriculum change, assist other teachers in improving classroom practices, work with parents and other community leaders to communicate with them about curricular goals and practices and to facilitated their ideas about needed curricular changes, and function as a liaison with appropriate administrators regarding long-range curriculum planning (Klein, 1985, p. 36).

However, these teacher leaders did not necessarily possess the same content expertise as their specialist counterparts in mathematics and literacy. Hammerseley-Fletcher and Kirkham (2007) stated that the selection of these middle leaders in primary schools were often based on the headmaster's preference rather than a clear formalized pathway or role description and that, often, these leadership roles were devised "in order to retain good, long-standing teachers and to take some pressure off the senior managers" (p. 5). Ryng (2000) further supported this claim by stating that some middle leaders in Ireland were selected because of seniority rather than competence.

Nevertheless, Harris and Muijs (2004) wrote that teacher leaders significantly impacted student performance by being instructional leaders and "social linkages" within the school community. At the school level, Harris (2015) found that "teacher leadership is positively related to changes in teachers' classroom practice and their instructional effectiveness" (p. 61); however, the links between teacher leadership and student performance was not as direct, at least empirically.

Another category of academic or subject-specific middle leadership in primary

schools was in the form of general pedagogical expertise. Similar to Busher and Harris'

(1995) "confederate" department that supports interdisciplinary efforts, these teacher

leaders organized events or school efforts in a particular grade level. Another example

was in the form of technology coordinator, special educator, and the like. However, these

may also be embedded in the teacher leadership category.

While not stated directly in the literature, non-academic middle leadership could

also occur in the form of community liaisons, similar to their secondary school

counterparts. For example, staff who organized communication pathways between

parents and teachers may technically be a middle leader; however, because no studies

were found on this type of middle leader, there were few descriptions on this role in

primary schools.

Table 2.2

A Summary of Middle Leadership in Primary Schools

	Expertise	Role/Title	Description
Academic	Content-Based Expertise	Math coach, Elementary math specialists, Literacy Coach/Specialist, Teacher leader, Curriculum Coordinator	(Repacki & Francis, 2014) Content expertise Collegiality and trust (International Reading Association, 2006) Leadership Content expertise (Klein, 1985) Curriculum leadership
	General Pedagogical Expertise	Teacher leader, Technology Specialist, Special education teacher leader	(Harris & Muijs, 2004) Social linkages Improvement in curriculum and instruction
Non-Academic		Community liaison	Communication between schools and the community

To summarize, middle leadership in primary schools were not as formalized and consistent compared to their secondary counterparts. Hammersley-Fletcher and Strain (2011) wrote that this inconsistency in role construction and expectation was a disservice to the teachers, students, and middle leader themselves. As such, a push towards clarifying these roles and responsibilities is needed. However, some categories summarized in Table 2.2 offers some conceptual organization of the roles and functions of middle leaders at the primary level.

Factors that Influenced Middle Leadership Role Construction

While middle leadership directly influenced teacher efficacy and student performance (de Nobile, 2017; Elish-Piper & L'Allier, 2011), contextual factors such as organizational or departmental structure, academic responsibilities, and senior leadership styles mediated the way middle leaders' roles were constructed. These factors influenced the construction of middle leaders role with respect to how middle leaders are perceived, tasked, utilized, and evaluated. As such, examining how organizational structure, academic responsibilities, and senior leadership styles allowed for a deeper understanding of middle leadership.

Organizational Structure

Organizational structure directly impacted the roles and behaviors of people within them (Owens, 1991). In the section above, it was well evidenced that middle leaders within secondary education were affected, often positively, by the stronger tradition of intra-department hierarchy and content specialization within secondary schools (Busher & Harris, 1999). For example, in unitary and federal departments, which

tended to only exist in secondary schools, middle leaders had clearer role definitions

closely related to their content and content-based pedagogy expertise. However, in

elementary schools, which due to the multiple and multidisciplinary nature of elementary

teachers teaching loads, had a more confederate, grade-level approach to organizing

change efforts, which necessitated middle leaders to be more pedagogically- or academic-

skill-oriented in their role definition. As mentioned previously, this orientation was

pronounced in the broad conceptualization of literacy coaches, who are often, unlike their

imagined counterparts (i.e., elementary mathematics specialists), were conceptualized as

supporting teachers in advancing academic literacy across all subjects.

Academic Responsibilities of Middle Leader and Teachers

Another significant factor in middle leaders' role construction was in both middle

leaders own assumed teaching loads and the teaching loads of the teachers they directly

worked with. With respect to the teachers they work with, if these teachers teach one

subject matter, which was typical of secondary schools teachers, then the corresponding

middle leader typically concentrated on both supporting and teaching within one specific

subject area (Bennett, 1995). Middle leaders in these situations typically had greater

content expertise in the subject matter as well as significant classroom experience in said

subject matter. However, due to both a) the overvaluation of content and undervaluation

of content-based pedagogical knowledge in secondary schools in the United States and b)

the relative content expertise of secondary teachers teaching, middle leaders in secondary

schools tended to manage more administrative tasks related to assessments, equipment

and supply management, and facilitate bi-directional communication.

Although these tasks were important, middle leaders in elementary schools,

partially due to the inverse assumptions about the content-knowledge and pedagogical content-knowledge of elementary school teachers, often focused on more substantive and systematic initiatives directly related to improving teaching and learning. Further, in elementary schools because teachers teach multiple subjects, middle leaders roles tended to be interdisciplinary, student learning focused, and, relatively, more holistic (Bennett, 1995). However, Hammersley-Fletcher and Kirkham (2007) and Ryng (2000) both note that primary middle leaders, because of its interdisciplinary nature, were not necessarily "experts" in their field. For example, even though elementary math specialists focus on only one subject, unlike their single-subject middle leader peers who run unitary, secondary mathematics departments, they were typically not subject experts, but rather relatively more experienced and knowledgeable teachers of mathematics.

Senior Leadership Styles

Of the three factors, senior leadership style may have been the most impactful. Evidence from the literature suggested that it both influenced role definition and the middle leader's effectiveness. First, middle leaders performed better when senior school and/or district leadership wre supportive of their curricular and/or pedagogical initiatives, rather than supplanting these initiatives with other, non-role related initiatives or adding, non-strategic tasks to their work load (Kafle, 2013; Hammersley-Fletcher and Kirkham, 2007; Ng & Chan, 2014; Javadi, Bush, & Ng, 2017). For example, were subject specialists allowed the time and space to support teachers in their implementation of the curricular and/or pedagogical demands necessitated by the districts strategic plan, or were they or their team meetings co-opted by accountability data reporting and/or supporting individual students to make systemic and systematic change(s)? Much of a senior leaders

style manifested itself in the way they created, replicated, or shifted collaborative, quasi-democratic, or authoritarian teaching contexts (Brown, Boyle & Boyle, 2002).

Collaborative environments occurred when "there was a clear and shared vision about the values and purposes of the school and this vision is regularly reviewed and examined (Fleming, 2001, p. 33)". Within collaborative school environments senior leaders prioritized professional meeting time, where they planned for and discussed the strategies in implementing the vision, which then resulted in middle leaders having both the necessary autonomy and consistency (e.g., Mondays at 11am, every-other week) for effective meeting routines to develop. Typically, middle leaders on the secondary level met by unitary department, whereas elementary teachers met by grade level.

However, for middle leaders on both levels, the consistency and autonomy for meetings afforded in collaborative school environments allowed for teaching teams to: a) share new understandings and/or resources formally, for example, via looking at student work protocols, b) create shared understanding and consensus about issues of practice or department policy, or c) reflect upon and plan next steps on pedagogical, curricular material, or assessment initiatives/projects. Collectively such processes, facilitated by collaborative senior leadership styles, allows for iterative, grounded, and shared responsibility for curricular and/or pedagogical changes, which improves student learning outcomes and teacher efficacy (Bennett, Woods, Wise, & Newton, 2007).

Middle Leader's Core Responsibilities

Although middle leaders' role definitions were influenced by a variety of factors, namely, the school's organizational structure, assumptions about academic responsibilities, and senior leadership styles, there were categorical consistencies across

middle leaders in terms of their leadership responsibilities. Specifically, in the literature, four themes were found surrounding middle leaders' leadership responsibilities. These are:

- Middle leaders as Strategic Planners

- Middle leaders as Managers

- Middle leaders as Mentors

- Middle leaders as School Representatives

The first three leadership responsibilities, that is middle leaders as strategic planners, managers, and mentors were most prominent within subject matter-related middle leadership roles. These roles often had the titles of teacher leader, subject specialist, instructional coach, head of department, and/or curriculum coordinator. The last theme, that is, middle leaders as school representatives was marginally associated with the aforementioned roles, and most closely associated with roles such as parent liaisons, family and community liaisons, and, generally, those who are "in touch with a variety of actors and sources of information in the external environment of the school" (Busher & Harris, 1999, p. 308)

However, most studies in middle leadership typically focused on the first three themes—specifically in the subject-matter related middle leadership, which aligned well with the purpose and methods of this dissertation. In the next few sections, each of the first three themes will be discussed at length, along with the day-to-day responsibilities of middle leaders as reported in the literature.

Middle Leaders as Strategic Planners

Because middle leaders are structurally between administrators and teachers, they

were able to view the school in both a broad (school-wide/grade-level) and specific (day-to-day/classroom/teacher) way. Thus, they had a unique knowledge of the broader school systems and culture and the more specific teacher or classroom knowledge that was useful for planning (West, 1995).

Planning, in most organizations, typically invovled long-term outcomes divided into short-term, more manageable outcomes. Marshall (2012) wrote that because of middle leaders' specialized knowledge of both upper leadership's overall goals and the daily needs of teachers, they were able to inform school stakeholders and decision makers of feasible alternative outcomes as well as help reason through the different options, often fusing relevant concerns and considerations among the options. This was similar to Beck and Plowman's (2009) findings, which stated that middle leaders encourage divergent interpretations of problems and solutions yet synthesize this divergence in later stages of change.

This strategic skill set was significant in the sense that it allowed organizations to review available information in order to make the "best" possible choice for decision-making. As schools often faced high-stakes consequences such as decreases in funding or, even in some cases closures, it is important that administrators make decisions that promoted the highest level of teaching and learning, as reflected in instructional quality, curriculum design, and assessment (Gurr & Drysdale, 2013).

Another aspect that significantly contributed to being strategic planners was middle leaders' knowledge of organizational networks (Marshall, 2012) and school culture (Gurr & Drysdale, 2013; West, 1995). Because middle leaders served as important interfaces between disconnected actors and domains (Conway & Monks,

2011), middle leaders have the potentiality to be agents of communication and change—especially in relation to high quality teaching and learning (Gurr & Drysdale, 2013). Further, their knowledge of organizational networks allowed for less confrontational and abstracted change, which allowed teachers to remain efficacious within changing teaching contexts and accountable to administrators' vision of change (Marshall, 2012).

This dual, specialized knowledge, reflected in their organizational position between administrators and leaders, was useful for strategic planning (Ahearne, Lam, & Kraus, 2014l Conway & Monks, 2011; Marshall, 2012; and De Nobile, 2017). Their influence in both directions helped administrators in planning for change and teachers in implementing these changes.

Middle Leaders as Managers

As senior leadership refines the school's goals, middle leadership had the crucial role of reflecting upon how these ideas will be translated into practice through curriculum and instruction (West, 1995). It is generally accepted that teachers, especially beginning teachers, are often concerned about classroom management while ensuring that materials were prepared (Fessler, 1995). While these concerns are significant, these did not necessarily align with upper leadership's goals for the year. Middle leaders, with their intermediary position and knowledge of both content and pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman, 1983), could aid in communicating the relevance of these goals to the subject matter and its integration into teachers' daily tasks and or team culture. For example, the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM, 2018) promotes the use of elementary mathematics specialists (EMS), an example of middle leadership, in schools. They write:

At the school or district level, EMS professionals may work primarily with teachers as coaches, in a professional capacity or targeting school-wide improvement in mathematics. In this role, EMS professionals build capacity by strengthening teachers' understanding of mathematics and helping them develop more effective instruction and assessment….[These include] support on a day-to-day basis ranging from conversation in the hall to in-classroom coaching to regular grade-level and departmental seminars focused on how students learn mathematics—can be crucial to the teaching work life (NCTM, 2018).

Thus, middle leadership was particularly advantageous in "translating" school-wide initiatives into subject-matter-specific, teacher-oriented goals. However, the process of "translating" goals into actions often involved collaboratively developing curriculum with teachers. Tyler (1949) and Schwab (1973) offered practical frameworks for how this can occur. Schwab (1973) highlighted the importance of recognizing teachers' unique knowledge while the middle leader, (the subject matter specialist), offered their mastery of the content knowledge, and their pedagogical content knowledge. Together, along with the perspectives of others (curriculum specialist, students, and milieus), a curriculum could be developed.

Meanwhile, Tyler (1949) proposed a process for developing curriculum. Following a general consensus of curricular goals and objectives from the stakeholders, the team must decide upon the organization of the curriculum and the assessments. This organization should be both vertical and horizontal in nature. Vertical alignment refers to the scope and sequence of the curriculum within the subject matter. Meanwhile, the horizontal alignment refers to the specific subject's alignment with other subject matter.

While middle leaders may not necessarily utilize these specific frameworks in their efforts to plan for and implement school goals, studies (NCTM, 2018; West, 1995) indicate that these responsibilities are often tasked to middle leaders. As expected, contextual factors, such as school culture and teacher beliefs (Newmann, 2007; West, 1995) played a role with how middle leaders plan for implementation.

In addition to curriculum development, middle leaders as managers also included the coordination of logistics and systems within the district (Dinham, 2007; Giamellaro & Siegel, 2018; Klein, 1985). Thus, middle leaders, from secondary department chairs to elementary school teacher leaders, in one way or another participated in planning for and organizing teacher meetings. This included finding a time and location, creating agendas, and managing and organizing documents and or materials.

Middle Leaders as Mentors

One important aspect of middle leadership was the ability to serve as a mentor, defined as someone who could model, explain, support, and provide feedback to teachers to improve their practice. Defined as such, mentoring relationships were most common between middle leaders who are content, pedagogical, and/or content-based pedagogical experts. These middle leaders were often instructional coaches, content specialists, or department heads that mentor their content area's teaching faculty interpersonally and/or communally.

Interpersonally, mentoring could occur informally and informally, for example, during impromptu copier room conversations, after mutually scheduled observations, or before and after co-planned and/or co-taught lessons In doing so, middle leaders were able to share not only relevant information and practices to teachers, but they are able to

provide consistent first-hand guidance for classroom application (Koh, Gurr, Drysdale, & Ang, 2011). This unique attribute of middle leadership was especially important because continuous and individualized professional development for all teachers (within a content area and/or grade level) offered opportunities for institutional growth.

In addition to interpersonal mentoring, communal mentoring by middle leaders, which uniquely integrated the middle leaders role as strategic planner, manager, and mentor was best exemplified through the sustained professional development characterized by Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). PLCs are typically middle-leader led teacher groups that collectively engage in improving curriculum and instruction, typically in a data-driven or –informed way (de Nobile, 2017; Gurr & Drysdale, 2013). This task of managing a professional learning community is complex. Guskey and Huberman (1995) wrote that teachers needed varying professional development support depending on where they are in their careers. Thus, middle leaders have the additional responsibility of establishing relationships in order to address each teacher's individual needs communally while also forwarding communal goals, which were, ironically, often superimposed, and nonetheless personalized within the PLC (Koh, Gurr, Drysdale, & Ang, 2011).

In both mentoring roles, that is, interpersonal and communal, middle leaders were exceptional in their ability to provide sustained, content-focused, collaborative, and timely professional development. Darling-Hammond (2017) wrote that effective professional development were typically [1] content-focused, [2] incorporated active learning, [3] supported collaboration, [4] used models for effective practice, [5] provided coaching and expert support, [6] offered feedback and reflection, [7] and sustained

duration. As such, Darling-Hammond's (2017) conceptualization of effective professional development, which assumed communal and interpersonal relationships between the PD provider and teaching professionals, could be a worthwhile heuristic for middle leaders to utilize to frame their mentoring activities. Further, while professional development and middle leadership has not been linked empirically, these effective practices were expected within typical role constructions and responsibilities of middle leaders—especially those who are tied to a specific subject matter.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

This study aimed to understand how middle leadership was conceptualized in a district. Often, studies regarding middle leadership utilized the perspective of the administrator (Koh, Gurr, Drysdale, & Ang, 2011) or the middle leader (Choi, 2011; Ng & Chan, 2014). Because middle leaders are generally understood as school employees who are in the "middle" of administrators and teachers, this study sought to understand middle leadership not simply from the middle leaders' perspectives but from a "bi-directional" lens, including teachers and administrators who frequently worked with the middle leader. This novel approach was done in the hope that an in-depth understanding of the role and how it was manifested in the district would bring some clarity in an otherwise ambiguous school position. With this in mind, the study asks the following research questions:

1. What were the conditions that gave rise to the creation of academic middle leadership positions?

2. How were middle leaders selected in the district?

3. How was middle leadership conceptualized in the district?

4. How were middle leaders evaluated in the district?

5. How can districts support middle leaders?

These questions were crafted in order to contribute towards district-wide understanding of [1] the internal and external factors driving the emergence of middle leadership roles, [2] the skills, experiences, and dispositions that are desired from potential middle leaders, [3] the way titles, roles, and responsibilities influence the way middle leadership roles are co-constructed, bi-directionally within three levels of school-

based leadership (senior leadership, middle leadership, teachers); [4] the degree to which evaluations of middle leaders are well aligned with their roles and responsibilities; and [5] the ways middle leaders might be best supported in an effort to advance positive student outcomes.

Study Design

To answer these questions, this study employed an embedded, single-case study (Yin, 2018). One elementary school, one middle school, and one high school were selected as *sub-units*, while collectively, the findings across the schools represented the district's experience of middle leadership in an *exploratory embedded, single-case*. Figure 3.1 illustrates the school grade level categories (elementary, middle, high) as embedded sub-units in the district as a case. Within each school, there are middle leaders, administrators, and colleagues. This case study design was particularly appropriate because [1] the limited number of studies in middle leadership in the United States called for an exploratory approach, [2] few, if any research had conducted studies on middle leadership at the district level, and [3] the district has three grade level categories: elementary, middle, and high school. In order to represent the context of each school level category, and the unique contexts within, each school needed to be separate and embedded in understanding the district's conceptualization of middle leadership.

Within each school level category of this embedded, single-case study a middle leader, the middle leader's principal, and at least one teacher under the middle leader's purview were included within this study. Specifically, all five questions operated to construct a sequential narrative, that is, from job posting to candidate selection to role matriculation to evaluation to professional growth opportunities, in order to provide a

descriptive account of a "common case" of middle leadership within a district (Yin, 2018, p. 56). In tracking the conceptualization of a middle leader across their evaluation cycle, this study allowed for examining the specificities of middle leadership "in operational detail" while avoiding the pitfalls of holistic, single-case studies, which tended to be "unduly abstract" (Yin, 2018, p. 55, 56).

Data collection involved interviewing participants, collecting artifacts, memo writing, and field notes. Subsequently, this data was analyzed using an adaptation of cross-case synthesis, which although typically undertaken in relation to multi-case studies, can be analogously appropriate for an exploratory, embedded single-case studies (Yin, 2018). With this in mind, two main steps were involved in the analysis. First, an analysis of each school level category (elementary, middle, high) was performed to help illuminate the similarities and differences between each school. Then, a second, a cross-case analysis between the schools and district-level data was undertaken to understand if any generalizations between participants could be established on the district (case) level.
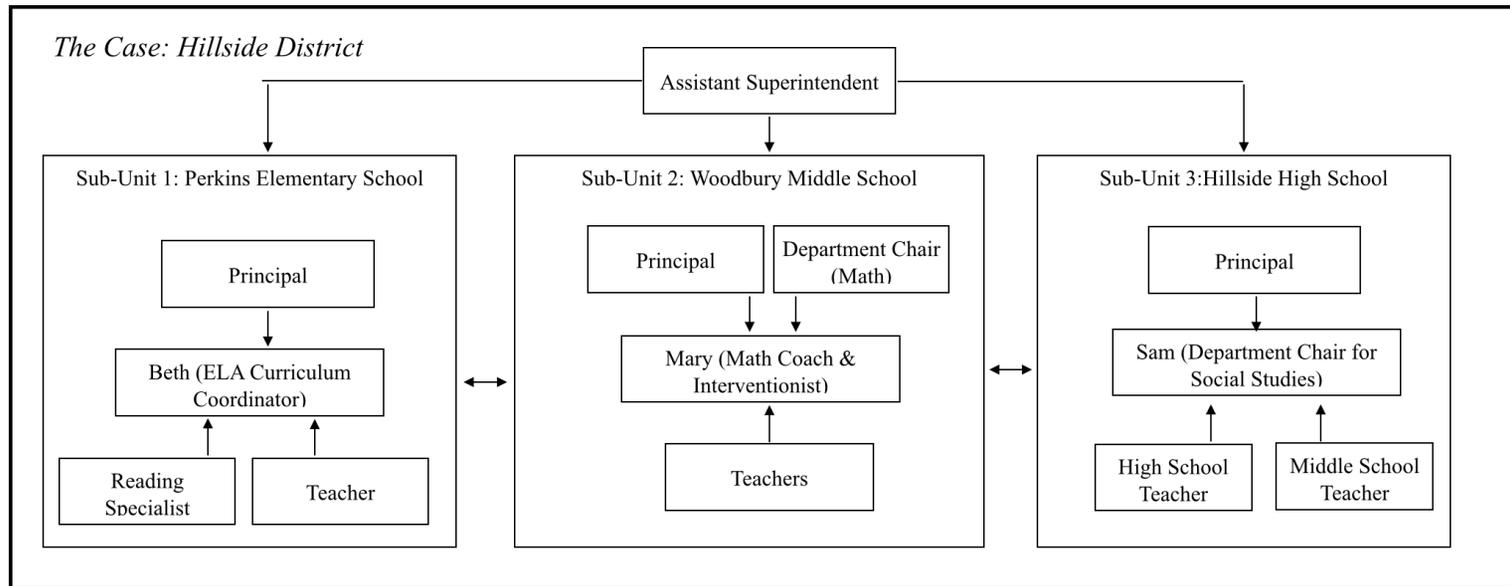
Figure 3.1 A visual representation of the study design.

Research Setting

The context of this study was limited to a single suburban district in New England. The district has four elementary schools, two middle schools, and one high school. The student population was majority White at 82.5%, while Hispanic, African American, and Asian students were underrepresented relative to their population proportions statewide. Roughly 11% of the student population was economically disadvantaged, 38.6% had at least moderate special needs, and 12% were emerging bilingual learners of English (a.k.a., English Language Learners). Moreover, the district boasted both a 96.2% attendance rate and above state-average MCAS scores.

All teachers in the district were licensed with a 13.4 student to teacher ratio. Full-time staff members were mostly White (98.5%) and women (83.2%). In 2018, principals and teachers had an 87.5% and 89.4% retention rates, respectively. By grade-level band, there were 105 elementary school teachers (pre-K to 5), 69 middle school teachers (grades 6 to 8), and 84 high school teachers (grades 9 to 12), with 3 teachers in multiple grade levels (285 teachers total). Breaking teachers down by general role, 242 taught general education, 38 taught special education, and 4 focused on English Language Learners.

The district's organizational chart (see Figure 3.2) illustrates the different departments, roles, and leadership positions. However, there is no document in the district that defines each of the roles and responsibilities of staff. Senior leadership included the superintendent who oversaw the entire district, the assistant superintendent, who focused on curriculum and finances, and the principals of each of the schools.
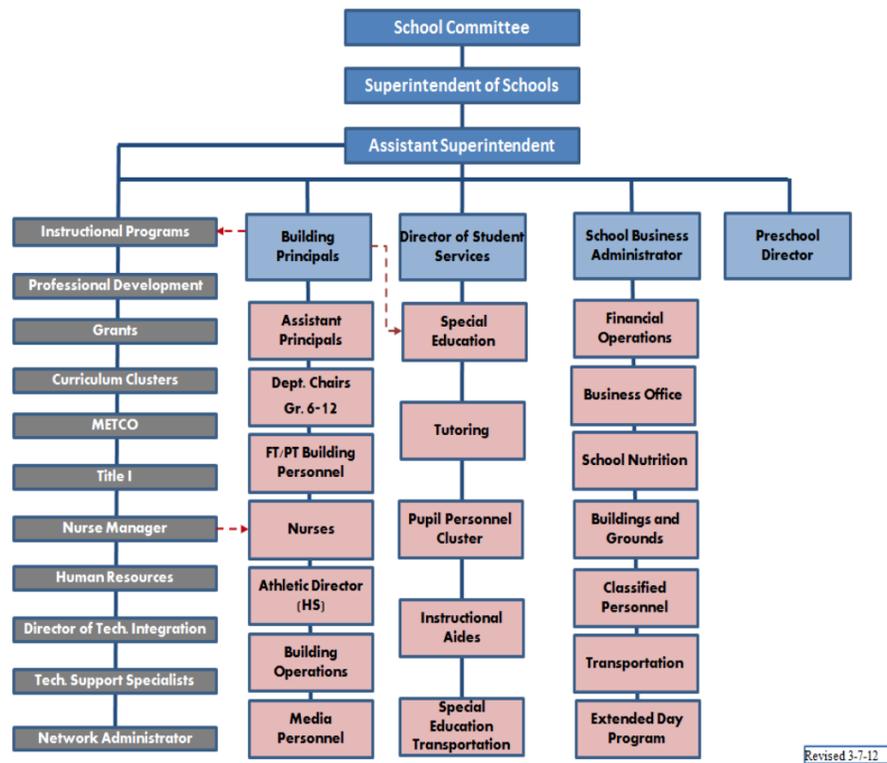
Figure 3.2 District's Organizational Chart. Taken from the district's website.

To manage and coordinate district-wide changes, the district participated in

cyclical monthly meetings, albeit with less formality on the primary level. During the

first week of each month the entire senior leadership team met to disseminate information

about policies affecting the district and to make collaborative, district-wide decisions. On

the secondary level, during the second week of the month the principals met with their

respective middle leaders (e.g., department chairs, curriculum liaisons, teacher leaders.)

to discuss ways to support teachers with the implementation of both district-wide and

school-based initiatives. Then, during the third week of the month, secondary middle

leaders had content-based meetings with classroom teachers in an effort to localize

district- and school-based efforts within their respective classrooms. In contrast, on the

primary level, principals informally shared the substance of senior leadership meetings with their respective middle leaders who then work strategically, throughout the month to implement these district-wide decisions locally with the teachers they work with.

The Elementary School

In this district had four elementary (K-5) schools, each of which were relatively indistinguishable from the other in terms of student demographics and staffing. Underscoring these similarities was a practice of consensus-based decision making among the four elementary school principals and assistant superintendent, which led to minimal variation in terms of policies and practices across these four schools.

Middle leadership in this school, like its counterparts, was extensive. There were both academic (i.e., math coach, English language curriculum coordinator, special education coordinator) and non-academic (i.e., technology coordinator, teacher leaders) middle leaders. The elementary schools, unlike other districts, had no curriculum directors. However, they did have "coordinator" positions that were similar to department chair positions in the middle and secondary schools. For this study, the middle leader selected to participate was the newly created role of English language arts (ELA) curriculum coordinator. For the purposes of this study, she was named "Beth". The reason why Beth was selected was because of her role (ELA curriculum coordinator) [1] was the only middle leadership role that spanned the four elementary schools and [2] fit the selection criteria for middle leaders. As such, compared to other middle leaders in the elementary schools who were confined to a single school, Beth's middle leadership position of ELA curriculum coordinator represented the district the best for elementary school.

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│  Sub-Unit 1: Perkins Elementary School  │
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│          │     Principal      │          │
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│                    ↓                    │
│        ┌───────────────────────┐        │
│        │ Beth (ELA Curriculum  │        │
│        │    Coordinator)       │        │
│        └──────↑────────↑───────┘        │
│  ┌──────────┐      ┌──────────┐         │
│  │ Reading  │      │          │         │
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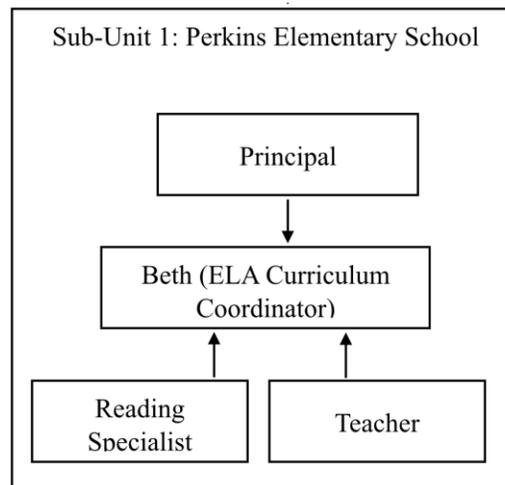
Figure 3.3 Perkins Elementary School

Although all four elementary schools included Beth as part of their staff, the elementary school selected was the one where her office was situated in. For this study, it was named "Perkins" Elementary School. Perkins, like the other elementary schools, had one principal and no assistant principal. Thus, senior leadership was simply the principal of each school. The ELA curriculum coordinator position was just created at the time the study was conducted. Under the ELA curriculum coordinator, there were classroom teachers and a reading specialist. Classroom teachers taught all subject matters while the reading specialist administered student interventions for reading.

The main concerns within the elementary schools was two fold: first, the lack of alignment between the district's ELA curriculum and the state's Framework for ELA; and second, the lack of consistency in curriculum and pedagogy among elementary schools and classrooms. Because of this the elementary school principals actively sought programs and/or resources that were more aligned with the state's frameworks, which could be implemented consistently. One way the district supported this cause was the

creation of the ELA curriculum coordinator position that would guide senior leadership in the selection and implementation of a new standards-aligned ELA curriculum.

The Middle School

There were two middle schools in the district. Each middle school catered to students from grades six to eight who share similar demographic characteristics and standardized test score results. Like the four elementary school principals, both middle school principals frequently communicated with each other to ensure that both schools had similar if not equal support and services provided to teachers and students. Each middle school had a principal and assistant principal. While principals had extensive responsibilities with respect to financial management, human resources, family and community engagement, and instructional leadership, vice principals had a supportive role to these, sharing the principal's load for instructional leadership (teacher evaluations) and managing student behavior.

Like the elementary schools, the middle school also had a variety of academic and non-academic middle leadership roles. However, unlike the elementary schools that shared middle leaders, the middle school had one math coach and intervention specialist working in each building full-time. Previously, the middle school used to share a math curriculum liaison—a position dedicated to creating math curriculum for both middle schools. However, within the context of mounting pressure for increasing students' standardized test scores and after a seventh grade *dip* in student scores was observed, the school board provisioned funding for the math coach and interventionist positions.
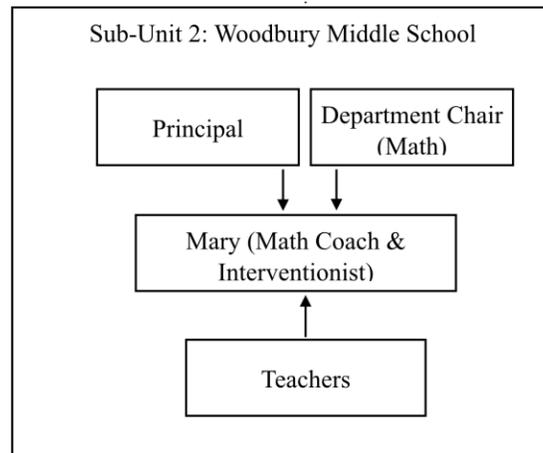
Figure 3.4 Woodbury Middle School

Mary was selected compared to other middle leaders in the middle schools because she fit the study's selection criteria (see Sampling section) and her history of working between the two middle schools as the math curriculum liaison. Thus, similar to Beth, Mary, compared to other middle leaders in the district, had a sense of middle leadership between both middle schools. Moreover, the other math coach and specialist, who was not selected for the study, had only one year of tenure in the district. As such, her knowledge and experience of the middle schools was not as rooted in the district compared to Mary.

While some district have curriculum directors or department chairs for K-8 and 9-12, Hillside district had department chairs from 6-12. These department chairs follow Busher and Harris' (1999) description of a federally structured "Head of Department", who are responsible for a subject matter's curriculum and instruction. Because of the district's structure, Mary was working under the direction of her principal as well as the department chair for mathematics (John).

The main issue for the middle school was a long-identified problem of a "dip" in student performance between 6th and 8th grade in the state's benchmarking test. The math coach and interventionist position was created in the hopes that the addition of a math-specific leader in each building would address this concern. The assistant superintendent, department chair for mathematics (John), and both middle school principals supported the creation of the role.

The High School

Hillside High School was the only high school (grades 9-12) in the district with 1,128 students and 86 teachers. There was one principal in the school and two assistant principals who aided the overall operations of the school, evaluations of staff, and management of students. Like the elementary and middle schools, the secondary school had a diverse set of middle leaders both academic and non-academic middle leaders.

Academic middle leadership in the school was comprised of department chairs. In this school, there was a department chair for every subject matter, regardless of whether or not the subject was tested by the state. Thus, compared to the middle school where there were coaches for tested subjects such as mathematics and no middle leaders for untested subjects like social studies, the high school had department chairs for every subject area, for example, science, math, English, art, and athletics. Historically, department chairs in the district had remained in the "teacher line" or teacher-based salary scale despite having a 0.4 teaching load and a 0.6 managerial load. Non-academic roles include the technology support specialist, the METCO liaison, and non-permanent teacher leaders for special events.

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┌─────────────────────────────────────────┐
│      Sub-Unit 3:Hillside High School      │
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│          ┌─────────────────┐              │
│          │    Principal     │             │
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│        │ Sam (Department Chair │           │
│        │   for Social Studies) │          │
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│   ┌──────────────┐ ┌──────────────┐       │
│   │ High School  │ │ Middle School│       │
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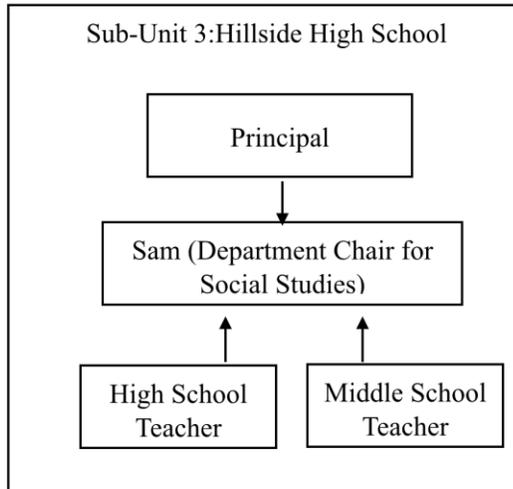
Figure 3.5 Hillside High School

In the district, the department chair worked with the assistant superintendent for subject-specific curriculum and instruction and the principal for instructional leadership and school policies. While the high school had two assistant principals, the department chair does not frequently interact with them. Instead, both assistant principals support the principal in administering teacher evaluations and managing student behaviors.

While the secondary school was physically separated from the middle school (they are in different buildings), middle leadership extended to both. For example, even though department chairs are housed in the high school, they were also responsible for curriculum and instruction of their subject matters on the middle school level. As such, middle leaders in both the secondary and the middle schools often worked together, with department chairs being the "senior" of the two. Unlike other middle leaders across the district, department chairs had the additional responsibility of observing and evaluating teachers within their departments and creating and implementing initiatives to ensure that curriculum and instruction was aligned to state policies.

Access and Entry

Access to the district was facilitated through the researcher's completion of a principal practicum at one of the district's two middle schools. In this practicum experience the researcher supported both day-to-day, school operations and longer-term, district-wide initiatives. However, this latter engagement with district-wide planning, for example, collaboratively mapping a district-wide plan for teaching emerging multilingual students of English, helped to forge relationships with teachers, middle leaders, and senior leaders across the district. These relationships combined with the support of the newly appointed assistant superintendent of schools, who was also the researcher's supervising administrator, provided wide-spread support for the study.

Thus, after completing the IRB process, the superintendent allowed the researcher to send out a district-wide e-mail inviting teachers, middle leaders, and administrators to participate in the study. Again, given the researcher's prior work within the district, potential gatekeepers, such as, middle leaders and principals generously opened up their schools' to participate in the study. Although not every middle leader who volunteered was selected, it did result in access to every school in the district, albeit to varying degrees (i.e., principal and/or middle leaders).

Sampling

In order to gain a representative sample from the district, all middle leaders, administrators and teachers were invited to participate in the study. A poster flyer was emailed by the district's secretary to the entire district. Then, a list of interested participants was pooled. However, as an outsider, it was difficult to identify which of the

middle leaders were appropriate for the study, given its purpose. Thus, the assistant superintendent was asked to help identify the potential participants.

For this study, middle leaders were defined as academic (subject specific) leaders those who lead a teacher group. Together, the assistant superintendent and I identified potential participants from the list that volunteered. Because this study's approach needed a bi-directional perspective from both teachers and administrators to contribute to the understanding of middle leadership, administrators and teachers also needed to be sampled. Once each of the participants was identified for each school/grade level category (elementary, middle, high), a snowball sampling method was utilized, where each middle leader participant was asked which teachers and administrators they worked with. This particular sampling method was utilized for every sub-unit/school grade level category in order to follow a "replication design" and ensure a consistent sampling within the district (Yin, 2018). However, if a teacher or administrator with respect to the selected middle leader did not want to participate or was not available within the time frame of the study, the middle leader was no longer selected.

Table 3.1

Levels of Sampling

Sampling Level	Potential Participants	Selected
Level One Sampling	All middle leaders, administrators, teachers in the district	Volunteers
Level Two Sampling	Volunteer middle leaders, administrators, teachers	"Representative" middle leaders for each grade level category based on assistant superintendent's perspective and study's middle leader definition. Consent provided by selected middle leaders.

Level Three Sampling (Snowball)	Representative middle leaders and the administrator/s teacher/s, and colleague/s they worked with.	Consent provided by participants (middle leader, administrators, teachers).

Table 3.1 summarizes the three levels of sampling conducted in the study. Level one involved the entire district. By level two, middle leaders for each grade level category were identified. In order to identify potential participants, the superintendent and I reflected on the position and history of each middle leader in the district as well as the definition of middle leadership for this study. The selected middle leaders (Sam, Beth, and Mary) were all formally asked for consent. Following consent, level three of sampling was conducted, which utilized a snowball method that asked Sam, Beth, and Mary for potential administrator and teacher participants. They were then invited to participate in the study and were formally asked for consent.

Participants

In this section, a general summary of participants will be provided. Then, a description of each participant in each school will be offered. Table 3.2 lists the participants in the study. In total, 14 participants from the district took part in this study. There were 4 administrators, 3 middle leaders, and 7 middle colleagues. Each "sub-unit" is a school in the exploratory, embedded case study that was the district. Within each school, there were a different number of participants depending on the recommendations of the middle leader. For the elementary school, there was a total of 4 participants, with Beth, the ELA curriculum coordinator in the center. One elementary school principal as well as teacher and a reading specialist completed the total list of participants from the elementary school.

In the middle school, there were 5 participants, Mary, the math coach and interventionist, the principal in her building, and two teachers she coached. She also recommended the participation of the department chair for mathematics (John) because of her close working relationship with him. The high school had four participants, with Sam, the department chair for social studies, the high school principal, and 2 social studies teachers—one from the high school and one from the middle school. The assistant superintendent was also interview as a representative from the senior district-based leadership perspective. As the sole academic-oriented senior leader, she was responsible for all curriculum and instruction for K-12 and frequently works with principals, middle leaders, and teachers on various district initiatives.

Table 3.2

Summary of All Participants

Grade Level Category	Administrator	Middle Leader	Middle Leader's Colleagues	Total
Elementary (Perkins)	1 principal	1 ELA curriculum coordinator (Beth)	1 reading specialist 1 teacher	4 participants
Middle (Woodbury)	1 principal	1 Math coach and Interventionist (Mary)	2 teachers 1 department chair for mathematics (John)	5 participants
High (Hillside)	1 principal	1 department chair for social studies (Sam)	1 high school 1 middle school	4 participants
District Level Personnel	1 assistant superintendent			1 participant
Total	4 administrators	3 middle leaders	7 colleagues	14 participants

Elementary School Participants

Beth had over 15 years of experience as a teacher and reading specialist. Prior to her role as ELA curriculum coordinator in Hillside district, she worked as an ELA coach in a nearby district. In her previous district, she participated in a yearlong coaching seminar from an out-of-state for-profit organization. Her current role in the district spans all four elementary schools. The principal of Perkins, had been in the district for over five years. He has no assistant principal and oversees the entire building. He frequently communicates with the other elementary school principals to ensure a fair distribution of support and resources from the district.

The reading specialist and teacher interviewed in the elementary school were both housed in Perkins Elementary School. The teacher interviewed is a veteran first grade teacher with over 30 years of experience in the district. As such, she is knowledgeable of the history behind state and district policies as well as the changes in the district's structure over the course of her tenure. The reading specialist, also a veteran, had been in the district for 11 years. While the teacher taught as a traditional classroom teacher, the reading specialist administered student "pullouts" where she would set aside a number of students for interventions in reading. She also administered some of the reading assessments using the district's previous curriculum.

The Middle School Participants

Woodbury Middle School had 5 total participants. At the center of this middle school sub-unit was Mary, the math coach and interventionist. Mary started in the district as an 8th grade math teacher for about 5 years. Two years before the study was conducted and before the role was created, Mary served as curriculum liaison between the two

middle schools. She, along with another curriculum liaison from the other middle school worked together to create a common curriculum for the middle schools. During the time of the interview, Mary was on her first year of being math coach and interventionist.

The principal of Woodbury had been in the district for a few years. He frequently worked and communicated with the assistant superintendent, who was the previous middle school principal in the other middle school. At the time the study was conducted, the principal had planned to obtain his Ed.D. from a university in New England. In the next school year, he was also scheduled to replace the assistant superintendent while the assistant superintendent transitions into a superintendent role.

In addition to the middle school principal, Mary recommended three more participants—one novice 6th grade teacher, one veteran 8th grade teacher, and the department chair for mathematics (John). The 6th grade teacher was a novice and new to the district. She had known Mary outside the district through personal family relations. The 8th grade teacher was a veteran math teacher in the district. When Mary first started in the district, she served as her mentor for the school. Mary also worked with the department chair for mathematics (Sam). Sam, whose office was in the high school, was responsible for curriculum and instruction for 6-12 math. Like other department chairs, he had formal evaluation roles as well as a 0.4-teacher and 0.6-administrator role. As such, he had classes to teach in addition to being department chair. As the district's leader for math, he decided strategies for the improvement of teaching in math, which included the creation of Mary's role.

The High School Participants

Hillside High School as a sub-unit had 4 total participants. Sam, as the primary middle leader for this grade level category was the department chair for social studies. Sam had been in the district for over five years and had previous experience as a department chair for social studies and a school leader in a different state. The principal selected was the high school principal, who had over a decade of experience in the district. Because department chairs were responsible for curriculum and instruction for grades 6-12, which spanned both the middle school and the high school, one teacher from each school was selected. The high school social studies teacher had over 20 years of experience in the district. Meanwhile, the middle school social studies teacher, also a veteran, was also a "teacher leader" in the middle school. She jotted meeting notes during PLC meetings and helped administrators distribute information. Both teachers were a part of the leadership team that Sam created to re-develop the district's social studies curriculum to adhere to the newly released state standards.

The Assistant Superintendent

The district's assistant superintendent was responsible for the district's overall curriculum and instruction. Prior to being assistant superintendent, she served as a longtime principal of one of the middle schools. She has an Ed.D. from a university in New England. She was also responsible for the finances in related to curriculum and instruction. To accomplish this, she works with all 7 school principals in the district and all department chairs in the high school.

<div align="center">

Data Sources

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In order to perform a cross-case analysis within an embedded, single-case design,

Yin (2018) suggests creating a "replication" design where a sampling design and protocol for each sub-unit (school grade level category) was followed in order to match measures to procedures. In this study, this suggestion was followed in an effort to increase credibility, that is, the strength of the relationship between the findings and the reality it seeks to represent (Guba, 1989). Thus, for each school, the same sampling, data collection, and analysis was repeated. Specifically, for each sub-unit interviews, field notes, memos, and artifacts made up the data sources used to construct themes within the case (see Figure 3.1). While all interviews were recorded and transcribed, field notes and memos were recorded in writing. Given that middle leaders were central to the study, most data collected beyond interviews, that is, field notes and artifacts, involved middle leaders. Collectively, these varied data sources allow for data triangulation, construed herein, as a means for increasing the scope, depth, and consistency of this study's inquiry into its phenomenon of interest, that is, middle leadership (Flick, 2002; Thurmond, 2001).

Before the study occurred, forms approved by the relevant Institutional Review Board (IRB) were submitted and reviewed. Before participants were allowed to participate in the study, consent forms were reviewed, clarified, and/or signed. Further, participants were assured that they can withdraw from the study at any point in time, for any reason. In the following sub-sections, each of the data sources collected and their respective protocols are described herein.

Table 3.3

Alignment of Research Questions to Participants and Data Sources

Research Question	Participant/s	Data Sources
What were the conditions that gave rise to the creation of academic middle leadership positions?	Assistant Superintendent, Principals	Individual Interviews Analytical Memos School and District Documents
How were middle leaders selected in the district?	Assistant Superintendent, Principals	Separate Interviews Analytical Memos School and District Documents
How was middle leadership conceptualized in the district?	Assistant Superintendent, Principals, Middle Leaders, and Middle Leaders' Colleagues	Separate Interviews Middle Leader Observations Analytical Memos School and District Documents
How were middle leaders evaluated in the district?	Principals Middle Leaders	Separate Interviews Analytical Memos School and District Documents
How can districts support middle leaders?	Middle Leaders	Separate Interviews Analytical Memos

Interviews and Observations of Middle Leaders

Observing middle leaders in a "typical day" was important because it allowed for the contextualization of interviewee's responses. Specifically, a *Shadow Study* technique was undertaken to ensure the credibility, and ultimately the dependability, of the study's results by triangulating the observations against the middle leader's potentially aspirational conceptualization of their role (Desjean-Perrotta, 1998). To prepare for the shadow study, I prepared an observation protocol that recorded the schedule of activities of the middle leaders, their interactions with their colleagues, and my thoughts. To

coordinate time for the shadow study, I communicated with middle leaders and asked for a convenient time to observe them throughout the day. However, to save time, all middle leaders requested that interviews occurred in the same day. As such, interviews were conducted during the middle leaders' free time within the day, specifically, during their lunch breaks.

Middle leaders were interviewed in a private location in their respective schools. The interviews typically occurred in their classrooms or offices. A semi-structured interview (see Appendix B for interview protocol) was utilized to both guide the interview and allow the participant to express related thoughts and ideas. These interviews occurred face-to-face and one-on-one. Each interview lasted approximately for one hour. These interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. In some cases when additional responses were needed, a follow-up interview was conducted, time-permitting. Due to the scope and limitations of the study, there was not enough time to have a second round of interviews with all middle leaders. The only middle leader who was interviewed twice was Beth. Following each interview, memos were written informally to record any of my thoughts and reflections. Then, at the end of each observation day, I wrote a formal memo for each middle leader.

Administrator Interview

Interviews with the principal were similar to the middle leaders' interview as they were one-on-one, semi-structured, face-to-face, and occurred in a private area of their respective schools. However, questions were slightly different. While some questions involved their perception of middle leaders' role and responsibilities, other questions included middle leadership selection and evaluation. This provided insight as to how

middle leaders were selected as well as how they evaluated middle leaders'

performances. These insights were necessary because administrators were the most

influential in the creation of middle leadership roles. Thus, they had a unique knowledge

of the context that led to the creation of the role for their own respective schools.

Moreover, as principals, they experienced middle leadership from selection of the

appropriate candidate, implementation of the role in their schools, and evaluation of

middle leaders' performance. Interviews were recorded and memos were constructed

immediately thereafter.

Colleague Interviews

While focus group interviews may have been more efficient, one-on-one

interviews were chosen in order to ensure confidentiality of the middle leader's

colleague, especially since these colleagues continuously work with the middle leader. In

addition, focus group interviews were also difficult to coordinate, as teachers had little to

no common free time. During the interview, these colleagues asked about their

experiences of their respective middle leaders. As colleagues, they provided a unique

insight to what it was like to work with the middle leader. For teachers, this focused more

on how the middle leader led their PLC meetings or how they were supported by the

middle leaders. For the department chair (like John), this provided perspective on what it

was like to lead a middle leader. Finally, other colleagues such as the reading specialist

offered the unique perspective of how middle leaders impact the roles of stakeholders in

the school.

Instrumentation of Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

The semi-structured interview protocol for each participant type was developed

through two pilot cycles. According to Yin (2018), pilots are important in order to ensure that: a) the research questions align with the interview questions and b) the interview/data collection protocols are seamless. For this study, the pilots were conducted with two middle leaders, one principal, and one teacher. The interview questions built on questions raised in studies on middle leadership by de Nobile (2017), Koh, Gurr, Drysdale, and Ang (2011), Ng and Chan (2014), Javadi, Bush, and Ng (2017), and Bennet, Woods, Wise, and Newton (2007). Specifically, although no specific questionnaire was shared in these studies, questions were culled from the research questions themselves. However, as no studies discussed how teachers experience middle leadership or how senior leaderships conceptualize the evaluation of middle leaders, several interview questions were constructed and modified to inquire into these aspects of this study's research questions.

The first pilot interview occurred in the Fall of 2018 with a middle leader, teacher, and principal from three different school districts. While the questions showed promise, modifications were made because the diction of the interview questions bordered on pedantic, necessitating clarification and creating overly formal, but less illuminating responses. As such, the questions were modified to create clarity and promote rapport. The second pilot interview occurred in February of 2019 and included one middle leader from another school district. This interview proved to be the most successful. As such, minor, non-substantive modifications were made to the questions.

Analytical Memos

Rather than descriptive summaries, analytical memos capture a researcher's emerging insights and thought processes with respect to the phenomenon under

investigation. This is done in an effort to synthesize the researchers' observations and reflections "into high level analytic meanings" (Miles, Huberman, & Salndaña, 2014, p. 95). For this study, analytical memos were leveraged to record the researcher's thoughts and observations following both interviews and the shadowing of a middle leader. Furthermore, this process of analytical memo-ing was used iteratively, not only after data was collected, but while codes were developed, data was analyzed, and findings summarized.

School and District Documents

In addition, to documents collected during middle leader observations, school and district documents were utilized to support the triangulation of the data collected. While not everything observed or discussed was reflected in school or district documents, this was expected. However, when possible these sources were sought out to understand official policy and how it matched and/or varies on the ground. Additional documents referred to by middle leaders during interviews were also collected Table 3.4 summarizes all the school and district documents collected for the study.

Table 3.4

A List of School and District Documents Collected

School	Participant	Document
Perkins Elementary School	Principal	• ELA Curriculum Coordinator Job Description & Responsibilities
	Beth (ELA Curriculum Coordinator)	• Weekly Schedule • Sample PLC Agendas • Teacher Observations
Woodbury Middle School	Principal	• Math Coach and Interventionist Job Description & Responsibilities (For Job Posting) • Math Coach & Interventionist

		Role Description (For School Distribution)
Hillside High School	Mary (Math Coach & Interventionist) Sam (Department Chair for Social Studies)	• Teacher Observation Sample • Agenda for Leadership Team Meeting regarding new state standards)

Data Collection

Data collection occurred during the Spring of 2019. Following the selection of participants, interviews and field observations were conducted based on participant availability. As a result, the data collection period spanned three months (See Table 3.5).

Table 3.5

Data Collection Timeline

Data collection	Apr	May	Jun
District consent	X		
Teacher consent	X		
Middle Leader consent	X		
Principal consent	X		
Teacher interviews	X	X	X
Middle Leader interviews	X	X	X
Principal interviews	X	X	X
Field Observations	X	X	X
Memos	X	X	X

In accordance to the Institutional Review Board (IRB), this study followed the rights of all participants—that is, to either provide or reject consent, to ensure participant privacy, to be provided with study results, and to remove themselves from the study at any time. As a result, the consent forms included details of the study including research questions, data collection, privacy measures, and data storage. This ensures that the

participant was fully informed of the entirety of the study and could trust that what they disclosed would remain fully private. Further, to ensure anonymity, all participants were assigned different names and all interview transcripts were stored on the Boston College server.

Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) recommended that researchers keep a "data accounting log". A data accounting log is "a management method that simply documents on a single form when and what types of data have been collected from specific participants and sites" (p. 122). This allowed me to organize and keep track of all the data collected, and align the appropriate data to the participant. Within this document, a list of the date and time of interviews, observations, and acceptance of school/district documents was recorded.

Analytic Plan

In seeking to explore and understand middle leadership in a district, the analytic plan aimed to triangulate data collected between schools to inform the district's larger conceptualization of middle leadership. Prior to data analysis, all interviews were transcribed. The analytic plan had three main levels, as illustrated in Figure 3.6.

In the first level, individual case reports were written for each school. Then, cross-case analyses for each participant type (administrator, middle leader, colleagues) were conducted to see if there were themes or emerging patterns that were present between participant types. Finally, a cross-case, district-wide conclusion was formed. However, initial conclusions needed to be modified to ensure that themes that emerged were consistent within and across schools.
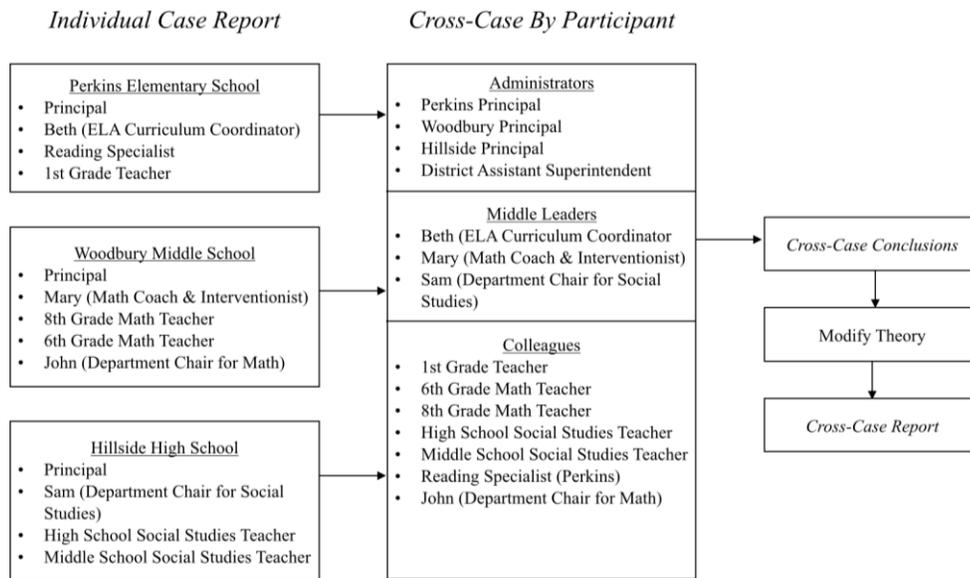
Figure 3.6 An illustration of the study's analytic plan.

Within-Case Analysis

Within-case analyses "describe, understand, and explain what has happened in a single, bounded context" (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014, p. 100). Because each school was a sub-unit in the larger case of the district, an individual case report for each school was written for each school. Interview transcripts, school/district documents, and memos were all pooled for each school. Subsequently, a combination of provisional coding and in-vivo coding were engaged. Provisional coding is "researcher-generated codes" (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014, p. 77) based on what is already known about middle leaders in the research literature. Finally, an individual case report for each school was written describing the themes that emerged from the data collected.

Cross-Case Analysis By Participant

Following an individual case report for each school, a cross-case analysis for each participant type (administrator, middle leader, colleagues) was conducted. For this first level of cross-case analysis, the same method of gathering interview transcripts,

school/district documents, and memos was conducted. However, instead of grouping the data by school, it was grouped by participant type. Again, provisional and in-vivo coding was utilized to find common patterns and themes for each participant type. These themes were then matched with the corresponding research questions using Table 3.3 as a guide.

Cross-Case Conclusions

Following cross-case analyses by participant type, the first draft of cross-case conclusions was written. In this draft, themes that were emergent for the district was described and explained in relation to the research question. Then, another draft was written to further explain how the themes were related to each other. Finally, a cross-case report was written.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

This dissertation aimed to understand the formation and maintenance of middle leadership on a district level. Specifically, it aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. What were the conditions that gave rise to the creation of academic middle leadership positions?

2. How were middle leaders selected in the district?

3. How was middle leadership conceptualized in the district?

4. How were middle leaders evaluated in the district?

5. How can districts support middle leaders?

Each of these questions will be answered sequentially in the next few sections.

Research Question 1: What were the conditions that gave rise to the creation of academic middle leadership positions?

The creation of middle leadership positions was influenced by both internal and external conditions. External influences included the publicly available information, such as math and ELA scores, which are aligned with state and national standards, and depending on student scores, specific policy remedies. Because of the quantitative, public, hierarchical, and comparative nature of standardized testing, the district was keen to create structural, in this case, middle leadership positions, to support tested subject matters. As the secondary principal explained, "I think it's more public. You know, school committee comes to me and says 'What do we do about your math scores?' They are not coming to me and asking 'What are you doing about your social studies scores?'" The assistant superintendent echoed this sentiment, stating,

> In middle and elementary, we don't have a social studies middle leader and, right now, we don't have a science middle leader. So, yeah, because you look at math and English. Right now, state tests are at a higher stake and you see more of the gaps in the reading, writing and in math.

The math department chair agreed. He stated, "I do think that part of the reason we had the math coaches and we do all this focus is because we are getting outside metrics that are given to stakeholders and [those] serving the building."

In essence, the creation of the two new middle leadership positions in the district was partially because of the pressure from highly visible test scores. However, this visibility was dependent on whether or not the subject matter is tested. For the state, ELA and math weigh the heaviest for school rankings, and thus strengthened the argument to the school committee for the creation of new middle leadership positions. This means that unfortunately, other subject matters that may also need curricular and pedagogical supports were not considered at the same level.

While the department chairs have structurally and historically been in the district for over twenty years, the external factor of changes in the state standards and or new policies, such as the support of emergent bilingual learners, demonstrated the strategic benefit of the maintenance of such positions. For example, the department chair for social studies recently created a task force in order to develop a curriculum based on the state's newly released History and Social Science Curriculum Frameworks. As frameworks frequently change, and curriculum alignment to these standards is required across all the state's public schools, a person who is knowledgeable about the subject matter and has had relevant teaching experience is often needed in order to align, develop, and

implement curriculum. If the district did not have a department chair, they would not have been prepared to adhere to these new state policies. At best, this would have increased responsibility for an already overstretched senior leadership to develop curriculum, train, mentor, and oversee teacher leaders, or alternatively, it may have resulted in a costly search of and coordination with an external consultant to complete this task.

In the past, the district had cases where external consultations were necessary to round out gaps in expertise or experience. In these cases, the collaboration between the department chair and the external consultant was able to minimize the burdens of senior leaders and improve the quality of teaching and learning. For example, the high school principal shared that,

> We have done something in the past in math and we have brought in an outside
> consultant to help and who has been in and out classroom and has given us
> feedback on what is going on in the classrooms and trying to help us.

In that situation, the consultant observed classrooms, attended mathematics department meetings, and constructed work products. Hiring the consultant added immense value to the district's curriculum. However, consistent, teacher-oriented support, which is a significant factor in implementing district curriculum, was still needed. As such, the district additionally thought about the potential of middle leaders as a more permanent, consistent, and academic teacher-focused support.

Internal conditions that led to the creation of middle leadership roles included the need for [1] consistency in curriculum and instruction, [2] curriculum development, and [3] leadership distribution. Consistency in standards-aligned curriculum and instruction

has been a recurring problem for the district, especially in the K-5 setting. As the elementary principal stated,

> The creation of the role is just because we wanted to do a complete and thorough assessment review of what's happening in English language Arts and knowing that the program that we have is not aligned with the state curriculum. So, we need to make a transition. We knew that, the materials that we have, the Scott Foresman's reading stream is programmed, it's outdated. It's not aligned. So, we wanted to find a way to facilitate that transition to whatever it may be, not knowing what, where we're going. This person's role would be a large part of the direction of ELA instruction but also has somebody whose primary focus is ELA who can spend the time looking at the materials, the resources, the professional development, the collaboration, the writing program, the reading program, our phonics program, Foundations, at the lower level.

In other words, the district needed to select an existing standards-aligned curriculum and plan for its adaptation to the district's existing structures, which implied the need for curriculum development. Additionally, senior leaders in the district wanted this curriculum to be consistent across the four elementary schools. This meant that the curriculum needed to be further translated into a scope and sequence that teachers would follow to ensure that students received consistent, standards-aligned, high quality instruction.

Traditionally, this responsibility fell under the assistant superintendent. However, it did not seem realistic for the assistant superintendent to dedicate the time needed to successfully select, adapt, and implement curricula for ELA when other subject matters

needed similar amounts of support. Thus, distributing this leadership to an ELA-specific middle leader (Beth), seemed like the right strategy for senior leaders.

Similarly, the math coach and interventionist position was created in the middle school level not only in response to external factors, but as a means for distributing and supplementing the math department chair and the middle school principals. The middle school principal shared,

> We have you know, four administrators assigned in [both] middle schools, two assistant principals and two principals and you have one math department chair in charge of 6-12 and so, we really believe you know that while we can bring in a lot of resources, while we can make changes as a curriculum, while we're getting it in classroom, the teachers are not getting the real, specific support they need.

In other words, the reality of department chairs being housed in the high school and other competing senior leadership tasks created a gap in math-specific teacher support within each middle school building. Understandably, the math department chair who had the responsibilities of teaching, managing teachers and the curriculum, evaluations had limited physical access to support teachers consistently in the middle school level.

Similarly, despite the middle school principal's daily presence in the school, he could not provide subject-specific supports to every teacher, in every subject matter He shared,

> I have 61 staff members and I observe each of them informally and formally, you know, two to five times a year depending on where they are…but only so much guided feedback can be given in the content area you know.

The creation of a math coach and interventionist position for each building addressed the leadership distribution necessary for both the department chair and the principal. As a math-specific leader, Beth could immediately respond to teachers' curricular and pedagogical questions and concerns consistently, closing the "gap" in teacher support for math in the middle school.

Table 4.1 summarizes the conditions that gave rise to the creation of academic leadership positions. External conditions that indicated the need for middle leadership included results in standardized tests, changes in state standards, and new state policies for teachers. However, these external conditions were also supported by internal conditions such as the lack of consistency in curriculum and instruction and the need for leadership distribution. Together, these conditions created a compelling case for both the school committee and senior leadership to create middle leadership positions in the district.

Table 4.1

External and Internal Conditions that Influenced the Creation of Academic Middle Leadership Positions

External Conditions	Internal Conditions
- Performance in standardized tests - Changes in state standards - Creation of new state policies for teachers	- Lack of consistency in curriculum and instruction - Need for leadership distribution

Research Question 2: How were middle leaders selected and evaluated in the district?

Naturally, the conditions that persuaded the district to create academic middle leadership positions also shaped how middle leaders were selected and evaluated within

the district. To answer this question about middle leadership, this section is broken down into two sub-sections with the first describing the selection of middle leaders and the second on their evaluation.

The Selection of Middle Leaders

At the time that the data was collected, the state had no formal middle leadership pathways. Districts, essentially, could create their own requirements for the selection of middle leaders, and there was no need for certification or degrees. While this expanded the pool of potential middle leaders, the assistant superintendent shared that the district struggled with creating job descriptions because of it. As such, most of the job descriptions were subjective and based on the senior leadership's vision for the role, including the presumed skills and experiences of the candidates. The analysis of middle leader selection across schools in the district illuminated themes or characteristics that were essential to the selection of middle leaders. These were: [1] teaching experience and [2] previous experience in a middle leadership positions or tasks. The district was able to verify the presence of these two characteristics in the candidates' résumés and interviews, and as such provided the most dominant evidence for selection. However, based on the job description, the district also wanted to obtain a sense of [3] strong interpersonal and communication skills, [4] planning skills, [5] coaching skills, and [6] assessment/evaluation skills, even though the candidate was not necessarily known to them.

Across all three schools (elementary, middle, high), principals regarded the middle leaders as exemplary teachers. The high school, middle school, and elementary school principals, respectively, described Sam as a "master teacher," Mary as a

"mathematician" and Beth as "experienced." In fact, all three middle leaders had at least five years of teacher experience prior to engaging in a middle leadership position. Thus, it can be assumed that one requirement of middle leadership is teaching experience. Table 4.2 summarizes the qualifications listed between the two new middle leadership positions in relation to mastery in content and pedagogical content knowledge. Unfortunately, the district was not able to provide an original copy of the social studies department chair's position. Instead, excerpts from the high school principal's interview were listed.

Table 4.2

Job Descriptions (Teaching Experience)

ELA Curriculum Coordinator	Math Coach and Interventionist	Department Chair
• MA Elementary Certification • MA Reading Specialist Certification • Minimum of three years PreK-5 teaching experience	• Possess a deep understanding of content standards and standards for mathematical practice as outlined in the MA Curriculum Framework. • Proficient at teaching all levels of elementary math. • Proficient in differentiating instruction based on individual student strengths and needs. • Understand and communicate multiple approaches to different math problems. • Understand and communicate mathematical ideas on a procedural and conceptual level.	• "Had taught every level of social studies that we were basically teaching here." • "He was already coming to us as what I consider being a master teacher."

Beth spent a significant amount of time being an ELA teacher and then a reading specialist, which to the principals, meant that she understood the needs of both positions. For Mary, her history in the district and positive evaluations from the principal indicated that she had fulfilled these requirements. For Sam, his experience teaching every social studies class set him apart from other candidates. Therefore, a significant factor in the selection of middle leadership was teaching experience and principals' perceived content and pedagogical content knowledge.

Another factor in the selection of middle leadership was previous experience in middle leadership positions or tasks. Because middle leadership positions, apart from the department chair, were new to the district, senior leadership also needed guidance from the selected middle leaders in shaping the position. This was especially true for the ELA curriculum coordinator position. As the principal shared, "We chose a candidate with the more relevant and appropriate experience, she had the experience.... The experience that she brought…we felt like she had done a role very similar to what we were looking for."

For Mary, her experience as the district's curriculum liaison—a district stipend position for developing math curriculum for the two middle schools—while being a teacher provided her with an opportunity to develop middle leadership skills. Not only was she able to work with the principals of the two middle schools, she was able to establish relationships with teachers. The principal shared,

> She had done a lot of work at her liaison position as an 8th grade math teacher
> and refining our 8th grade math curriculum. So not only did she do that on her
> own, she [also] worked a little bit with another at [the other middle school] and so
> I was able to watch her, to collaborate with her, and really like present the new

curriculum in an inviting way. She has proven at that point to be incredibly

collaborative, really student centered, student driven and very professional in her

approached to the practice.

Because of this experience, hiring Mary as a coach and an interventionist, an extension of

her pervious role, seemed natural from the perspective of the principal.

Sam already had experience as a department chair for social studies in a different

state as well as school leadership experience, which was the main reason why he was

selected. The principal shared,

So, we chose him mainly because he had some experience with leading a

department [and] he had helped to lead a school that…had some issue with one of

the administrators…he stepped in and did a lot of work for them at that point.

Thus, similar to Beth and Mary, Sam was selected because of his prior experiences in

being a department chair and school leader.

The Table 4.3 summarizes each of the middle leader's previous experiences that

led to their selection.

Table 4.3

Middle Leaders' Previous Leadership Experiences

ELA Curriculum Coordinator	Math Coach and Interventionist	Department Chair
• ELA coach in a previous district. • Experience rolling out new district curriculum.	• Curriculum liaison in the district.	• "Experience leading a department" • "Helped lead a school"

These results suggested that prior academic leadership experience mattered for the

selection of middle leaders. Whether it was a prior role or an add-on responsibility, in the

case of the curriculum liaison, these former successful experiences were viewed as more reliable indicators of future success. Further, although many teachers engage in what some may consider "teacher leadership" oriented tasks, such as, collaborative curriculum development, official titles, such as curriculum liaison may distinguish educators in a field where everyone is literally leading a classroom.

Principals also utilized the selected middle leaders' teaching and leadership experiences to subjectively infer Beth, Sam, and Mary's interpersonal and communication skills, planning skills, coaching skills, and assessment/evaluation skills, which were all highly desired skill sets. Table 4.4 summarizes the job descriptions in relation to pre-service middle leadership requirements and in-service perceived skills. The only common attribute of the three middle leaders was interpersonal and communication skills.

According to the elementary school principal, what was highly memorable about Beth's interview was "Her people skills. Enthusiasm was something that's very memorable from her interview. She was just very motivated and driven." Similarly, Mary's existing relationship with teachers was an important factor in her selection. The middle school principal shared, "And then the other thing is Beth, I think really earned the respect of her colleagues because she is so dedicated because she is student driven and because she is hard worker." For Sam, his approach in a highly political subject matter was impressive, from the perspective of the high school principal:

> It was a situation where I felt like I had huge variety of people on every level of
> the spectrum you know who is typical on the social studies department. You
> know, you get your Republicans, I'm your Democrat and everything in between

and they typically are very opinionated and not an easy department to lead. And

he had the temperament, when I interviewed him, to listen to peoples' concerns.

This suggested that interpersonal and communication skills was a mandatory, highly

desirable skillset for middle leaders across subject matters and grade level categories.

Meanwhile, the other perceived in-service skills seem to be directly correlated

with the title. For Sam, the most dominant skill was evaluation because this was a direct

responsibility of the role. All department chairs were required to evaluate teachers. For

Mary, the "coach and interventionist" title meant that the majority of her role revolved

around coaching. For Beth, the curriculum coordinator position meant a lot of planning

(i.e. How can I plan for the curriculum rollout) and coaching (i.e. How can I support

teachers in utilizing this curriculum?)

To summarize, middle leaders are selected based on their teaching and leadership

experiences. However, while the job requirements involved more than teaching and

leadership experiences, senior leadership in the district utilized those experiences to

subjectively infer their potential for planning, coaching, assessment/evaluation, and

interpersonal and communication skills.

Table 4.4

Middle Leaders' Job Qualifications In Relation to Required Pre-Service Experience and Perceived In-Service Skills

Pre-Service Requirements	ELA Curriculum Coordinator	Math Coach & Interventionist	Social Studies Department Chair
• Teaching Experience	- MA Elementary Certification - MA Reading Specialist Certification - Minimum of three years PreK-5 teaching experience	- Possess a deep understanding of content standards and standards for mathematical practice as outlined in the MA Curriculum Framework. - Proficient at teaching all levels of elementary math. Proficient in differentiating instruction based on individual student strengths and needs. - Understand and communicate multiple approaches to different math problems. - Understand and communicate mathematical ideas on a procedural and conceptual level.	- "Had taught every level of social studies that we were basically teaching here." - "He was already coming to us as what I consider being a master teacher."
• Leadership Experience	- ELA coach in a previous district. - Experience rolling out new district curriculum.	- Curriculum liaison in the district.	- "Experience leading a department" - "Helped lead a school"

• Interpersonal and Communication Skills	- Effective writing skills - Strong interpersonal skills to establish effective working relationships with teachers and school administrators	- Evidence of collaboration.	"He listened to peoples' concerns"
• Planning Skills	- Analytical skills to examine student test data and make recommendations for improvement in curriculum and teaching		
• Coaching Skills	- Creativity - coordinate and model engaging best practices to promote reading and writing at the elementary level. - Mentor and coach teachers on effective instructional strategies.	- Ability to model research-based best practices in mathematics instruction.	
• Assessment/Evaluation Skills			- "Being a master teacher which is important because he would be doing evaluations of teachers"

Research Question 3: How were middle leaders conceptualized in the district?

This section describes how middle leadership was conceptualized from the joint perspectives of administrators, middle leaders, and teachers. The first section will briefly describe each middle leader's general responsibilities. The next section will discuss the district's conceptualization of middle leadership. Finally, the last section will present an insight to the bi-directionality of middle leadership in the district.

Middle Leader's Roles and Responsibilities

The middle leaders' responsibilities are summarized in Table 4.5. Similar themes were found between the middle leaders' perceived in-service skills and their corresponding responsibilities, with the addition of the management skill. All three middle leaders in the study were responsible for [1] interpersonal communication, [2] management, and [3] coaching. Additionally, depending on their titles, [4] teaching, [5] strategic planning, and [6] assessing/evaluating.

Sam, Mary, and Beth, as leaders in the "middle" were responsible for communicating curricula and policies to the teachers. As they collaborate with the principals, as well as the assistant superintendent, they are the first to know about strategies and district policies in relation to their respective subject matters. They were also expected to communicate in a variety of mediums depending on what is needed or relevant for their subject matters.

All middle leaders in the study were also "managers." Beth had the most managerial tasks because curriculum planning and implementation required organized processes, especially in relation to logistics, materials distribution, and data collection. Mary and Sam had the similar responsibility for managing and analyzing student data,

however, because of his 0.6 administrator position, Sam had the added responsibility of assigning social studies teachers in the beginning of the school year.

Given their respective experience in teaching, all middle leaders were also expected to share their content and pedagogical content knowledge through coaching. For Mary, coaching was central to her role in helping teachers improve instruction and student performance. For Beth, coaching was more oriented towards supporting teachers in implementing the district's new ELA curriculum. For Sam, coaching was a part of his responsibility but not in the same gravity as Beth and Mary. It was more informal and involved short conversations around the potential of a new lesson activity or unit.

However, not all middle leaders engaged in teaching, strategic planning, and assessment/evaluation. While Sam and Mary both had teaching responsibilities, Beth did not. As Mary was housed in the middle school, she was only responsible for grades 6-8 math teachers in one middle school. Sam, as a department chair, was responsible for social studies teachers in grades 6-12 (2 middle schools and 1 high school). Beth, however, was responsible for curriculum coordination from K-5 in 4 different schools. Given the magnitude of her role, it was not reasonable to include classroom teaching as part of her responsibility.

Table 4.5

Middle Leaders' Responsibilities Based on Job Description (Elementary and Middle) or Interview (High)

Responsibilities	Elementary ELA Curriculum Coordinator	Middle School Math Coach and Interventionist	High School Department Chair for Social Studies
Teaching	None	- Provide enhancement for high-achieving students who have already achieved lesson objectives. - Provide intervention to students with needs.	- 2 Social Studies Classes
Interpersonal and Communication Skills	- Serves as PreK-5 reading department facilitator - Collaborate with the Assistant Superintendent, Elementary Principals, high school ELA Department Chair, and ELA subcommittee.	- Prepare a variety of written and electronic materials (e.g. planning and pacing guides, classroom materials, reports, etc.) for the purpose of demonstrating best practices in math instruction, and/or conveying information to teachers, special educators, Title 1 educators etc.	- Communicate district policies to teacher team.
Strategic Planning	- Work with schools to develop and implement reading/language arts program models that meet and exceed federal & state grants/regulations. - Stay current through professional readings, seminars, workshops, and conventions. - Monitor state and national trends and issues in student achievement and student assessment.	- None	- Re-design curriculum for new state standards in social studies.
Management	- Develop, coordinate, and monitor	- Maintain a variety of manual and	- Assign teachers to courses

	the Pre-K- 5 instructional program for English Language Arts and assessment. - Provide training and assistance for school district personnel in data collection and student related data analysis. - Provide input for the curriculum and instruction budget. - Preview and assist with the selection of new PreK-5 instructional materials.	electronic files and/or records other data regarding math proficiency for the purpose of determining success of math coaching on student achievement.	in the beginning of the school year. - Manage student data collected.
Coaching	- Provides leadership in curriculum & instruction for PreK-5 English Language Arts and PreK-12 common assessments. - Assists teaching staff with the implementation of new curriculum and instructional materials. - Coordinate and/or lead staff development.	- Analyze class and grade level data in mathematics for the purpose of sharing information with teachers and making informed decisions relative to instructional practices. - Support teachers to ensure small group guided math lessons are rigorous, differentiated, and aligned to standards. - Lead and participate in district-based professional development to improve teachers' math content knowledge and pedagogy.	- Provide feedback to teacher units/lessons.
Assessment/Evaluation	-None	- Observe instructional delivery and provide feedback to enhance and support the development of teachers' math content knowledge and pedagogy	- Evaluate 6-12 social studies teachers once a year.

Sam and Beth are similarly responsible for ensuring that the district's curriculum adheres to or exceeds the state standards. As such, Beth needed to be strategic in her selection and implementation of the district's new ELA curriculum while Sam had to re-design the district's 6-12 curriculum for social studies in order to cater to the state's newly released standards. Because major decisions regarding curriculum are typically made by the department chair, Mary was not as heavily involved in strategic planning when compared to Sam and Beth. As such, it can also be implied that if the state ever changed the math standards, Beth may have some influence over the district's overall plan to adhere to the standards; however, the department chair for mathematics would still have the final decision.

Finally, Sam and Mary's titles indicated that a significant portion of their responsibility is to perform routine observations and evaluations. As a coach, Mary was expected to visit classrooms often and provide feedback on pedagogy. Because this was an integral part of coaching, she created an observation framework to record teachers' growth over time. However, because the position was non-administrative, she was not expected to administer teacher evaluations. On the other hand, Sam's license in school administration as well as his position as the department chair required him to observe and evaluate grades 6-12 social studies teachers at least once a year.

To summarize, all the middle leaders in the district had responsibilities in management, coaching, and good interpersonal and communication skills. Depending on their titles, they also had additional responsibilities of strategic planning, teaching, and observing or evaluating teachers.

District Conceptualization of Middle Leadership

In this section, the conceptualization of middle leadership from each participant category (middle leaders, administrators, teachers) will be discussed. Generally, the district conceptualized middle leaders as [1] teachers, [2] communicators with high interpersonal skills, [3] strategic planners, [4] managers, [5] coaches, and [6] evaluators. Each of these will be discussed from the perspective of the middle leader, followed by administrator and teacher perspectives.

Teachers

All middle leaders in the district considered themselves as teachers of students. For example, Sam, had a 0.4 teaching load (two classes) and Mary was responsible for teaching "advanced" and intervention courses. However, Mary found teaching as a middle leader different from her typical classroom experience:

> In a difficult day, I always have at least one section of math club. In a difficult day, mostly, I have two. For the students, it services one of their related arts so its not taking the place of an academic and it's not an instructor that's part of their schedule and from most students it makes three times per seven days within the cycle and I do have one student who has it six times per seven days so she sees me almost every day.

Even though Beth did not have any teaching responsibilities for teaching, she shared that she deeply valued her teaching knowledge and frequently drew from her experiences to anticipate potential curricular and pedagogical concerns. Thus, among middle leaders, there was a general understanding that despite their slightly higher rank, they came from the perspective of teachers.

While middle leaders as teachers created positive perceptions throughout the district, it also illuminated a tension: If middle leaders are situated in the "middle" of administrators and teachers, was the distance between these population equal in magnitude? None of the middle leaders seemed to think so. As Beth shared,

I did find this hard last year because my principal and I were very close. And so, he would ask me for information, you know what I mean, so I feel like that relationship can go a little bit feisty especially if you have an administrator looking to you for information specifically about teachers. And not getting pulled into that because I feel like that that can be a challenge too because you know this middle leadership, you're on the teacher's side. The choice is also on the administration too and what they want to carry out. I always want to have the teacher's back cause that's the place I come from. I come from the teaching place. That's what I know, that's what I do.

Similarly, social studies teachers viewed Sam as their "protector." As one social studies teacher shared,

I think, his job is also kind of protecting us…so if you're taking an initiative, his job is to kind of implement that initiative that they want from up from [senior leadership], and when we institute something he [kind of] softens the blow a little bit and tries to take on that, a little bit by himself for trying to explain to us, you know why it's important like in a meeting we just had, you know if we're doing something that we don't think is useful for the classroom, maybe we should stop and think about it. You know, I like that. That's his job and he wants to make it better for the classroom.

Thus, when there is a controversial policy or task, middle leaders seem to take the side of teachers, and teachers expect middle leaders to understand their perspective. Nevertheless, as the teacher shared, there is an understanding that middle leaders also carry some responsibility towards administrators.

Administrators, as creators of the role, acknowledged that middle leadership is its own separate category. However, when it came to compensation, middle leaders were categorized in the "teacher" scale. As the high school principal shared,

Within the contract, there's a Unit A and there's a Unit B but the only people in the Unit B are the assistant principals and the current director. I've always thought that maybe the department chairs should move in to Unit B so there's at least some separation from them and the teachers.

Thus, even though middle leaders had responsibilities akin to administrators, they were still, with respect to compensation, considered teachers rather than administrators. This further implied that their financial trajectory was founded in the teachers' salary scale, with an additional stipend that, at the time this study was conducted, were not expected to increase every year.

To summarize, middle leaders were partly conceptualized as teachers. This was evidenced by their teaching load, financial contracts, and their positionality in contentious policies. This conceptualization also illuminated that middle leaders were not conceptualized exactly in the "middle," between administrators and teachers. Rather, all participant groups leaned towards conceptualizing middle leaders as closer to teachers than administrators.

Coaches

The middle leaders' extensive teaching experience led to district stakeholders to gain confidence in their content and pedagogical content knowledge. As such, being "coaches" to teachers in the district was natural role for middle leaders. However, the structure and gravity of coaching was different among Sam, Beth, and Mary.

As the district's middle school math coach and interventionist, Mary had the most structured coaching time. She shared,

> We are hoping to kind of focus on two teachers per term and by being able to really focus on our attention on two as supposed to five or six, be able to meet with those teachers and talk to them about what we're saying in our observation but also what their feeling they want to work on and using this time that we don't have right now, to meet with them to better support them in how they can make this look in their classroom and what they can do to support the students in their classroom and how they can change some of their instructional methods.

Thus, coaching for Mary involved routine observations and supporting teachers in developing their pedagogical content knowledge to support student learning.

For Sam and Beth, coaching was less dominant, however, it was still present. Beth did not specifically think that her role had space for formal coaching though she did model teaching strategies for the district's new curriculum as a way of establishing good relationships with teachers. She shared,

> I knew [this curriculum] from my previous district so I said I would love to come in, model lesson, observe a lesson, co-teach a lesson, giving some feedback, and these was all you know just to volunteer and so some teachers signed up for that

so I would partner with them for say like a week and we usually do a way like the

coaching cycle.

For Sam, his position had fewer opportunities for formal coaching. However, this could

have been due to the reason that teachers in his team were mostly veterans. As such,

coaching consisted of informal feedback on newly developed lessons, units, or activities.

Additionally, the nature of coaching provided by middle leaders depended on

whether or not the teacher is a novice or a veteran. One novice teacher stated,

She has kind of been like a mentor for me. She's been my target person, my go-to

person if there's ever an issue, you know, with the curriculum, there's something

I'm unsure of, whether how to teach it, if I need resources, or even if it's

something where, you know, I don't know who to direct the question to. She has

kind of been my outlet person.

Thus, for this novice teacher, coaching involved not only content-specific knowledge but

also institutional and cultural knowledge. Contrastingly, veteran teachers liked to be

approached as a colleague, as one veteran teacher explained,

No, [he's not a mentor]. I think as far as my department is concerned, I think

we're all really collegial with each other. I think it's harder than people realize

because there are a lot of personalities that can be rough. Well, like I've said

before, we're independent teachers, we like our independence.

As such, formal coaching or mentorship was not as appreciated by veteran teachers

because they relate coaching with a decrease in dependence. At the same time, however,

they appreciate having a content-specific leader that they can share ideas with, as another

veteran teacher shared,

I wouldn't go to [the principal], for like math-specific questions, you know, I

wouldn't go to him and say, like, you know, 'Students are having difficulty

learning how to calculate discounts or original prices and, you know, what are

some other ways that we could teach this? This kid isn't doing well in this topic.'

I don't really see him in that role.'

To summarize, all middle leaders engaged with some kind of coaching; however,

because Mary is the math coach and interventionist, she had the most formal coaching

structure compared to Sam and Beth. Coaching also differed between novice and veteran

teachers. Novice teachers enjoy both formal and informal coaching involving curricular,

institutional, and cultural knowledge while veteran teachers prefer sharing feedback and

ideas informally.

Communicators with High Interpersonal Skills

As mentioned in previous sections, middle leaders, from their selection, roles, and

responsibilities displayed high interpersonal and communication skills. According to the

middle leaders, a significant amount of their time is communicating with administrators

and teachers. They utilize their communication and interpersonal skills to establish and

maintain positive relationships with teachers and relay district policies and teacher

feedback.

As a new district employee, Beth had no initial relationships with teachers and

had little sense of their concerns. As such, reaching out and communicating to them was

her top priority after her selection. She shared,

The first thing that I did was I meet all teachers who have PLC's so I reach out to

individual teachers team at each school. So, my goal was to meet with every grade

level team K-5 by December so basically saying---hey, can I have few minutes

with you. I love to introduce myself, tell you a little bit about myself. And then I

had 4 straight questions that I asked each grade level team to try to see some

similarities. So, basically what's going on in terms of reading and writing, what

are some challenges in terms of reading and writing, what resources are you

currently using, what resources would you [want to] use or hope to use, what

professional development have you had in the past, what professional

development would you hope to have in the future. And so, I kind of just did my

own gathering of information there.

In addition to gathering information, her rationale for attending teacher meetings was to

establish relationships with teachers. After all, as a previous ELA coach, Beth understood

the importance of collaborating and working with teachers in order to successfully plan

for and implement the newly selected ELA curriculum.

Compared to Sam and Beth, who were both new to the district when they started,

Mary had the privilege of building upon her existing relationships with teachers in her

new role as coach and interventionist. With her relationships with the principal and

teachers, she was able to serve as a "connector," as one teacher shared,

I think that she also helps to keep everybody on the same page, so whereas like

say, [the principal] and I don't have common time, and so she's kind of that

connector piece between us, like who is doing what, where you in the pacing. Not

to say that [the principal] and I can't just communicate but she kind of like, a hold

– she bridges teachers together to make sure all 8th grade students are getting the

same material.

This role of making sure that teachers are administrators are in the same page was similar for Beth, according to the reading specialist:

> I think that if you don't have middle leadership then you have this gap in communication, inaccessibility and that can make for, you know, really challenging place to work or a lot of misunderstanding between, you know, what administration expectations are, what is expected of you in the classroom. So, I think when you have a middle leader they're able to help translate things down and make teachers feels heard. That also makes administrators feel that, you know, they're also communicating appropriately with staff.

This limited potential misunderstandings or miscommunications between teachers and administrators.

However, as Sam shared, communication with teachers was not always formal. He shared,

> My office is…I'm on the same floor [as teachers]…and so, I have a much closer working relationship even if I am not going into classes, not going to any classes today when I walked down on a hall way doing various thing I can, you know, here what's going on.

Thus, being in close physical proximity to teachers allowed middle leaders to engage in informal, face-to-face conversations that promoted positive relationships and become more approachable to teachers.

In sum, middle leaders use their interpersonal and communication skills to establish and maintain positive relationships with teachers. They utilized it formally, through PLC meetings or department meetings, and informally, through casual

conversations. While formal communication was often about curriculum or other district policies and initiatives, informal conversation included discussions regarding institutional and institutional knowledge as well as sharing of personal feelings and events. Together, these communication pathways allowed for middle leaders' ease in working with teachers.

Evaluators

Middle leaders, understood as teachers and coaches, were also conceptualized as evaluators. As experts in their subject matter content and pedagogy, middle leaders were expected to evaluate, if not observe, classrooms regularly. Because formal evaluations in the state required a license, only Sam was tasked with conducting them. However, in order to coach effectively, Mary and Beth both observed teachers frequently.

For Sam, evaluation was a necessary part of his role and responsibilities. He shared,

> I think we are probably in the right position to do this, to do observations and
> have conversations with our teachers… you know, we're supposed to be the
> experts in a curriculum we know the expectation much more than an assistant
> principal or a principal could.

In other words, as the department chair, Sam felt that he had more authority to administer teacher evaluations because of his knowledge of the curriculum. Some teachers agreed with this notion. One teacher shared,

> I absolutely welcome evaluation [from the department head] because especially
> knowing you have an administrator who is not a teacher, right? When you have a
> department chair who is doing your evaluation, I know confidently that was a

person who is in the classroom and who became a leader. And so in a lot of

respect, I really value more evaluation that I get from [him] because he's someone

who won't just look at my classroom management or anything like that but also

the way that I'm working with curriculum so that makes his evaluations really

valuable.

To put it another way, some teachers felt that being evaluated by middle leaders

somewhat increases the validity of the evaluation because the middle leader's teaching

experience and expertise in the subject matter enabled them to evaluate their teaching

based on subject-specific pedagogy rather than classroom management, which they

associated with principal evaluations. Subject specific feedback received in relation to

these evaluations were also positively received.

However, not all teachers agreed with middle leaders as evaluators. Although

Beth and Mary did not write formal evaluations, the teachers they worked with felt

strongly about the role being non-evaluative. One veteran teacher shared,

Okay, it's huge, I think it's huge because people are hesitant to try new things,

and if that coach is coming in, evaluating us, then we feel like we're not [going

to] take big risks. I see the math coaches, I see the tech people, and I'll say, 'I

don't know what I'm doing here' [but] I wouldn't say that to an evaluator,

[because] you know, your job is on the line, then, and I think teachers that would

be more hesitant to try things with the help of the person. I think that non-

evaluative piece of it is huge.

This illuminated some potential concerns regarding evaluations and the trust associated

with it. According to this teacher, if middle leadership roles were to become evaluative,

then teachers were less likely to take risks in pedagogy. After all, evaluations were associated with judgments while observations were linked with coaching.
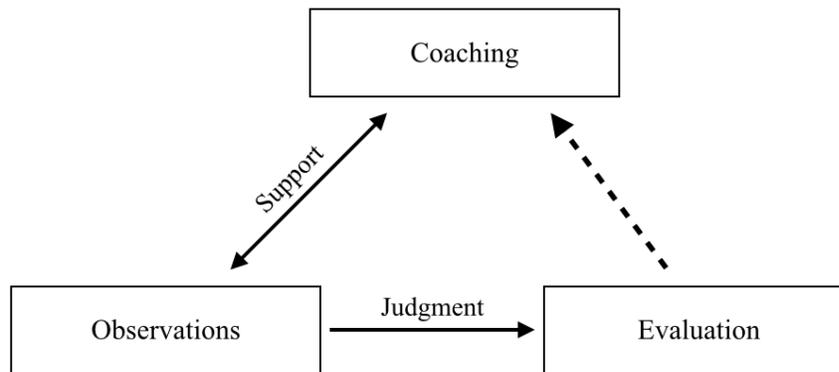
Figure 4.1 A visual representation of teachers' notion of coaching and evaluation.

This tension illustrated a key issue in middle leadership. Figure 4.1 offers a visual representation of how evaluations were understood in the district. Coaching and observations were considered avenues for teacher support. Thus, teachers understood that coaches needed to observe classrooms frequently to provide feedback. However, when observations were utilized as judgments or evaluations of teachers' practice, teachers did not take it as positively. Nevertheless, as one teacher noted earlier, evaluations could lead to some form of coaching, but it depends on how the middle leadership role was structured or what the leadership style of the middle leader is.

For middle leaders, there was also no consistent perspective on evaluations. While Sam enjoyed evaluations, Beth and Mary erred on the side of caution. As Beth explained,

I think one of the biggest things is like the trust. Like I said when I was an instructional coach, this is not evaluative, this is not judgmental, this is you know, this is all about the students and I firmly believe that—I really believe in a

student's centered coaching philosophy of what do you want your students to know and be able to do. That's where we come in…not necessarily how I can fix you as the teacher. Sometimes you work on that as well, but you know we always starting with the students. We want our students to be able to write. So I say, okay now what do we have to do instructionally to get them there and I feel like that's hard. It's hard to build that trust when you are the evaluator because no matter what you say, I'm just come here to help you, know they know in the end of the day you're writing their evaluations.

This repeated the teacher's concern about offering support versus making a judgment and the trust associated with it. As a coach, Mary enjoyed observing classrooms and even created her own framework for teacher observation. However, just like Beth, Mary was transparent about observations being non-evaluative.

While teachers and middle leaders more dominantly disliked formal evaluations, administrators envisioned the role of middle leaders in the future to be more evaluative. Sam's role as department chair and evaluator will not likely change but for Beth and Mary, the principals in their respective schools were open to the possibility of including evaluation. Nevertheless, both principals acknowledged the potential impact evaluations could have on teacher-middle leader relationships. As the elementary school principal stated,

So, she's building relationship with all kinds of people and we don't want anybody to feel intimidated by her but some form of observation evaluation that may change down the road if teachers need more of that.

Similarly, the middle school principal explained,

It's a coaching position. It's still new. The downside to them evaluating can affect

relationships. Good coaches you know maybe add some more you know honest

conversation from a teacher around their own personal struggles. What they fear

is that information about the teacher being evaluated will be shared with the

administrator.

This again reflected issues of trust when it came to middle leaders and evaluation.

In addition, the conceptualization of middle leaders as evaluators was also tied to

titles. For the middle school principal, who in the school year after the study was

conducted became assistant superintendent, middle leaders with titles "coordinator" or

"chair" have evaluative roles. As such, Beth's non-evaluative role might change in the

near future while Mary will continue to be non-evaluative support structure for teachers.

To summarize, all middle leaders in the district were conceptualized as

evaluators, especially because of their perceived expertise in subject matter curriculum

and pedagogy. However, this conceptualization was dependent on the purpose of

evaluation. Teachers preferred evaluation as a form of support through observation and

coaching, as they believed this would improve their teaching practice. On the other hand,

when observations were evaluative, teachers became less confident in taking risks and

trying new pedagogy and could potentially impact trusting relationships with the middle

leader. Beth and Mary remained cautious of this issue and were in favor of being non-

evaluative, while Sam fully supported his evaluative role. However, this may change for

Mary due to district's policies for coordinators and department chairs.

Managers

Middle leaders as managers were one of the core functions of the role. For senior leadership, these management responsibilities included the creation of systems to ensure fidelity of policy/curriculum implementation and monitor its progress. For middle leaders and teachers, this meant the management of routines and systems, such as assessment logistics, data management, delegation of tasks, and team meetings. These management tasks can be further categorized into logistics, data management, and team management.

Sam, Beth, and Mary had similar responsibilities with respect to data and team management (Table 4.6). Data management involved scheduling of student assessments during the academic school year. For example, Sam decided when students would take school-wide assessments. Then, they collected, organized and analyzed the data in order to inform strategic planning (next section) or coaching. On the other hand, team management involved running professional learning communities (PLCs), which were often for teachers in the same grade level (elementary) and/or subject matter (middle and high). All middle leaders in the study were responsible for creating agendas, communication channels (distribution/collection of information), and ensuring that personal concerns that may impact team dynamics were addressed. Thus, having interpersonal and communication skills were a vital prerequisite to the managerial aspect of the role.

Table 4.6

Middle Leaders' Management Tasks

Management Tasks	Sam (High School Department Chair for Social Studies)	Mary (Middle School Math Coach and Interventionist)	Beth (Elementary School ELA Curriculum Coordinator)
Logistics	• Assignment of classes (year	• Coaching cycles • Observation	• Curriculum rollout

		Cycles	• Coaching cycles for curriculum implementation
	start)		
	• Scheduling and location of team meetings		
	• Scheduling of evaluations in high school and middle school		
Data Management	• Scheduling of student assessments		
	• Data collection and organization		
	• Data analysis		
Team Management	• PLC meetings		
	• Agendas/Meeting Locations		
	• Communication Channels		
	• Personal Concerns		

However, the logistical responsibilities differed between the middle leaders. For Sam, being the department chair meant that he was also responsible for assigning teachers to their classes in the beginning of the year. He also had the authority to organize department meetings and schedule and administer evaluations with teachers in the high school and middle school. Meanwhile, Mary was responsible for scheduling coaching or observation cycles with teachers. Finally, Beth was primarily responsible for managing the curriculum's rollout and determining the curriculum's scope and sequence for each grade level for K-5 schools. In addition, she was also expected to coach teachers in implementing the curriculum.

To summarize, middle leaders were conceptualized as managers. Management included logistics, which differed depending on the middle leaders' roles. However, middle leaders had similar responsibilities for data and team management.

Strategic Planners

Middle leaders in the district were also conceptualized as strategic planners. Strategic planning was theme that emerged with respect to middle leaders' description of

their responsibilities. In the literature, strategic planning was associated with middle leaders' ability to understand both senior leadership and teacher concerns and contribute to the overall planning and implementation of the district's initiatives (West, 1995; Marshall, 2012). While not specifically mentioned as a responsibility, this theme emerged based on middle leaders' experiences.

For Beth, strategic planning was central to her role. For example, upon her selection, Beth knew that her main priority was in establishing relationships with teachers. The reason was because her previous experience as a coach taught her that teacher buy-in was important for any district initiative. Then, in selecting a curriculum for the district, she created a leadership team in order to gain information, cater to teacher needs, and prevent teacher disappointment or dissatisfaction with the selection and implementation of the curriculum. As part of this strategic plan, she also made sure that she was highly visible to teachers and frequently offered to model lessons or in some cases, "fill in" for teachers. She shared,

> I said I would love to come in, model lesson, observe a lesson, co-teach a lesson,
> giving some feedback, and these was all you know just to volunteer and so some
> teachers signed up for that so I would partner with them for say like a week and
> we usually do a way like the coaching cycle like I would model a
> lesson…whoever signed up.

While there was no guarantee that teachers would then fully support her ideas, Beth knew that offering these services to teachers would place her in a more positive, respected position especially because she was new to the district.

For Mary, strategic planning was different. While Sam and Beth's roles had a district-wide impact, Mary's role was limited to the middle school. As such, she did not have the authority to create district-wide math policies. Instead, she mentioned that those were directly the responsibility of the math department chair. However, in her own way, she strategically planned for coaching in her school. At the time that the study was conducted, it was only the district's first year of having coaches. As such, there were no existing structures that Mary could utilize. Because of this, Mary had to envision what coaching should look like and then create district documents to support it. For example, she created an observation framework that she shared with teachers to inform them about how they would be observed and supported. This led to teachers being more open about being coached and observed.

Finally, Sam's strategy involved anticipating and planning for the next school year. As department chair for social studies, he was aware that the state was releasing a new set of standards to be implemented in the next school year. To prepare for this shift, Sam created a K-12 leadership team that planned for curriculum alignment to the new standards as well as vertical alignment throughout the different grade levels. With the help of the assistant superintendent, Sam was able to meet with this leadership once a month and ensure that the district complied with the new state standards.

While administrators did not necessarily label or require middle leaders as strategic planners, their responsibilities (Table 4.5) suggested that strategic planning was useful skill set in being a successful middle leader. Teachers did not necessarily think about middle leaders as strategic planners. However, they seemed to understand that middle leaders were involved in district planning and policies.

To summarize, all middle leaders in the study engaged with some form of strategic planning. However, these differed depending on the context. As a new district employee, Beth focused her strategies in forming relationships with teachers and planning for the curriculum's rollout. As a first time position, Mary focused her strategy on creating observation tools and support for math teachers. Finally, as department chair, Sam focused his strategy on ensuring that the district adhered to the new state standards for social studies.

Relationship Between Middle Leader Conceptualizations

Figure 4.2 illustrates the relationship between the district's conceptualization of middle leaders. Prior to becoming middle leaders, candidates had significant teaching experiences and interpersonal and communication skills. However, their core values, with respect to their day-to-day responsibilities included management, coaching and evaluation. In order to coach and evaluate well, however, middle leaders needed teaching experience and well as good interpersonal and evaluation skills. This was particularly helpful in providing feedback and suggestions. Middle leaders also utilized their interpersonal and communication skills to manage projects and people successfully.

With these pre-service and core skills, one could assume good middle leadership. However, what seemed to promote excellence in middle leadership was strategic planning. For this study, this was evident in the way middle leaders could anticipate pre-project tasks or concerns that needed to be addressed, whether it was curriculum study, for Sam, a reflection on coaching, for Mary, or establishing strong relationships with teachers, for Beth. These contributed to success in promoting their respective district initiatives.

In addition, strategic planning could contribute to better coaching and evaluation. However, this depended on how strategic the middle leader was. For Beth, part of her strategy was coaching teachers. This allowed her to establish relationships with teachers and gain more face time with them. As such, she was able to obtain information that would help her manage the curriculum rollout more successfully.
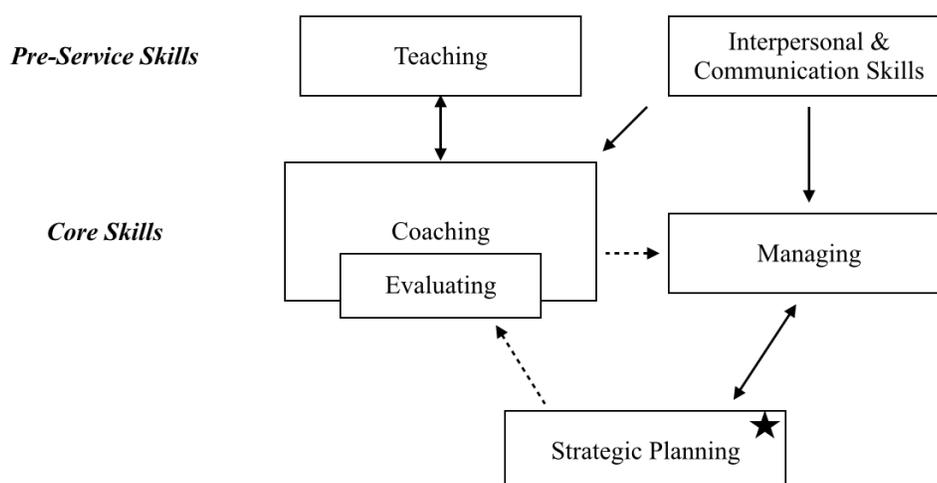
Figure 4.2 Relationships between middle leader conceptualization

As illustrated in Table 4.7, administrators held much of the power when with respect to middle leadership. Senior leadership largely decided much of the decisions surrounding the middle leaders' respective projects or initiatives. First, administrators decide if the middle leader was a good teacher. Then, they further decided upon what was communicated and how teachers and projects are managed, coached, and evaluated. The only influence that they received was when middle leaders had a strategic plan. This was strongly visible in Sam's creation of the leadership team for social studies, which was supported by the assistant superintendent, and Beth's plan for the curriculum rollout, which administrators followed.

Middle leaders as bi-directional leaders was strongest in interpersonal and communication skills and management. As they communicated between administrators and teachers, it was important for middle leaders to understand what concerns were on either side and "translate" concerns to both sides to minimize miscommunication and promote understanding. As managers, middle leaders often updated administrators regarding their progress while leading their teacher teams. This, along with coaching, was the heart of the role.

Teachers had very little influence on middle leadership roles and responsibilities. These were limited to sharing their concerns with middle leaders, which do not always influence senior leadership decisions; and, in consensus building, which middle leaders often adjust to. However, as much as they had little influence on the role and district projects that involve them, teachers thought about middle leaders as "one of them," rather than as an administrator. Thus, they expected a sense of loyalty from middle leaders.

As a whole, what Table 4.7 explains is that while it is true that middle leaders are in the "middle" or in "between" teachers and administrators, the bi-directionality did not always exist. As much as senior leadership created these roles for leadership distribution, much of what is "distributed" was more about subject-specific tasks rather than subject specific leadership. For example, Sam and Beth both have strong subject specific content and pedagogical knowledge. As a result, they had an instinct for what structures the district needed to create or implement for their specific subject matters. However, these ideas needed to be approved by senior leadership, even when they do not necessarily have the same background or expertise in subject matter. This created some frustration for some of the middle leaders (further discussed in research question 5), especially when

they did not agree with the district's decision. Nevertheless, compared to teachers, middle leaders were in a much better position to bring about concerns to senior leaders.

To summarize, bi-directionality was not always present in the district's middle leadership roles. They were present in middle leaders' communication between administrators and teachers as well as management, through updates provided to the middle leader and the coordination of teacher meetings. Senior leaders were mostly uni-directional in their decision-making; however, they were open to being influenced by middle leaders' strategic plans.

Table 4.7

Conceptualizations of middle leaders across participant groups by theme and direction

Sub-concepts	Administrators (Admin)	Middle Leaders (MLs)	Teachers (Ts)
Teaching	→MLs are expert teachers, who are closer to teachers than Admin	-Self-define as expert teachers who need to be closer to teachers than Admin to do job	← Ts perceive as teachers with valuable experience who need to have loyalty to teachers first
Interpersonal and Communication Skills	→ MLers needed to efficiently relay information, policy, news	→Relay info, policy, news from Admin to teachers ←Convey teacher feedback on admin policies and decisions.	← MLers are a protective barrier from Admin ← MLers convey Ts concerns, feedback, and ideas.
Strategic Planning	←Do not necessarily label MLs as strategic planners but follow ML's strategic plan.	←→ Distributes strategy to administrators and teachers.	→Do not necessarily label MLs as strategic planners but are recipients of strategy.
Management	→ Manage routines and systems to assure fidelity of implementation and progress monitoring	→ Manage routines and systems such as: assessment logistics, data management and analysis, running team meetings ← Convey supports and info needed	→ MLers set the agenda, schedule, and due dates for curriculum and assessment progress. ←→ Mlers are consensus builders
Coaching	→Expected for MLers with Coaching in title and for all MLers in relation to Novice Teachers	→For novice teachers: regular observations and feedback, co-planning, modeling →For more senior teachers: feedback on ideas, modeling new approaches	→Novice teachers identify MLers as their coach →Senior teachers identify MLers as a trusted colleague, sounding board
Evaluation	→ Only expected if in job description. Requires admin license. Expectation that	→For all teachers if in job description. Focus on content-specific feedback.	→ Teachers with MLers who are also evaluators like the content-specific feedback.

feedback focuses on
content.

Differences in Middle Leadership Between Elementary, Middle, and High School

In this section, differences between schools that may have impacted the middle leadership role will be discussed. Generally, regardless of school (Perkins, Woodberry, or Hillside), middle leaders were selected, conceptualized, and evaluated similarly. What seemed to be different was [1] the way the middle leader was introduced to the school, [2] scope of work, and [3] teachers' work load.

Table 4.8

A Table Listing New and Existing Middle Leadership Positions with Internal/External Hiring

	Existing Position	New Position
Within-District Hire		Mary (Math Coach & Interventionist)
Outside of District Hire	Sam (Department Chair for Social Studies)	Beth (ELA Coach & Curriculum Coordinator)

There was a difference in how all the middle leaders were introduced to the district. Whether or not they were within or external hire seemed to influence the way they were introduced. Table 4.8 Despite being a known figure in the district, the principal made sure that Mary's position was explained to all stakeholders in the school. As such, when teachers were interviewed about their experiences with Mary, they were confident about what her roles and responsibilities were. Contrastingly, both the reading specialist and the elementary teacher from Perkins Elementary School were unclear about Beth's responsibilities. According to both, Beth had no introduction to the district— information that Beth confirmed during her interview. She also shared that because of this lack of clarity and explanation to stakeholders, she struggled with situating herself in the district. While Sam similarly did not have the same introduction, the existence of the

role in the district for a long time meant that teachers had very clear descriptions of his roles and responsibilities prior to Sam taking the position. As such, multiple stakeholders could inform Sam regarding his role and responsibilities.

Therefore, new middle leader positions need intensive support from senior leadership to define, describe, and explain the role to school stakeholders prior to introducing the new role. This practice proved to be successful for Mary, while the lack of this structure created confusion and ambiguity for Beth. On the other hand, middle leaders who are placed in an existing middle leadership role, such as Sam's, did not need the same amount of support, but would probably benefit from this practice.

The other difference was the amount of people the middle leaders were responsible for. Beth and Sam were similar because they were each responsible for one single subject matter, 5 and 6 grade levels, respectively. However, what Beth lacked for in grade level, she made up for in being responsible for all 4 elementary schools in ELA while Sam was responsible for the Hillside High School and the two middle schools. Meanwhile, Mary, who was situated in the middle school, had 3 grade levels in 1 school. Thus, organizational structures seemed to matter when it came to the middle leader's scope of work.

Teachers' workloads also mattered for middle leadership. Because teachers in elementary schools teach all subject matters, compared to their middle and high school colleagues, Beth had challenges scheduling common time. The reason was because when grade level teams teacher teams meet in the elementary school, they met for all subject matters. As such, ELA had to compete with other subject matters such as science and

math for time. On the other hand, teachers in the middle and high school had existing subject-specific PLC meetings, which Mary or Sam could lead.

To summarize, differences in middle leadership included how senior leadership introduced the role to school stakeholders, district organization, and teacher loads. While the first two influenced the conceptualization of the role, the latter influenced the logistics of the role.

Research Question 4: How were middle leaders evaluated in the district?

The Evaluation of Middle Leaders

The evaluation of middle leaders in the district occurred formally and informally. In this section, the formal evaluations will first be discussed followed by the informal evaluations. Then a brief cross-case analysis comparing and contrasting the elementary, middle, and high school evaluation of middle leaders will be provided.

The principals perform formal and informal observations and evaluations of all middle leaders. For example, Sam was evaluated by the high school principal and Beth was evaluated by one of the elementary school principals. Similarly, Mary was observed by the middle school principal. However, the department chair for mathematics also evaluated her because of his responsibility of evaluating all teachers in the middle school once a year. Because Mary was teaching an intervention class, she, like other teachers, needed to be evaluated by the department chair.

At the time of this study, the state had no specific evaluation frameworks for middle leaders. Nevertheless, the district utilized the following state-based evaluation frameworks: the teacher evaluation framework and the administrator evaluation framework. The teacher evaluation framework has four main standards, [1] Curriculum,

Planning, and Assessment, [2] Teaching All Students, [3] Family and Community

Engagement, and [4] Professional Culture. These standards have further sub-categories,

as stated in Table 4.9

     Beth, Mary, and Sam are evaluated twice a year—one mid-year and another end-

year—based on these standards. For Mary and Sam, this was mandatory because both of

them were teaching classes. Sam taught social studies classes while Mary had an

intervention class. As such, it was reasonable to utilize this framework for their teaching

practice. Beth's situation,

Table 4.9

The State Classroom Teacher Rubric (DESE, 2018)

Standards	Sub-Categories

I – Curriculum, Planning, and Assessment	A. Curriculum and Planning Indicator
	    a. Subject Matter Knowledge
	    b. Child and Adolescent Development
	    c. Well-Structured Units and Lessons
	B. Assessment Indicator
	    a. Variety of Assessment Methods
	    b. Adjustments to Practice
	C. Analysis Indicator
	    a. Analysis and Conclusions
	    b. Sharing Conclusions with Colleagues
	    c. Sharing Conclusions with Students

II – Teaching All Students	A. Instruction Indicator
	    a. Quality of Effort and Work
	    b. Student Engagement
	    c. Meeting Diverse Needs
	B. Learning Environment Indicator
	    a. Safe Learning Environment
	    b. Collaborative Learning Environment
	    c. Student Motivation
	C. Student Learning Indicator
	D. Cultural Proficiency Indicator
	    a. Creates and Maintains a Respectful Environment
	E. Expectations Indicator

	a. High Expectations
	b. Access to Knowledge
III – Family and Community Engagement	A. Engagement Indicator
	a. Family Engagement
	B. Collaboration Indicator
	a. Learning Expectations
	b. Curriculum Support
	C. Communication Indicator
	a. Culturally Proficient Communication
IV – Professional Culture	A. Reflection Indicator
	a. Reflective Practice
	b. Goal Setting
	B. Professional Growth Indicator
	a. Professional Learning and Growth
	C. Collaboration Indicator
	a. Professional Collaboration
	D. Decision-Making Indicator
	a. Decision-Making
	E. Shared Responsibility Indicator
	a. Shared Responsibility
	F. Professional Responsibilities Indicator
	a. Judgment
	b. Reliability and Responsibility

however, was slightly different. According to the elementary school principal, she was being evaluated using the educator rubric even though she did not teach students.

Meanwhile, Sam's 0.6 administrator role meant that he needed to be evaluated not only using the educator rubric but also the state's administrator rubric. The administrator rubric has similar categories as the educator rubric but was based from the perspective of leadership. Table 4.10 lists the standards and the sub-categories in the administrator rubric.

Table 4.10

The State Administrator Rubric (DESE, 2018)

Standards	Sub-Categories
I – Instructional Leadership	A. Curriculum Indicator
	a. Standards-Based Unit and Lesson

	Support
	B. Instruction Indicator
	a. Student Engagement
	b. Quality of Effort and Work
	c. Meeting Diverse Needs
	C. Assessment Indicator Indicator
	a. Variety of Assessment Methods
	b. Adjustments to Practice
	D. Evaluation Indicator
	a. Educator Goals
	b. Student Learning Measures
	c. Observations and Feedback
	d. Ratings and Alignment
	E. Data-Informed Decision-Making Indicator
	a. Data-Informed Decision Making
	b. School Goals
	F. Student Learning Indicator
II – Management and Operations	A. Environment
	a. Operational Systems and Routines
	b. Social Emotional Well-Being
	c. Student Health and Safety
	B. Human Resources Management and Development Indicator
	a. Recruitment and Hiring Strategies
	b. Induction, Professional Development, and Career Growth Strategies
	C. Scheduling and Management Information Systems Indicator
	a. Time for Teaching and Learning
	b. Time for Collaboration
	D. Law, Ethics, and Policies Indicator
	a. Laws and Policies
	b. Ethical Behavior
	E. Fiscal Systems Indicator
	a. Fiscal Systems
III – Family and Community Engagement	A. Engagement Indicator
	a. Family Engagement
	b. Community and Stakeholder Engagement
	B. Sharing Responsibility Indicator
	a. Student Support
	b. Family Support
	C. Communication Indicator
	a. Culturally Proficient Communication
	D. Family Concerns Indicator
	a. Family Concerns

IV – Professional Culture	A. Commitment to High Standards Indicator
	a. Commitment to High Standards
	b. Mission and Core Values
	c. Meetings
	B. Cultural Proficiency Indicator
	a. Policies and Practices
	C. Communications Indicator
	a. Communication Skills
	D. Continuous Learning Indicator
	a. Continuous Learning of Staff
	b. Continuous Learning of Administrator
	E. Shared Vision Indicator
	a. Shared Vision Development
	F. Managing Conflict Indicator
	a. Response to Disagreement and Conflict Resolution
	b. Consensus Building

What was interesting about these two evaluation frameworks is that neither one fit the middle leadership completely. Family and community engagement was not a cited responsibility from any of the stakeholders. Thus, it was unclear how the standard was utilized to evaluate middle leaders using both evaluation frameworks. On the other hand, professional culture, which was present in both evaluation frameworks seemed to align well with middle leaders' interpersonal and communication skills (See Figure 4.3.).

From the teachers' evaluation frameworks, "curriculum, planning, and assessment" and "teaching all students" were appropriate for Sam and Mary's classrooms. In a way, this was also appropriate for Beth because she was responsible for developing the district's ELA curriculum. From the administrator's evaluation framework, instructional leadership clearly reflected the middle leaders' coaching and observation/evaluation responsibilities. Unfortunately, only Sam was being evaluated for this standard because of his administrator license. This means that even though Beth and Mary coach other teachers, and thus provide instructional leadership, they are not being

evaluated for that component. The management and operations standard also matched some aspects of middle leaders' managerial responsibilities, such as scheduling and management information systems. However, other sub-standards in the category, such as human resources and financial management, were not included in the middle leaders' roles and responsibilities. Thus, there were some aspects of the teacher and administrator evaluation frameworks that aligned with how middle leaders were conceptualized in the district. However, middle leadership-specific core tasks such as coaching for a specific subject matter and the management of professional learning communities (PLC) were not reflected in these two frameworks.

Teacher Evaluation Framework   *Administrator Evaluation Framework*

Curriculum, Planning & Assessment

Professional Culture

Teaching All Students

Instructional Leadership

Management & Operations
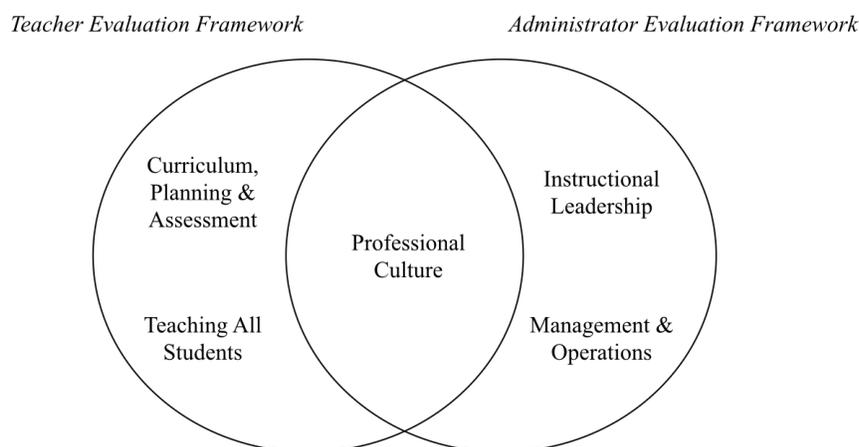
Figure 4.3 Middle leaders' competencies as reflected in teacher and administrator evaluation frameworks.

Nevertheless, the district was able to gain a sense of these core skills through informal evaluations (e.g. administrator observations). For example, the department chair for mathematics (John) observed Mary for how she ran her PLC group. At the time of the study, he also intended to observe how she coached and provided feedback to teachers.

Thus, there seemed to be awareness in the district regarding the misalignment of evaluation frameworks to middle leaders' roles and responsibilities.

There were also differences specific to each grade-level band. In the elementary schools, four principals co-evaluated the middle leader. While the way the principal described the process did not illuminate how the evaluation is divided among the four of them; it was clear that consensus needed to be achieved between the four principals. Moreover, because the position is novel for both the principals and Beth, the evaluation is jointly influenced—the principals are explicit about what aspects of the evaluation rubric they wanted to assess, while Beth invited the principals to observe aspects of her role that spoke to the specific criteria being assessed. Thus, compared to how teachers were being evaluated, Beth had some influence in the time and location in which she was going to be evaluated.

Within the middle schools and high school, the historical and existing relationship between Sam and Mary and their corresponding principals enabled a more relational approach. As the middle school principal had evaluated Mary, as an educator in previous years, he already knew of her capabilities as a teacher. Thus, while he did observe her teaching as a math interventionist, his observations focused on her coaching, albeit in a more informal and conversational manner. The department chair echoed this informal and conversational approach, despite the greater clarity and formality of his role. This illuminated principals' relational approach in evaluation, whether the process seemed iterative and influenced by the middle leader.

Based on these findings, middle leadership evaluations in the district seemed to rest in the professional discretion of the relevant principal(s) and department chairs, all of

whom approached evaluation in a collaborative and relational manner. Formally, administrators utilized DESE's teacher and/or administrator evaluation frameworks to evaluate middle leaders. However, these frameworks were not able to capture middle leaders' full roles and responsibilities. For these, administrators administered informal observations and provided immediate feedback to the middle leaders.

Research Question 5: How can the district support middle leaders?

In this section, middle leaders' concrete ideas for how they could be supported by the district will be discussed. These suggestions were categorized using the same competencies/conceptualizations of middle leadership in the district in order to provide cohesion and consistency in the study.

Table 4.11 summarizes the findings for this research question. In general, none of the three middle leaders (ELA curriculum coordinator, math coach and interventionist, department chair for social studies) needed support in teaching. This brings to mind a finding in middle leaders' selection and evaluation, where all three had significant teaching experience prior to selection. As such, it was not surprising that none of them felt the need to be supported in their teaching practices. Interestingly, only one middle leader felt the need to be supported in administering evaluations. After all, only one of the three middle leaders in the district is required to conduct them. However, other skills, such as [1] interpersonal and communication skills, [2] strategic planning, [3] management, and [4] coaching were significantly described as a need of support across all three middle leaders. Each middle leader, their dominant desire for support among these four categories, as well as their respective recommended solutions will be further discussed in the next few paragraphs.

Table 4.11

A Summary of Middle Leaders' Suggestions For District Support

Middle Leader	Teaching	Interpersonal and Communication Skills	Strategic Planning	Management	Coaching	Evaluation
			Needs of Support			
ELA Curriculum Coordinator (Beth)	N/A	• Political Knowledge (Who gets things done?) • Institutional Knowledge (How things get done?) • Cultural Knowledge (Why things get done this way?)	• Planning for systematic, institutional coaching.	N/A	• Implementing coaching cycles.	N/A

Math Coach & Interventionist (Mary)	N/A	N/A	• Scheduling.	N/A	• Formal professional development • Administering observations and feedback. • Learning and supporting standards-based math pedagogy.	N/A
Department Chair for Social Studies (Sam)	N/A	N/A	• District sharing of strategic plan.	• Logistics • Leadership in practice • Open door policy for issues and concerns • Regular discussion with principal about the role. • Authority to implement strategic plan.	N/A	Clear expectation for middle leader evaluations.

Beth

For Beth, her main need of support is in Interpersonal and Communication Skills. As mentioned earlier, being able to communicate effectively, and bi-directionally, was a crucial aspect of the role of middle leaders. As connectors between administrators and teachers, a significant amount of their responsibility is sharing, translating, and relaying information. While Beth has had sufficient experience in managing teacher teams, her lack of political, institutional, and cultural knowledge of the district hindered her from being able to effectively communicate with district stakeholders. This struggle is unique to Beth because Sam and Mary had significant time working in the district. Thus, they did not have the same interpersonal and communication challenges as Beth.

Without any formal and structural mentorship in the district, Beth had political difficulties—she did not have information on who needs to be communicated with in order to push her agenda forward. While it is true that she regularly met with administrators (principals), and the expectations between the two are easily communicated, this clarity did not easily translate to the teachers. While the reasoning behind this can be attributed to the lack of formal communication structures between middle leaders and their teacher teams, being aware of which teachers are influential mattered, especially because her role aimed to adopt and adapt new curriculum in the district. Without successful and effective communication with teachers, it was difficult to promote teacher buy-in, which is critical for the curriculum's successful adoption.

In addition to her lack of political knowledge, her lack of institutional knowledge (district processes, or how things are completed) as well as the district culture (why things are being completed in this manner) provided for difficulty in strategic planning.

District processes exist formally, through the required forms or approvals needed in order to create certain programs or activities, and informally, through a request to an assistant superintendent. Being new district personnel, Beth found that she was tasked to work within these processes without being provided with information regarding what processes may hinder or accelerate specific aspects of the curriculum selection and implementation. For these, she had to rely on Mary and the other middle school math coach and interventionist, who were her district mentors in navigating the district's policies, politics, and culture.

Mary also had a limited sense of district culture. For example, she had a little sense of the four principals' leadership styles in the beginning of her tenure, with no guidance on how to approach them or how to establish rapport. This also translated similarly to her relationship building with teachers. She had limited knowledge of how teachers would like to be approached for collaboration—information typically learned over time and experience. These impeded her understanding and knowledge of the history of certain district policies that may be relevant to her current work.

Beth stated that one reason for this might be due to the solitary nature of her role. Without any formal district mentorship structures, she spent time speculating what *might* work in terms of strategic planning rather than situating herself within the known constraints of district political, institutional, and cultural knowledge—a feat that could be potentially addressed by creating a common district structure for middle leaders. She shared, "I think even to start getting everybody that's in this sort of role together. So, having our own [professional learning community (PLC)] or whatever you want to call it. Or having our own time that we all match."

Beth's suggestion would certainly address her gaps in political, institutional, and cultural district knowledges because of the diverse set of district experiences that other middle leaders have obtained over time. However, she also shared its potential for improvement in strategic planning and coaching:

[The PLC] would be a great start and then really like getting deep into the coaching piece. I mean even in this role, like I said, I feel like I'm great in modeling. I can do a great lesson, and then I gradually turning it over to the teachers, so that they are building their own capacity and able to do without me. I guess they need some work on that and that whole, you know, the debriefing, and those you know, the feedback and all of that stuff. Giving really, I feel like that would be helpful to all of us in this role, definitely, like personally me.

Thus, her vision was not limited to sharing information in the district. The PLC groups can also be utilized for sharing some ideas of how to move from one-to-one coaching and modeling to a more systematic, institutional approach—a task that she personally felt she needed support with, and a skill that is imperative to strategic planning. After all, her role spanned four schools and as such, cannot realistically maintain a one-to-one coaching approach for every teacher that requests it. Because of this, creating systems of efficient and effective support, as part of strategic planning, is something that she could greatly benefit from.

One commonality between the Beth and Mary was the need for support in coaching. While only one of them is technically a coach, Beth felt like it was a part of her responsibility, and should be discussed in the PLC meetings:

How to have you know coaching conversations, have the pre-meetings, the post meetings, what a coaching cycle looks like, the different roles of coaching. So, I almost [want to] go back and like, refresh my memory on all of that. I just feel like that piece from me is missing a little bit. And you know, I don't like tough conversation. Like, I have these tough conversations, I guess too, is part of it. I'm not good at that, that just, you know, that's my personal thing. So, working on, I guess for only like figuring out especially in this role because it is so, so people-centered. You know, what to do, what do I need to work on as a person, I guess.

That's [going to] help me in this role if that makes sense, you know.

Thus, the coaching piece seems to be directly tied to strategic planning and the systems that needed to be created in order to support teachers efficiently and effectively. For example, she spoke about how frequently coaching cycles should be and what should be in the agenda, how to run data meetings with teachers, as well as providing constructive feedback while simultaneously providing teacher support. Similarly, Mary stated that she needed support on conducting professional development and structuring common time that directly corresponded to her coaching role.

As such, the PLC suggestion, if implemented could have tremendous impacts on the middle leaders' overall reflective and collaborative practices. In having a formal space to share their ideas and concerns through the PLC, they could gain opportunities to reflect on their roles and responsibilities and collaboratively generate district-based solutions. As Beth shared, this could even include philosophical conversations about the structure and function of middle leadership within the district.

Mary

Mary's main area of need was in coaching. As a veteran teacher, her coaching mostly occurred at a student level, as she was teaching in her classroom. While she had opportunities to explore school leadership, it was limited to curriculum development rather than managing a team of teachers. As such, much of her concern revolved around the matter of coaching teachers—what that should involve (scope), and how to be effective in the role. As was stated in the previous sections, the principal of the school was very clear about the expectations of her role. However, how this translated to a daily basis, in addition to the scope and length of coaching cycles and professional development remained ambiguous.

Like teaching, coaching involves content and pedagogical knowledge. While Mary was confident in her content and pedagogical knowledges to teach in an 8th grade classroom, she was not similarly confident in understanding how grades 6 to 8 math standards are organized vertically and horizontally, as well as how to provide pedagogical support for teachers to improve their practice. She stated,

> I definitely think that some professional development that's geared specifically towards the idea of coaching and some methods and strategies for doing the observations but then relaying the feedback to teachers with kind of had information from a variety of sources but having the opportunity to really focus our attention on what that should look like.

However, in conversations outside of the interview, she stated that part of the professional development that she was requesting was not only exposure to new mathematics methods but also how to manage the people who teach mathematics. Specifically, she was looking for support in the management of mathematics content,

which involves a thorough understanding of the 6 to 8 standards, their progression, and the new pedagogical methods that support teacher learning. Moreover, as a middle leader who seems to take a relational approach to coaching, she wanted to learn how to provide feedback in a supportive, rather than judgmental manner. In order to do this, she believed that formal professional development, where she could attend courses on teacher assessments and or evaluations, specifically for mathematics was necessary.

Support in coaching was a common need for Mary and Beth. However, both wanted support in different aspects of coaching. While Mary opted for professional development on math-based management and pedagogy, Beth would rather focus on systematizing coaching. This difference was evident in some of the potential solutions offered by the math coach and interventionist. While Beth preferred a PLC, middle leader-driven district-based systems approach, Mary was more partial to logistical solutions, working with two teachers intensively for this academic year, and then choosing two other teachers next year.

Logistical support was the dominant need for the math coach and interventionist's strategic planning skills. In her opinion, part of the issue of why coaching was not occurring more systematically was because of the lack of formal recurring schedules between the coach and the teachers. This impacted not only her ability to plan for a teacher's improvement for the long-term but also hindered the role's presence and necessity within the schools. She believed that if coaching was not within a teacher's schedule, then teachers would not prioritize or realize the importance of coaching. She explained,

We are hoping to kind of focus on two teachers per term and by being able to really focus on our attention on two, as supposed to five or six, be able to meet with those teachers and talk to them about what we're saying in our observation but also what their feeling they want to work on and using this time that we don't have right now, to meet with them to better support them in how they can make this look in their classroom and what they can do to support the students in their classroom and how they can change some of their instructional methods because right now so much of our feedback time is very informal its either on the flier through email or through our feedback documents but we don't have established time really to meet one on one with teachers and having that will allow us we feel to better coach the teachers and to better, in fact, change.

Based on this statement, one can presume that a formal scheduling (embedding the coaching in teachers' daily/weekly/monthly schedules for the role's actualization is crucial if senior leadership wants to improve, if not change, the district's pedagogical model. It seemed like buy-in and collaboration between the teachers and Mary depend on it.

In addition to logistical support, which required partnership with the principal, Mary also thought about enrolling in a university-based program for middle leaders of mathematics. A coaching-specific program, it has both management courses as well as math-specific courses on providing professional development to teachers. She believed this would not only address all her concerns regarding management, content and pedagogical knowledge, and coaching but also improve upon her ability to concretize and instantiate the role to its fullest extent.

Sam

The main area of support that Sam needed was with management. Because of the 0.6 administrator and 0.4 teacher load, the majority of his responsibilities comprised of management-related tasks. His understanding of his role and responsibilities revolved around the vertical alignment of the social studies curriculum as well as fostering what he understood to be high quality pedagogy. However, his major concern surrounding was the school's seemingly authoritarian style of leadership (Brown, Boyle, & Boyle, 2002). In this type of leadership, the school "demonstrated little formal collaboration between [other] heads of department and little or no co-operative working with other staff colleagues" (p. 36).

While Sam did not state this leadership style from senior leadership explicitly, it can be deduced based on his interview. For example, when asked about what supports he needed, he specifically stated, "Importantly, I need to know the expectations my supervisors have for me. I need support within the district to fulfill my expectations. I need the authority to make decisions and implement policy related to fulfilling my expectations." This statement alone implied that he was unclear about what his supervisors expect from him. Based on his other interview responses, he also seemed confused about whether or not being a department chair was based on the completion of subject specific tasks or if he is involved in district-wide subject leadership and strategic planning.

This finding, while significant, was not surprising. While both the principal and the department chair were aware that the state's Standards for Administrators was being utilized for the evaluation, other aspects of the role is beyond these standards. For

example, despite his initiative in collaborating with the assistant superintendent to review the district's curriculum with respect to the newly released state standards for social studies, this was not included in the department chair's evaluation.

Second, the statement also specified the lack of authority provided to the department chair in fulfilling his duties. This implied that despite being the department chair for social studies, the district did not seem to provide him with enough freedom and authority in the decision-making and implementation of policies related to his department. This was significant because it limited his role as a taskmaster, completing instructions from senior leadership rather than utilizing his knowledges and experiences to inform district policies with respect to social studies teachers and curricula. As such, a sense of limitation and frustration from the district chair was felt during the interview.

Finally, the statement also clarified some details regarding the department chair's relationship with the principal. For example, when asked to explain how senior leadership could support him, he stated that first and foremost, he would like "an open door policy to offer support related to specific concerns or issues." This suggested that policies in the school seem to be of a "top-bottom" approach, where issues and concerns from senior leadership is shared to middle leadership, and not necessarily from middle leadership to senior leadership. As such, despite gathering information and feedback from his team of teachers, there was little opportunity to discuss these back to senior leadership, which once again, echoes his concerns about performing tasks rather than collaborating on problems and solutions.

However, this does not necessarily indicate that senior leadership was as fault. Instead, Sam also expressed the need for him to grow as a leader, and seeks

"encouragement [from senior leadership] related to how to improve my leadership and practice." As such, he may need some coaching with respect to how to become a better leader, or how to exert some of his leadership in his practice. While Sam did not provide detailed solutions, as did Beth and Mary, he might benefit from a routine review of his role and responsibilities along with senior leadership. For example, a discussion around how leadership is distributed between the principal or assistant superintendent and the department chair, that allows the department chair to be a collaborator on the overall district strategic plan. In doing so, he might have more efficacy and confidence in leading and managing. In addition, he might also benefit from Beth's suggestion of having a formal PLC specifically for middle leaders, where they have opportunities to share strategies and practices.

As the table indicated, none of the middle leaders felt the need for support in teaching. This echoed a finding about their selection and evaluation. Before middle leaders were selected, they had a significant amount of time teaching within or outside the district. As a result, all middle leaders were confident in their skills in teaching, with administrator often referring to them as "master" teachers with a significant amount of content and pedagogical content knowledge.

To summarize, as the type of middle leadership roles, titles, and responsibilities were different, there was no consistent need that emerged. For example, while all three needed some support in strategic planning, the aspect of strategic planning was unique to the middle leader. However, one similarity between the three middle leaders is that they were all isolated from each other and has a little sense of what the other is responsible for. This implies that currently, the district does not have any systems in place for middle

leaders. As such, Beth's suggestion of creating a middle leader-specific PLC could respond to much of their concerns. In addition, supporting middle leaders in attending certificate programs specific to their subject matters could prove to be beneficial and support their efficacy in the role.

CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

This chapter offers a general summary of the study, its conclusions, and implications. The first section provides a brief review of the purposes, goal, and methods of the study. The second section offers a discussion of the findings for each research question. The third section describes the conclusion of the study. The fourth section illustrates the limitations of the study. Finally, the fifth section offers recommendations for further research on the topic of middle leadership.

Purposes, Goals, & Methods

The purpose of the study was to explore how middle leadership was conceptualized in a single K-12 district through the collective experiences of administrators, middle leaders, and their colleagues. Specifically, the research questions were:

1. What were the conditions that gave rise to the creation of academic middle leadership positions?

2. How were middle leaders selected in the district?

3. How is middle leadership conceptualized within the district?

4. How were middle leaders evaluated in the district?

5. How would middle leaders like to be supported?

To accomplish this, an exploratory, embedded single case study (Yin, 2018) was utilized where the district was the "case" and one elementary, middle, and high school were "sub-units" within the district. Data sources included interviews with 14 participants (4 administrators, 3 middle leaders, and 6 colleagues), memos, district documents (artifacts), and observations from a shadow study with each middle leader.

Discussion of Findings

This section will briefly discuss the major findings for each research question and relate these findings to the literature review. The first question focused on the context or situation led to the creation of the middle leadership position. For this district, the creation of the ELA curriculum coordinator and math coach and interventionist was due to internal and external factors. One external factor, standardized testing, illuminated the district's performance compared to the state. In order to maintain the districts' competitiveness within the State, the district needed to create roles that focus specifically on improving student scores, especially in math and ELA. Another external factor was changes in the state standards, which impacted curriculum and instruction and validated the history department chairs' position.

This notion echoed Brown and Rutherford's (1999) finding that school accountability, as reflected in standardized tests directly impacted school leadership, and as a result, middle leaders. In addition, Adey (2000) wrote that school accountability also influences actions for improving teaching and learning, which could lead to the creation of academic middle leadership positions. However, the author also stated that changes in curriculum, such as the changes in state standards, could also influence the creation or maintenance of the middle leadership role. Thus, similar to the results of this study, external factors such as standardized tests and changes in state standards directly influence senior leadership in creating middle leadership positions.

Internally, the district was motivated by a desire to improve the consistency and cohesion of curriculum and instruction. Because planning for and implementing curriculum consistently requires significant time and focus, creating middle leadership

positions was a significant, viable solution for senior leadership. In creating and maintaining these positions, senior leadership was able to continue improving student scores in standardized tests, adhere to the most recent state standards, and provide a coherent and consistent curriculum across schools and grade levels. McGarvey & Marriott (1997) argued that senior leadership conceptualized middle leadership roles as producing subject-related advice and curriculum to ensure consistency in the district.

The second question focused on how middle leaders were selected by the district. In general, the district assumed that middle leadership applicants were experts in content and pedagogy within their subject matters. Additional experience in school leadership or other middle leadership roles and tasks within and outside the district was preferred. One interesting aspect of the selection process is that certification, licenses, or degrees were not discriminating factors to their selection. Instead, experience was the dominant criteria for selection for middle leadership.

Consistent to this finding, Brown and Rutherford (1999) wrote that most middle leaders do not have any formal training. Instead, senior administrators utilize teaching experience as a means of developing philosophies and competencies needed to succeed as a middle leader. However, these authors as well as Adey (1998) noted that teaching experience is not a guarantee for success as middle leaders. Per se, professional development is needed to support the development of middle leadership competencies. The third research question focused on how middle leaders were conceptualized in the district. The literature identified characteristics were middle leaders as strategic planners, managers, and mentors. Two of these were supported by the results of the study and four

more characteristics were added. These were middle leaders as [1] teachers, [2] having good interpersonal and communication skills, [3] coaches, and [4] assessors/evaluators.

Middle leaders as strategic planners generally supported existing literature on the topic. Glover, Miller, Gambling, Gough, and Johnson's (1999) and Harris, Jamieson, and Russ's (1995) findings that senior administrators typically believed that middle leaders should be involved in the district's overall decision-making and strategic planning. However, Adey (2000) also noted that in some cases, middle leaders do not feel like they have the authority or competencies to do so (Adey, 2000). This misalignment was strongly reflected in Beth and Sam's positions. While senior leadership believed that they were capable of administering district-wide initiatives for their subject matters, both claimed that they felt limited by their authority. This tension was also evident in studies of leadership distribution (Lárusdódittir & O'Connor, 2017) and middle leadership, which suggested that distribution of leadership were sometimes more oriented towards tasks rather than subject matter leadership (Adey, 2000).

Middle leaders as "managers" was well documented in the literature. Managing involved the handling or controlling of the work of other people by providing directions that contributed to the organization's goals (Antonioni, 2000; West, 1995). Middle leaders as managers in the district followed a similar description. They were involved in logistics, managing resources, preparing agendas, and obtained an awareness of teachers' progress in the curriculum (McGarvey & Marriott, 1997). However, for the district, management also extended to managing people. Gleeson and Shain, (1999) similarly wrote about this characteristic of middle leadership as being "caught" between teachers and administrators and as such often needed some translating between the two.

In the literature, middle leader as teachers were discussed more as a pre-service (Adey, 1998) rather than an in-service characteristic. Consequently, middle leaders with teaching loads may be unique to Hillside Public Schools. The theme of loyalty, however, was consistent between this study and the literature. While middle leaders were situated between teachers and administrators, there seemed to be an expectation of loyalty to the teachers rather than administrators (Bennett, Woods, Wise, & Newton, 2007). This implied that the relational, professional distance between teachers and middle leaders are much closer compared to administrators. While the rationale behind this was somewhat revealed in the study, no other studies were found that focused on this topic.

While this study utilized interpersonal and communication skills to describe middle leaders' ability to communicate and work effectively to stakeholders, other researchers utilized terms such as "collegiality" (Bennett, Woods, Wise & Newton, 2007, p. #), "consent"-making (Gleeson & Shain, 1999), and "passion" or "enthusiasm" (de Nobile, 2017, p. #) to describe the same skillset. While interpersonal and communication skills were identified as a direct link between middle leaders and teachers in this study for coaching, this has yet to be explored in the literature.

The district's conceptualization of middle leaders as knowledgeable in subject matter content and pedagogy was consistent with the literature (Gurr & Drysdale, 2012; de Nobile, 2017). As such, middle leaders often serve as coaches in the district. In the literature review chapter, middle leaders were described as mentors rather than coaches. This may have been due to the selection of middle leaders in the study, which was more academically oriented. Coaches tend to be more subject-specific (NCTM, 2019; Elish-Piper & L'Allier, 2011; Brown & Rutherford, 1998) compared to mentors. However, one

aspect of mentorship seemed to be consistent with the findings. Guskey and Huberman's (1995) notion that teachers have different needs throughout their careers, and as such, require different kinds of supports. Similarly, results from the study indicated that novice teachers need more mentorship while veteran teachers prefer a collegial approach or informal coaching.

Finally, evaluation from middle leaders in the district occurred formally and informally. Informal evaluations in the district were typically a part of coaching, which reflected Antonioni's (2000) description of coaching. Formal evaluations, which contribute to overall teacher performance, had mixed opinions between schools in the district. This reflected an ongoing issue of whether or not middle leaders should have formal evaluative roles (Hammersely-Fletcher & Kirkham, 2007; Bennett, Woods, Wise, & Newton, 2007).

The fourth question was about how middle leaders were evaluated in the district. While the selection of middle leaders had very clear assumptions, the incongruence between the roles and responsibilities of middle leaders and the evaluation tools being used (State Evaluation for Teachers or Administrators) illuminated middle leaders' desire for clarity in evaluation. Because the role is not fully a teacher or administrator (Brown & Rutherford, 1999), the evaluation rubrics did not completely reflect their actual roles and responsibilities. Nevertheless, middle leaders seem to have had more control over the terms of their evaluation than classroom teachers. For example, middle leaders in the district were able to specify the time, location, and activity of their observations and evaluations, which senior leadership follows. This difference in how middle leaders are evaluated compared to teachers were not found in the literature.

Finally, the fifth question focused on supports needed to support middle leadership in the district. There were internal and external suggestions from middle leaders. Internally, the middle leaders would probably benefit greatly from having had a district mentorship program where newly hired middle leaders can gain cultural, political, and institutional knowledge from more experienced middle leaders. One way the district can provide this support is through the creation of a professional learning community for middle leaders within the district. Within this middle leader PLC, middle leaders would have had an opportunity to not only learn district information but also share best practices and discuss This suggestion was also found in Sammons, Thomas, and Mortimore's (1997) study on effective schools and departments. Their study implied that allowing middle leaders to form professional learning communities significantly contributes to improvements in teaching and learning. Thus, an adoption of this practice may benefit the district.

External support included encouraging middle leaders to enroll or participate in professional development or coursework in middle leadership. This could have included general leadership or management courses as well as subject-specific content and pedagogical courses that cater to their needs. For example, Mary, at the time of her interview, had recently enrolled in a university program that catered specifically for middle leaders in mathematics. Adey (2000) wrote that it provides middle leaders an opportunity to develop further as a leader, given that most middle leaders rely on their teaching experience for responsibilities beyond teaching.

Conclusions & Implications

This section will provide conclusions from the study along with corresponding implications for policy makers, administrators, teacher education programs, and middle leaders.

Policy Makers

For policy makers, this study evidenced that standardized state assessments and professional evaluation frameworks may need to be (re-)constructed to better support middle leaders ability to support teachers with respect to student learning. To begin, this study described key external factors, such as standardized tests, which heavily influenced the districts' decisions with respect to resource allocation. Readily available public information, such as district performance in tested subject matters (ELA, math, science) brings relatively more attention and resources to these disciplines disposal. In this district's context, it led to the creation of middle leadership positions in math and ELA. However, the needs of other subject matters, such as social studies or foreign language may not be equally met. Given the United States' push for global competiveness, it is important to create programs and funding sources that guide districts in hiring and developing middle leaders across all disciplines.

The results on the selection of middle leaders revealed that formal pathways toward middle leadership degrees or certifications were not necessary for success in the role. Instead, experience in similar middle leadership tasks seems predictive of job efficacy. However, what could be helpful is the creation of a different evaluation framework for middle leaders. Currently, only teacher and administrator

evaluation frameworks exist in the state. This provides limited guidelines for districts in supporting and evaluating middle leaders across the state. Creating this evaluation framework especially for middle leaders will address much of the middle leaders' concerns regarding senior leaderships' expectations.

Administrators

For administrators, this study's evidenced the need for senior leadership to create a strong vision for middle leadership roles, to communicate that vision to staff, and to create in-district supports to help middle leaders grow into these roles. Creating a strong vision for the middle leadership role provides clarity not only to the middle leader, but also provides an opportunity for administrators to recognize necessary structures (logistical or political) that promote or impede the success of the role (Nuemerski, 2012). For example, middle leaders need to know if coaching is a part of their responsibility, and also how, in the school's existing structure, this responsibility can be realized in their day-to-day activities. In doing so, middle leaders can clearly plan for and meet senior leadership expectations.

Discussing the middle leader's role and responsibilities with teachers and staff prior to introducing the middle leader was effective in clarifying role and responsibilities. As such, teachers were readily able to explain her role and responsibilities and utilize her as a resource for supporting student learning. However, middle leaders struggled with actualizing the coaching as aspect of the role, especially because no coaching cycles or routine observations existed within the teachers' schedules proved to be challenging. Thus, it is important for administrator to plan for and communicate the role's week-to-

week or day-to-day activities in order to prevent uncertainties or misunderstandings among school stakeholders.

In addition, the fourth research question highlighted supports that middle leaders would like from the district. The creation of within-district structures such as a mentorship program especially for new hires will support middle leaders in gaining institutional, cultural, and political knowledge necessary to gain buy-in and push initiatives forward. Moreover, the creation of a within-district professional learning community specifically for middle leaders allow for community building and reflective practice. Finally, administrators can support middle leaders' participation in professional development or certification programs that support subject-specific curriculum and pedagogy. This will help middle leaders conceptually understand best practices and further promote subject specific improvements in the district's curriculum and instruction.

Teacher and Administrator Programs

Teacher education programs could do more to support teaching and learning in schools by offering coursework to aspiring and practicing middle leaders focused on: facilitating content-based pedagogical content knowledge amongst colleagues, a variety of middle leadership specific skills, and curriculum development and management. As mentioned earlier, although formal degree pathways towards middle leadership did not seem necessary to be a successful middle leader, middle leaders of all levels were eager to take coursework in such programs if available locally. For example, programs could be created to support subject-specific content and pedagogical content knowledge, improve interpersonal and communication skills, as well as education leadership-specific skills

such as strategic planning, management, coaching, and evaluation. This would not only support the teaching profession but also improve district initiatives in curriculum and instruction.

Perhaps one "hidden" skill that middle leaders need in addition to the aforementioned is skills in curriculum development and management. Across all participants, developing and managing the curriculum was considered an explicit responsibility of the middle leaders. As such, there was an apparent benefit to improving this skill. However, given their hierarchical and bi-directional relationship with teachers, middle leaders also seemed to have the responsibility of developing a curriculum for the teachers within their teams. Specifically, middle leaders needed to plan for supporting and improving teachers' content and pedagogical knowledge. As such, it may be strategic for the teacher education program to include aspects of curriculum development and management for middle leaders.

Administrator programs can also support middle leadership by offering courses on how to support curriculum initiatives and mentoring not only teachers but also middle leaders. This action will not only validate the role and significance of middle leadership in practice but also in the wider educational literature.

Middle Leaders

In general, the findings of the study should be helpful in preparing and advancing current and aspiring middle leaders. For aspiring middle leaders the findings on the selection and evaluation of middle leaders may help interested teachers begin to build an efficacious portfolio of middle-leadership-like experiences that will prepare them to apply for and excel in their future roles. For current middle leaders, the selection and

evaluation of middle leadership candidates, as well as their conceptualization within the district helps identify specific skill sets that are needed for the role. In being aware of these, middle leaders can perform an honest self-assessment and work towards meeting expectations by seeking within-district support or participating in professional development or certification programs.

Limitations of the Study

This section will discuss the limitations of the study with respect to district structure, senior leadership styles, and time and access to the district. While the results of the study contributed to the broader research on middle leadership, there are several limitations, especially regarding its generalizability. First, this study was situated in a single district. As such, other districts, with different structures and cultures may have a different conceptualization of middle leadership. For example, this district has a structure of elementary (K-5), middle (6-8), and high (9-12) schools, with department chairs responsible for grades 6 to 12. Other districts may have a different structure where there would be two department chairs—one for grades K to 8 and another for grades 9 to 12 for a single subject matter. This could potentially create a different conceptualization of middle leadership.

This district seemed to employ a relational approach to leadership, where senior leaders aim to establish strong relationships with their constituents. Some studies cite senior leadership styles as an influential factor in middle leadership (Brown, Brown, & Boyle, 2002). This means that other districts with different leadership styles may lead to a different selection and evaluation processes and result in varying conceptualization of middle leadership. Because of this, the generalization of these findings may be limited.

Another limitation of the study is with respect to the amount of time and access in the district. Data collection for this study occurred in three months towards the end of the school year. Given that this study had to be completed by a single researcher, only three out of the seven schools were studied even though all schools in the district volunteered to participate. In addition, not all middle leaders who volunteered in the district were able to participate or be represented. There are limitations for how much the three middle leaders who participated sufficiently represent the entire district. Finally, the time frame in which the data was collected meant that other significant activities of the middle leader, which may have occurred in the beginning or middle of the year, might have been missed.

Recommendations for Future Research

This section discusses recommendations for future research on middle leadership based on this study. The first recommendation is a larger scale study analyzing the specific day-to-day or week-to-week responsibilities of middle leaders. This will aid administrators in creating a clearer vision and planning for middle leadership positions. The second recommendation is a pilot of different potential middle leadership evaluation frameworks. This may help the state or a district collaborative in administering more accurate evaluations of middle leaders. Finally, it would be helpful if future studies aimed to determine middle leaders' impacts on teacher efficacy, teacher retention, or teacher beliefs as this may validate the necessity of the role in districts.

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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR PRINCIPAL

1. Discuss consent and sign forms. Remind interviewee that there is no correct answer and that they can stop the interview at any time.
2. Talk to me about (middle leader's name) role.
   - How did it start?
   - Why did the district create the role?
3. Can you describe the role for me?
   - Is this a permanent position in your district? Why? Why not?
4. Why did you appoint (insert middle leader's name) for the position?
   - How did he or she fit the position?
   - Were there any specific credentials you were looking for?
5. What specific tasks do you expect from the middle leader?
   - What meetings are they expected to attend?
   - Are they expected to run meetings with teachers? How often?
6. How frequently do you meet with the middle leader?
   - What do you discuss?
7. Do you often "distribute" leadership to this middle leader? In what ways?
8. How do you evaluate the middle leader?
9. How do determine his or her success?
10. Do you think the middle leader contributes significantly to the school's success? How?
11. What other experiences do you have with the middle leader?

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR MIDDLE LEADER

1. Discuss consent and sign forms. Remind interviewee that there is no correct answer and that they can stop the interview at any time.
2. Tell me about your role in the district.
   - Do you have an official title?
   - Based on your understanding, is this position permanent in the district?
   - What does a typical day look like? How do you experience middle leadership in the district?
   - What are your roles and responsibilities?
     - What meetings are you expected to attend? To run?
3. In your opinion, who is a "middle leader"?
   a. What are their attributes? Knowledge bases?
   b. In what ways do you think you fit this description?
   c. In what ways did your past experiences prepare you for this role?
      i. Did teacher education prepare you sufficiently? In what ways?
4. Do you think your role is a "leadership" role? In what ways?
   a. In what ways do you lead teachers?
   b. In what ways do you lead administrators?
   c. What skills did you need to do your job well?
   d. Did you receive training in how to be a good "leader"?
   e. Do you think you mentor teachers? In what ways?
5. Do you have an in-district mentor?
   a. What aspects of your position do you need support on (if any)?
   b. Do you think you receive adequate support?
6. What can the district do to support you?

APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR COLLEAGUES

1. Discuss consent and sign forms. Remind interviewees that there is no correct answer and that they can stop the interview at any time.
2. Tell me about the middle leader. What are your experiences with him or her?
   - What is his/her role and responsibilities?
   - What is a middle leader? Have you had previous experiences with a middle leader before?
   - In what ways do you think (insert middle leader name here) is the same/different?
3. Describe some of your interactions with the middle leader?
   - Do you meet individually or as a group?
     o What do you talk about?
     o What does a typical agenda look like?
   - How often do you meet?
   - What supports does the middle leader provide in a day-to-day basis? How about a week-to-week?
   - Does the middle leader provide mentorship? In what ways?
4. How do you feel about being observed/evaluated by the middle leader?
5. What other experiences do you have with the middle leader?

APPENDIX D: PROTOCOL FOR FIELD NOTES

Date: _____ Time: _____

Location (A/B/C/D) —use letters/random names to code study location

Observation	Who/Participant	Time

Reflection/Thoughts:

APPENDIX E: PROTOCOL FOR MEMOS

Date: _____ Time: _____

Location (A/B/C/D) —use letters/random names to code study location

Event	Who/Participant	Thoughts

Further thoughts/Reflection