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A Study of How Trust, by Teachers, in Middle  
Leaders Affects the Perceived Practice of Middle  
Leadership in an English Primary School.

EP Option

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**Abstract****(Words: 98)**

This dissertation proposes a piece of case study research into the practices of middle leaders and how it affects trust in an English primary school. Underpinned by the framework of practice architectures, the research aims to uncover the *doings*, *sayings* and *relatings* of middle leaders and how these enable/constrain trust. Taking an interpretivist approach, the literature review and methodology focusses on the socially constructed nature of reality. Interviews and observations are proposed as tools to understand this. The proposed research aims to be relevant to practitioners and provide recommendations for further study, after an inductive, thematic data analysis.

**Key Terms:** Middle-leadership, Trust, Practice Architectures

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# Chapter 1: Introduction

(Words: 968)

This dissertation presents a literature review that provides insight into the current debates on middle leadership and trust. A proposal for further research is then outlined, within a clear conceptual framework. Finally, a postscript is included which acts as a critical reflection of the dissertation writing process and the personal development of the researcher.

## Topical Background

In an ever-changing education sector, middle leadership structures are becoming more prevalent in UK schools. Indeed, they are viewed as an effective way to distribute leadership, as schools find ways to manage external pressures such as Ofsted inspections, mandated curriculum changes and Covid-19 pandemics. In recent years, much has been written about middle leadership in schools. There is a considerable amount of research about the contested nature of the position (Harris *et al*, 2019). However, most of the literature is deeply theoretical and lacks a relevance to practice, and a usefulness to practitioners. The practice focussed research that does exist tends to focus on secondary schools and higher education. There is a lack of primary school centred research, in the context of middle leadership.

Furthermore, there is agreement in the literature that increased levels of trust, between leaders and followers, lead to more effective outcomes (Coleman, 2012). There is also a substantial body of work that refers to the significance of positive relationships in leadership. Moreover, this has led to the emergence of the concept of *relational trust* (Edwards-Groves and Grootenboer, 2021). However, there is a general gap in the literature that focusses on the practices of trust and relationship building, in relation to leadership.

This research seeks to build on the findings from the existing literature, whilst contributing, in a small way, to the perceived gaps in understanding. However as argued in Chapter 5, this research is small in scale, qualitative and highly contextualised. Therefore, any findings will not be generalisable and also broad, bold conclusions cannot be made. Yet, the proposed

research aims to be relatable and valid to the field of educational leadership research, as a small, contextualised case study.

### Rationale

The researcher's personal experiences of working with middle leaders led to an interest in the specific characteristics that might make a successful middle leader. In Chapter 2, the role of middle leadership is interrogated, through a literature review. Indeed, the challenging nature of the role is made clear, as middle leaders must react to pressures from above and below. Furthermore, during the study of the Stage 2 module, the researcher was made aware of an article on trust by Bottery (2003). The arguments made by this article resonated with personal experiences and understandings of middle leadership. From this interest, a research idea began to form relating to the extent to which trust affects the processes of middle leadership. The literature on trust is reviewed in Chapter 2. The chapter argues that trust is a highly relational and social concept.

### The Theories and Framework

In Chapter 3 of the dissertation, the conceptual framework, and ontological and epistemological perspectives are reviewed. The research is theoretically underpinned by social exchange theory. Moreover, the considerations that led to the development of this approach are highlighted. Indeed, there is an evaluation of contributions by Bourdieu and how his key theories were built upon, to develop the theoretical foundation of the proposal. Chapter 3 of the dissertation also evaluates the conceptual and methodological framework of the proposed research. Practice architectures is an emerging approach in social science, that seeks to understand the factors that enable and constrain practices in a particular context (Kemmis, 2022). It will be argued that the theory of practice architectures is the most relevant approach to answer the questions posed by this research. As will be explained in Chapter 5, it also offers a framework for data analysis.

The literature review process was carried out inductively. As new themes emerged, new readings were found. This allowed the review to develop organically, and interpretations to be synthesised as they were constructed. The methodology of the proposed research argues for a similar approach, within an interpretivist paradigm. Indeed, this dissertation is written from the perspective that realities are constructed within particular social spaces. The

research methods outlined in Chapter 5 seek to understand the constructed realities of the participants, in relation to middle leadership and trust.

### The Research Context

The proposed research will take place in a large, British, urban primary school. It is part of a multi-academy trust and has a clearly defined middle leadership structure. In the initial conceptualisations of this dissertation, it was proposed to be a piece of insider research and take place in the researcher's workplace. However, after reflection on the considerable challenges faced when undertaking insider research in this context on the Stage 2 module, it was decided that a different setting would be more appropriate. Therefore, a similar school within the same multi-academy trust has been selected, to mitigate these problems.

### Research Aims

The proposed research will have the following title:

*A study of how trust, by teachers, in middle leaders affects the perceived practice of middle leadership in an English primary school.*

Importantly, whilst the title contains the word 'affects', the proposed research is not seeking to prove a 'cause and effect' relationship between trust and middle leadership. Indeed, in small-scale qualitative research, this is not easily possible. The title should be interpreted as a way in which the research can find links, associations and patterns between trust and middle leadership.

The proposed research aims to analyse the specific perceived practices of middle leaders. Indeed, through the conceptual framework of practice architectures, the research proposal seeks to explore the *doings*, *sayings*, and *relatings* of middle leaders, and the factors that enable and constrain them. The building of trust and relationships will be considered as a key practice that may affect this.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review – The Topic

(Words: 4001)

### Introduction

This chapter will present, review, and critique the topic literature relevant to this proposed research. An approach summarised by Bloomberg and Volpe (2008) was taken to ensure each step of the process was carefully considered. Firstly, appropriate, peer-reviewed literature was identified and retrieved. This involved online library searches, using key words from the title and aims of the proposed research. Many further pieces of literature were then found by following in-text citations. Secondly, key topic themes were analysed from the literature, and comparisons and patterns identified. Importantly, these steps were processes, not single events. This meant that the process was guided by the themes and ideas, as they emerged from the literature. New literature was found to provide contrast or relevance to the developing theories. This inductive approach supported the development of the research questions and will be used throughout this proposed research, allowing initial assumptions to be examined (Merriam, 1998 cited in Cohen *et al*, 2018). Using a model outlined by Lillejord and Børte (2020), the quality of each piece of research was assessed by considering its validity, reliability and generalisability -in relation to this proposed study. However, this was approached with an understanding that much of the qualitative research being reviewed was not intended to have generalisability, but instead provide insights into particular contexts.

The process of conceptualising the topic for this research proposal began with an interest in how middle leaders are able to be successful and build successful trusting relationships. From this interest, the overarching topics of *Middle Leadership* and *Trust* were decided upon as the most relevant, during the literature review. Subsequently, three core themes emerged from the literature review process. Firstly, it was found that middle leaders face challenges in their role due to the upward, downward, and sideward-facing nature of their position. Secondly, the idea that trust is linked to, and based upon, human behaviours was a common thread. Thirdly, the literature suggests that trust is a key factor in establishing relationships between leaders and followers. These themes are reviewed and interrogated below.

## **Middle Leadership**

### **Why Middle Leaders?**

Middle leaders occupy an interesting and contested position in educational leadership. This research proposal is pertinent, as it aims to address some of the perceived gaps in the body of literature. Indeed, Harris *et al* (2019) found that most of the research on the topic focusses on secondary middle leaders, not primary. It can also be argued that middle leadership positions are now more diverse than ever (Harris *et al*, 2019), as schools expand their leadership capacities in light of changing policy agendas. Harris *et al* (2019) also conclude that the literature on middle leadership tends to be highly contextualised. Although, this review has found that much of the literature focuses on the generic issues faced by middle leaders, but not on individual contextual solutions.

### **Defining Middle Leadership**

Middle leadership is a key component of this research. However, before it can be reviewed, an understanding of its definition must be developed. Although, as argued by Bubb and Earley (2007, p.148), defining such a complex and diverse concept is “problematic”. Heng and Marsh (2009, p.526) define middle leadership in schools as “formal leadership roles that teachers undertake that have both management and pedagogical responsibilities, and encompass roles such as head of department subject head and (academic) level head”. For the purposes of this research, the specific role of Key Stage Lead is also considered.

There is an important, yet contested, distinction in the literature between the concepts of *middle leaders* and *teacher leaders*. The latter notion concerns itself with the broad talents and capabilities of individual teachers to lead (Heng and Marsh, 2009). Fairman and Mackenzie (2015) argue that the concept of *teacher leaders* emerged from individuals learning about their own practice and sharing this learning with colleagues. This, it is argued, leads to a form of collective and interactive leadership, focussed on improving teaching and learning outcomes. However, Fairman and Mackenzie (2015) go on to critique the term *teacher leaders*, maintaining that it does not accurately reflect the level of interactivity and professional learning that takes place. They call for a blurring of the lines between teacher and leader roles in schools.

However, this is a somewhat idealistic view of middle leadership, as it fails to account for the fact that, in an organisation, there is a defined leadership and management role structure. Indeed, in all primary schools, ultimately someone is accountable and responsible for decision making, line management and improving outcomes. Therefore, when middle leadership is discussed here, it will be in relation to “the formal leadership positions related to middle management and subject leadership” (Heng and Marsh, 2009, p.526). Moreover, Ng and Chan define middle leaders as a “diverse group who have been granted a certain type of delegated subject or pastoral responsibilities for which they are accountable” (2014, p.870). Middle leadership will be reviewed through this narrower lens – of those in formal leadership positions not a teacher leader approach - because it is necessary within the scope and scale of this work, to focus on a particular area to best answer the research questions. Mozumder argues that effective leadership “depends on the coordinated efforts of leaders within and across multiple hierarchical levels” (2018, p.168). Therefore, following this approach should provide insights into how middle leaders contribute within a hierarchy. However, whilst there will be an emphasis on formal middle leadership roles, it will become clear that this is also a highly contestable and critical approach. Indeed, this tension is evident in the attempts to define the term middle leaders in the literature (Gurr and Drysdale, 2013; De Nobile, 2018). For example, roles seem to differ by school and type of school. It is argued that many subject leads in British primary schools have no formal qualification in their subject (Hammersley-Fletcher and Kirkham, 2007, cited in Ng and Chan, 2014). Middle leadership is, therefore, different in primary schools and secondary schools. Importantly, primary middle leaders consider their “leadership role [to be] secondary to their substantial classroom teaching responsibilities” (Bassett and Shaw, 2017, p.749). It will become clear that managing the balance between teaching and leading is a challenging part of the role for a middle leader.

### Challenges in Role

Middle leaders are of particular interest in this research, due to the ambiguity of the role itself. They are faced with the challenges of being positioned ‘in the middle’, working as part of the main body of staff, but also as a leader. Much of the literature on middle leadership focuses on aspects of these challenges. For example, Lipscombe *et al* (2019) argue that

middle leaders must “negotiate different demands, tasks and relationships”, as they balance the “dual roles of leader and teacher” (p.1064). Moreover, others summarise middle leadership as a position of tension where expectations must be simultaneously managed from above and below (Branson *et al*, 2015, p.128). In addition, Harris *et al* describe the “tension between the expectations placed on middle leaders from above, versus expectations upon them from within their team” (2019, p.256). Therefore, the tensions of the role outlined here mean that the effectiveness of middle leaders overall can be questioned. Indeed, the extent to which middle leaders can successfully lead, whilst negotiating these dual roles, is of interest in this research.

The role of middle leadership is critiqued in the literature, as many authors view the role as being simply a messenger between the wider staff and the leadership team. Consequently, the effectiveness of a middle leadership structure, utilised to drive school improvement goals can be questioned. Critics argue that middle leaders are a conduit for tensions between leaders and the wider staff body (Brown *et al*, 2000 cited in Lárusdóttir and O’Connor, 2017), and that they are burdened with these tensions, as they attempt to influence and appease both sides. Furthermore, Wise argues that teachers and leaders have differing views on the role of middle leaders (2000, cited in Lárusdóttir and O’Connor, 2017). This causes role conflict, meaning middle leaders are unable to fulfil the differing and incompatible expectations placed upon them. Hammersley-Fletcher and Kirkham (2007) further develop the notion of middle leaders acting as messengers, by contending that they rarely are able to implement their own agendas. Moreover, in their comprehensive review of the literature, Harris *et al* (2019) highlight the common theme of middle leaders having issues with autonomy. Therefore, the extent to which middle leaders have agency can be questioned.

However, Bubb and Earley (2007) argue of a more optimistic reality, where middle leaders are the “kingpins” (p.148) and play “a pivotal role in passing ideas and information ‘up the line’ to organizational leaders” (p.149). Coleman (2012) views trust as vital to this process, as it informs how the information is interpreted. Therefore, it could be argued that high levels of trust between middle leaders and other staff “helps to reduce cynicism and promote receptiveness” (Coleman, 2012, p.85). Indeed, during the literature review process the theme of the importance of trust for middle leadership was noted in Coleman’s (2012)

article. This initial idea is further developed in the section on *Trust* below. Importantly, despite the critique of middle leadership in the literature, nearly all UK schools now have a middle leadership structure. Also, the roles of middle leaders themselves are ever becoming more diverse. There are now a vast range of job titles, as schools build teams to best compete with internal and external pressures. Therefore, it can be argued that their current popularity means that there must be significant benefits in having middle leader roles.

### Teacher Perceptions

Research has found that “although middle leaders saw themselves as teachers first and foremost, their teacher colleagues did not”. (Struyve *et al*, 2014 cited in Bassett and Shaw, 2017, p.750). This argument is supported by Lillejord and Børte (2020), who maintain that new middle leaders feel like teachers rather than leaders. However, their teacher colleagues no longer consider them as teachers. This body of literature is important to the aims of the research proposal, as it too seeks to gain teachers’ perceptions of middle leaders. However, this dissertation aims to go further by linking these perceptions to practice. As teachers seemed to no longer consider middle leaders as teachers, it could be argued that the wider body of staff are ‘othering’ their middle leaders. They are seeing them as different to themselves. This argument supports Branson *et al*’s claim that middle leadership is a “highly complex relational endeavour” (2015, p.128). In other words, relationships and, therefore, trust are extremely important for successful middle leadership to occur in primary schools.

### Influence of Middle Leaders

The true influence and power of middle leaders to lead teams and lead change can be questioned. A critical view is taken by Branson *et al*, who argue that middle leaders “are expected to be able to persuade, influence or direct [...] but have little to offer by way of tangible benefit.” (2016, p.130). Indeed, middle leaders rarely have the ability to access organisational funding, or to adjust workload or the workplace environment (Branson *et al*, 2016). It can be argued that this, once again, highlights the importance of relationship building for middle leaders. As most forms of extrinsic motivation are unavailable to them, middle leaders must manifest their influence relationally (Branson *et al*, 2016). Hammersley-Fletcher and Strain (2011) echo the critique of the influence of middle leaders. They conclude that, even successful middle leaders, just create “new bases of evidence to

demonstrate compliance [...] in respect of implementing government policies and the head's agendas, rather than using their role to develop significant initiatives in teaching and learning practices" (Hammersley-Fletcher and Strain, 2011, p.881). This is a heavily critical approach, as they go on to argue that middle leadership is "a device to encourage compliance", and a "smoke and mirrors" recruitment strategy in which there is an illusion of power from the headteacher (Hammersley-Fletcher and Strain, 2011, p.882).

An article by Hammersley-Fletcher and Kirkham (2007) takes a more balanced approach. It acknowledges that primary middle leaders rarely have line management over others. Therefore, to some extent middle leaders do lack power. However, Hammersley-Fletcher and Kirkham (2007) argue that it is possible for middle leaders to develop agency, if their school has a culture of "delegation and collaboration" (p.427). This takes significant time to develop and requires the total support of the headteacher. Moreover, it can be argued that the headteacher is a "key factor in the extent to which middle leaders are enabled to act as leaders" (Hammersley-Fletcher and Kirkham, 2007 p.427). Indeed, for a collaborative culture to develop, power and leadership must be distributed across the organisation. Findings from a study of Icelandic middle leaders, by Lárusdóttir and O'Connor (2017), emphasise that middle leaders struggled with the challenging positionality of their role. Consequently, they argue that both "self-awareness and trust-based practice" are vital to successful middle leadership in schools (Lárusdóttir and O'Connor, 2017, p.433). However, the article offers no insights into how this might manifest itself in the day-to-day actions of leaders. Indeed, there is a gap in body of research that links middle leaders to trust and daily practice. Therefore, understanding the concept of trust and also how middle leaders could undertake trust-based practice, is a key component of this research.

### **Trust**

Trust is now a well-researched concept in social science. In education contexts, there is much written about how principals develop trust, but with a particular focus on leadership styles. Moreover, the voice of leaders and middle leaders is often heard in data collection methods throughout the literature (Lipscombe *et al*, 2019; Banwo *et al*, 2021; Day *et al*, 2011). However, teachers' (followers') perceptions of how leaders and middle leaders build trust is an under-developed area of research.

Trust can be defined as the “confidence in or reliance on the integrity, veracity, justice, friendship or other sound principle, of another person or group” (Seashore Louis, 2007). It can be argued that trust is a vital ingredient for school improvement, professional learning, and better outcomes in schools (Coleman, 2012; Banwo *et al*, 2021). Indeed, a common thread that emerges from the literature is that high levels of trust lead to better school performance and leadership (Coleman, 2012; Day *et al*, 2011; Banwo *et al*, 2021; Lipscombe *et al*, 2019; Seashore Louis, 2007). Therefore, it is important to research the nature of trust in education.

Trust is also vital in organisations to successfully manage power, influence and risk (Coleman, 2012). In a study of trust in school principals, Moye *et al* (2005) argue that there are higher levels of trust in an organisation when teachers feel empowered by their leaders. Furthermore, it was found that teachers who felt that they had autonomy and influence in their role, also reported higher levels of trust in their leaders. Whilst that study related to principal trustworthiness, the conclusions reached on the concept of *influence* are also important to consider for this research on middle leaders. Indeed, it can be argued that a middle leader’s ability to build trust is affected by their ability to influence. Branson *et al* maintain that a middle leader’s power is developed through “influence and persuasion and is formed within a relationship with others built on trust, transparency and consistency” (2016, p.142). It can be argued that building trust, transparency and consistency is a form of *authentic leadership*, where leaders are deeply conscious of how they behave and interact, in practice with others (Iqbal *et al*, 2019). Moreover, it is contended that an authentic leadership style leads to increased trust in organisations (Iqbal *et al*, 2019). The notion of authenticity is developed further in the literature. In their article on middle leadership in primary schools, Hammersley-Fletcher and Kirkham (2007) argue that middle leaders must closely collaborate and negotiate with colleagues to gain their support. In this context, the word *support* can also be understood as *trust*. Therefore, this is further evidence that trust is vital for middle leaders to successfully negotiate and influence other members of staff in their organisation.

### Trust and Behaviour

It can be argued that trust is developed and maintained by the actions, practices and behaviours of humans. Coleman argues of a concept termed ‘behavioural trust’ (2012, p.94).

This, Coleman maintains, are the “day-to-day manifestations” of a person’s values (2012, p.94). In other words, it is the actions and behaviours of a person that contribute to their trustworthiness. Moreover, the study found that leaders with high levels of perceived trustworthiness consistently match their behaviours with the values and ideologies they promote (Coleman, 2012). Day *et al* (2011) echo this focus on values and argue that creating a culture of trust is done not just by the actions of leaders, but also by the values that they have and communicate. Coleman terms this notion as “ideological trust” (2012, p.91).

In her study on trust, Seashore Louis (2007) carried out focus groups and interviews, over three years in 5 schools. Whilst the findings from a sample size of 5 schools might not be considered generalisable to all contexts, the conclusions and their implications are valid to this research. The study concludes that teachers’ trust in leaders is “based on behaviour, and that teachers do not clearly discriminate between interpersonal behaviours (caring, concern, respectfulness) and administrative competence” (Seashore Louis, 2007, p.17). Therefore, it can be argued that a leader’s behaviour and values are highly linked with their competence and their trustworthiness.

Handford and Leithwood (2013) researched the characteristics and behaviours that enable teachers to trust school leaders. Indeed, their research found that teachers attribute 5 main characteristics to the leaders they trust. These are competence, consistency and reliability, openness, respect, and integrity (Handford and Leithwood, 2013). The study has its limitations; it is a small sample size and the schools chosen for data collection were already deemed to be ‘high trust’ or ‘low trust’ environments. Also, Handford and Leithwood (2013) argue that this has the potential to cause outlier results that may not correlate with “typical school trust environments” (p.207). However, despite these limitations, the conclusions drawn are particularly salient and valid for this research. Moreover, the trust characteristics are further broken down into the specific leader behaviours that lead to them being developed (Handford and Leithwood, 2013). Yet, the focus of their study is on trust in school senior leaders; there is a gap in the literature that researches the characteristics of middle leaders that enable trust.

This thinking led to the drafting of one of the research questions for this proposal:

*What do middle leaders do [...], to enable them to build trust and trustworthiness?*

Indeed if, as it is argued, trust is based on behaviour, then this idea should be unpicked further to ascertain which behaviours enable middle leaders to build trust and trustworthiness.

Trust is an inherently social construct (Coleman, 2012). It could be argued that it is built through interactions, expectations and shared values. However, trust in organisations is fragile. It cannot be forced upon someone (Day *et al*, 2011). Indeed, the research base concludes that trust is crucial (Lipscombe *et al*, 2019) and vital (Day *et al*, 2011) to successful outcomes, but is also “transient, contested and easily lost in schools” (Banwo *et al*, 2021). Furthermore, it can be argued that a culture of trust cannot be achieved by carrying out a staff meeting, or a training day (Edwards-Groves *et al*, 2016). Instead, it is built through the repeated, day-to-day social exchanges and interactions (Banwo *et al*, 2021). Here, the literature begins to associate trust with social exchange theories. These theories form part of the theoretical underpinning of this proposal, which is further developed in Chapter 3. Crucially, trust develops over time “through interpersonal exchanges in which the words, actions and ways of relating validates [...] expectations, obligations, intentions and commitments” (Edwards-Groves *et al*, 2016, p.375). Separating the trust building process into words, actions and ways of relating, in this way, is of particular significance to this research, which seeks to understand the actions and perceptions of middle leaders in trust building. Indeed, this is encapsulated into the theory of practice architectures. It is the conceptual framework that underpins this research proposal and is explored further in Chapter 3.

It can be argued that trust is a two-way process (Bottery, 2003; Day *et al*, 2011). It is a relationship between two individuals or groups. A common theme in the literature is that building and sustaining trust is a “relational phenomenon” (Branson *et al*, 2016, p.135). In their salient research, Edwards-Groves and Grootenboer (2021) cite Bryk and Schneider’s (2002) work on relational trust. They argue that trust is “entangled in the social exchanges, mutually understood responsibilities and designations, and interactions and relationships formed among key stakeholders in schools” (Edwards-Groves and Grootenboer, 2021, p.264). The article is particularly significant to this research, as it focuses on trust and its implication for middle leadership. Moreover, Edwards-Groves and Grootenboer (2021) conceptualise five dimensions of relational trust, and present how these are attended to by

middle leaders in practice. For example, interpersonal trust is developed by leaders having – amongst other attributes- reliability and respectfulness. Also, intellectual trust can be developed by leaders who are professional and demonstrate knowledge of the relevant content (Edwards-Groves and Grootenboer, 2021). The common theme in the literature is that relational trust is important to the success of leadership in organisations. However, Seashore Louis (2007) argues that many school staff teams have low levels of relational trust overall. Therefore, trust is a crucial, yet elusive concept. School leaders must consider how to develop relational trust. This research aims to highlight how middle leaders begin to build relationships and trust.

Furthermore, relational trust is seen as vital for leading sustainable and successful change in schools (Edwards-Groves *et al*, 2016). However, the literature on relational trust fails to account for what can be termed ‘role trust’ (Bottery, 2003). This is the idea that humans almost automatically trust people in certain roles, because of the society and values that they have been inducted into. This type of trust is not based on actions and relationships. It is assumed with the role, not the individual. Bottery (2003) uses the example of doctors. Indeed, due to pre-existing assumptions and societal norms, most people trust that doctors will not harm their patients. It is an expectation that comes with the role in society. Therefore, the extent to which the role of middle leader in a British primary school is associated with any form of role trust should be considered.

Critically, it could be argued that this form of trust might negatively affect the practice of middle leaders, due to the differing assumptions placed upon them by different people. As mentioned above, it is extremely difficult for middle leaders to successfully navigate the dual tensions and manage expectations from above and below (Branson *et al*, 2016). Therefore, it would be important for middle leaders to have a clearly defined job description and role, that clarifies the expectations for all. However, in dynamic environments such as British primary schools, that often have to implement new external policies and changes, this is a difficult proposition.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has critically reviewed the topic literature related to middle leadership and trust. Importantly, most of the literature reviewed takes a qualitative methodological

approach. Therefore, the generalisability of their findings, beyond the specific context, can be questioned. However, this chapter has shown that middle leadership exists in a contested, challenging position, and that trust is an important part of organisational effectiveness. The review has highlighted areas for further research. Significantly, research on the practices of middle leaders and how these may build trust is an underdeveloped area. The literature itself has led this process. During reading, the themes that emerged led to further reading, and further themes. Indeed, it was an inductive process. This research proposal is therefore conceptualised within an interpretivist paradigm. The next chapter will examine the theories and conceptual framework that have developed throughout this process, building on the paradigmatic approach.

## Chapter 3: Literature Review - The Conceptual Framework

(Words: 3016)

### Introduction

The previous chapter explored the topic literature relating to middle leadership and trust. This chapter will focus on the conceptual framework and the broader theories that underpin this research proposal. However, the term 'theory' is itself an ambiguous concept. Hammersley (1995) maintains that the way in which theory is used in types of qualitative research, such as this proposal, is dependent on our own individual understandings of the term practice (cited in Open University, 2021a). For example, people often compare theory with practice, discussing what might work in theory, but not in practice. Also, there is significant reference in the literature to how theory can potentially guide practice (Hammersley, cited in Open University, 2021a). However, the two terms are rarely used in such a way that understands practice as theory, and vice versa. This chapter, then, is positioned at an interesting intersection between the two terms: 'theory' and 'practice'. This is due to the fact that the theories reviewed here, are theories of practice.

A review of literature on social exchange theory will provide insights into the historical and theoretical underpinnings of this proposal. This will include how the work of key thinkers in social theory, such as Bourdieu, has informed the study. The developing theory of practice architectures is then outlined, as the conceptual and methodological approach that will frame the research. The works of Kemmis will be drawn upon here, as a key pioneer and developer of the practice architectures theory.

### Bourdieu and Social Theories

Bourdieu's meta-theory, including his key concepts of *habitus*, *field* and *capital* are summarised by Hurtado (2010). Bourdieu describes the social world as being made up of three forms of dimensions or *fields* (1977). These are: "(1) cultural and symbolic, (2) economic, and (3) social, fields and capitals" (Kemmis, 2022, p.61). These fields are the spaces, sites, and sub-spaces where social interaction occurs. Importantly, these *fields* are conceptualised as dynamic networks, characterised by struggles for resources and power

(Hurtado, 2010). Moreover, each individual entering a particular *field* has their own *habitus*. *Habitus*, Bourdieu maintains are the dispositions, “acquired through early socialization” that structure the relationships in a particular *field* (Hurtado, 2010, p.54). In other words, it can be argued that the *habitus* are the particular resources that individuals have at their disposal, when in a specific *field*. Furthermore, *capital* refers to the types of resources within a field. Bourdieu ideates three types of *capital*: economic, cultural and social capital (Hurtado, 2010). Critically, it is argued that the “concept of capital implies the accumulation of resources” (Hurtado, 2010, p.55). This means that building capital is contingent on the social processes and power relationships within a field (for example: trust building), but also the pre-existing social *habitus* of the individuals within it.

This theory is relevant to the research proposal because it outlines a structure regarding how people socialise and build relationships in particular contexts. Indeed, when applied to this research, the *fields* considered could be: the primary school; the relationships between teachers and middle leaders; and the pre-existing backgrounds of the individuals involved in the space.

However, Hurtado (2010) criticises the use of Bourdieu’s theories in the literature. Indeed, it is argued that Bourdieu is regularly referred to in articles, but a simple analysis makes clear that his works have not been broadly read before being referenced (Hurtado, 2010).

Moreover, there is a huge range of interpretations of his theories and significant ambiguity regarding what Bourdieu himself meant. Certainly, his ideas are applied in vastly different ways. It also must be acknowledged that Bourdieu was writing in the field of sociology, and so any attempt to translate theories across academic fields should be done so with caution (Hurtado, 2010). Therefore, this research does not claim to be deeply embedded within Bourdieu’s theories. Instead, it uses the concepts of *field*, *habitus*, and *capital* to provide an initial starting point to frame the research within social theories. Indeed, these ideas are further established upon below through a review of social exchange theory, as the ontological perspective continues to be developed.

### Social Exchange Theory

Like many of the terms discussed here, there are contested definitions and a level of ambiguity surrounding the concept of social exchange theory. Bourdieu’s social capital

theory links with social exchange theory, as both view human actions to be negotiated forms of transaction and capital. Indeed, social exchange theory suggests “that the actions of individuals depend on the rewards they received from others in the past or expect to receive in the future” (Iqbal *et al*, 2019, p.3). Moreover, Cropanzano and Mitchell echo this point by concluding that the body of literature agrees that “social exchange comprises actions contingent on the rewarding reactions of others, which over time provide for mutually and rewarding transactions and relationships” (2005, p.890). Furthermore, whilst definitions and views of social exchange theory differ, there is consensus within the literature that social exchange involves a “series of interactions that generate obligations” (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005, p.874).

Social exchange theory dictates that relationships build over time, but for this happen “parties must abide by certain ‘rules’ of exchange” (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005, p.875). It could be argued that these rules/norms of the exchange process, are linked to what Bourdieu terms *doxa* – the taken-for-granted, social and cultural beliefs and expectations that manifest in social spaces. Moreover, it can be contended that these *doxa* are related to building relationships (trust), as following them leads to greater cohesion and mutual understanding in particular social spaces. Consequently, social exchange theory provides a useful theoretical foundation to frame this research proposal. However, the use of the theory itself in the literature can be critiqued. Cropanzano and Mitchell argue that the ambiguity of the theory means that it has yet to be fully “articulated and integrated” (2005, p.875). Indeed, its use in research lacks clarity and produces highly subjective conclusions (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005). Although, it must be considered that Cropanzano and Mitchell were writing almost 20 years ago. Indeed, the body of literature on social exchange has progressed rapidly since then. Cook *et al* now embrace the ambiguity of the theory and outline how its “different theoretical formulations” can be utilised across fields of social science research (2013, p.61).

Social exchange theory is relevant to the field of educational leadership research, as it highlights the socially constructed nature of leadership hierarchies. It also provides a lens, through which insights into employer-employee exchanges can be gained. For example, it is argued that “an employee who sees the employer as supportive, is likely to return the gesture” (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005, p.883). Furthermore, it can be contended that

trust is a key factor in the process of an employee seeing an employer -or middle-leader- as supportive. Within the social theory literature, this type of exchange relationship between a teacher and a middle leader, for instance, can be viewed as a *leader-member exchange*.

### Trust and Social Exchange Theory

When reviewing the social exchange theory literature, *trust* emerges as a common theme. It is seen as an important contributing factor in theories of social relationships and the development of organisational citizenship behaviour. Moreover, there is a significant body of literature relating to social exchange theory and organisational citizenship behaviours (Iqbal *et al*, 2019; Dirks and Ferrin, 2002; Elstad *et al*, 2011). Organisational citizenship behaviour focuses on discretionary and individual behaviours that people exhibit to go 'above and beyond' their job description. The literature concludes that employees are more likely to display these behaviours when they have strong and authentic relationships with their employer (Iqbal *et al*, 2019; Elstad *et al*, 2011). It can be argued that trust and trustworthiness are key facets to an authentic relationship. From this perspective, trust is viewed as a type of *capital*, as part of a social exchange. However, whilst there are some studies that conceptualise trust as a form of social capital (Bryk and Schneider, 2002 cited in Elstad *et al*, 2011), the literature on how these authentic relationships are built as social exchange processes, involving trust, is underdeveloped.

In their meta-analysis of the literature on trust in leadership, Dirks and Ferrin (2002) discuss two perspectives on trust. The first of these presents a critical character-based approach, where decisions to trust a leader are based on perceptions of their characteristics, such as fairness and integrity (Dirks and Ferrin, 2002). This perspective is based on a transactional, hierarchical structure, and does not account for the social complexities of human interactions and perceptions. However, the second perspective conceptualises trust as part of social exchange theory. Moreover, in a leader-member relationship, the members see the relationship "as beyond the standard economic contract such that the parties operate on the basis of trust, goodwill and the perception of mutual obligations" (Dirks and Ferrin, 2002, p.612). It can be argued that this, again, highlights the relational nature of trust, as outlined in the previous chapter. Indeed, the principles of social exchange involve a set of behaviours associated with a particular relationship (maintaining trust, for example) and an expectation that these are reciprocated.

### Reciprocity

In their comprehensive review of the literature, Cropanzano and Mitchell (2005) outline three different types of reciprocity in social exchange theory. These, it can be argued, have similarities with the topic literature of this research proposal. For example, *reciprocity as a folk belief* involves cultural expectations, and the idea that people get what they deserve (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005). This can be linked to Bottery's notion of *role trust*, whereby societal roles are culturally linked to particular social expectations (2003). Indeed, *reciprocity as a folk belief* maintains that people reciprocate part of a relationship because it is the expected thing to do, culturally or socially. Critically, as this is the fulfilment of a social expectation, the relationships concerned may not involve trust, respect, or friendship. It is a more transactional, expectation-based approach that lacks a degree of interdependence.

Therefore, *interdependence* can be viewed as a vital characteristic of reciprocity (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005). This is where the outcomes of a relationship are based on the efforts of both parties involved (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005). From this perspective, the development of trust is, therefore, correlated with the development of reciprocity in relationships. Consequently, it can be argued that high levels of *interdependence* means that there are high levels of trust and more successful outcomes, as "interdependence reduces risk and encourages cooperation" (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005, p.876).

In the above sections, the notion of trust has been critiqued from the perspective of social exchange theories. It has become clear that trust "is a belief or perception held by the follower [...] it is not a property of the relationship or the leader" (Dirks and Ferrin, 2002, p.612). However, it is developed and maintained by social interactions and expectations, within a relationship.

### Practice Architectures

The social theories reviewed above provide an important theoretical foundation to the methodological framework of this proposed research. The theory of practice architectures has emerged from the work of early key thinkers, such as Bourdieu (Edwards-Groves and Grootenboer, 2021). For example, Bourdieu's theory that everyday practices are socially constructed forms of capital (Open University, 2021b) is significant to this research because it implies that practices are formed of deliberate actions and perceptions. Edwards-Groves

and Grootenboer (2021) argue that there has been a 'practice-turn' in contemporary leadership research. Indeed, there is more of an inquiry focus, attempting to find out what works and what is not effective for leaders, in particular contexts. Although, this approach could be criticised because any findings are heavily context dependent and lack generalisability. However, many theories and practical recommendations have emerged from this practice-focused literature. The majority of the qualitative practice-based research reviewed here aims not to be generalisable between contexts, but relatable and comparable. Furthermore, Kemmis (2022) argues that the 'practice-turn' relates to the shift in focus from social life being shaped by 'social structures' to being shaped by 'practices' – "whose repetition and reproduction in patterns of everyday social life create the impressions that 'structures' exist" (p.53). Additionally, Bourdieu contends that social structures are reproduced and made manifest by social practices (Hurtado, 2010). Practice, therefore, can be associated with, and conceptualised in relation to, social theories.

The research seeks to study the *actions* of middle leaders, from the perception of teachers. Indeed, it is argued that it is *actions* that contribute to building relationships and trust. However, the literature review process revealed that focus on actions is too narrow and does not account for the social complexities involved in human behaviour and relationships. Day *et al* (2011) argue that developing trust in organisations is not solely based on the *actions* of leaders, but also how they communicate and express their values. This involves language and discourse, and also the cultural understandings of an individual within society. Therefore, a wider conceptual framework is required to account for the complexities of social life. Moreover, the work of Kemmis (2022) and his developing theory of practice architectures is considered to be an appropriate and relevant approach to frame this research within.

In the theory of practice architectures, practices are deemed to be made up of three areas: *sayings*, *doings* and *relatings* (Powell, 2020). Moreover, these three areas -or dimensions- of practice are theoretically underpinned by the work of Bourdieu, as he conceptualises the social world as three kinds of *fields* (1977). The *sayings* of practice architectures refer to meanings and discourses that are shaped by language. It focuses on the fact that "what practices mean, what people intend by them, and how we understand them are shaped in language and specialist discourses" (Kemmis, 2022, p.61). Furthermore, the *doings* relate to

what is being materially done in a particular site, at a particular time. Moreover, the *relatings* refer to the pre-existing and dynamic social relationships that exist between people in the site. Kemmis (2022) argues that the theory of practice architectures aims to show how these *sayings*, *doings*, and *relatings* hang together in a project (purpose), such as teaching or leading.

### Using Practice Architectures as a Framework for this Research

As discussed above, the theory of practice architectures defines practice into the three dimensions of *sayings*, *doings* and *relatings*. However, this definition of practice is one of many in the social research literature. Indeed, it is contrasted by the philosophy of MacIntyre, who conceptualised ‘traditions’ of practice and ‘communities’ of practice (Nicolini, 2013, cited in Kemmis, 2022). This perspective views practices as broad, macro domains, for instance teaching, playing the piano, and farming. Moreover, a distinction is made between practices -for example teaching- and actions -for example marking books (Kemmis, 2022). However, this macro view of practices can be critiqued as the outcomes of the practices are vulnerable to the external processes acting on the related institutions. Therefore, the definition of practice in this proposal ‘zooms in’ beyond this perspective by seeing all actions (*doings*), *sayings* and *relatings* as practices.

Practice architectures identify “pre-existing cultural-discursive, material-economic and social-political orders and arrangements that enable and constrain practice, respectively in semantic space, physical space-time and social space” (Kemmis, 2022, p.1). Indeed, the practice architectures of a site can be understood as the pre-existing conditions that allow, or do not allow, practices to occur (Kemmis and Mutton, 2012). In the context of this research proposal, they can be viewed as the perceived conditions that enable or constrain middle leaders to build trust with teachers, for instance. Critically, if practice architectures are pre-existing conditions, the extent to which they can be changed or manipulated can be questioned. However, this research will take the position that the individuals associated with a site are always contributing to changing the practice architectures, by the very fact that they are enacting practices within them. Crucially, this adopted ontological perspective understands that knowledge is subjective, constructed and in the human mind.

Importantly, practice architectures are site dependent (Kemmis, 2022). Indeed, the theory is a “site based, ontological approach to exploring practices” (Sjølie and Østern, 2020, p.265). This means that practices can be conceptualised as not just happening *in* a neutral space, but as deeply interconnected to the socio-material characteristics of the site where they occur. Therefore, whilst there are similarities in the socio-material characteristics between places, each site has different practice architectures, meaning each is a separate case to study. In this research the site being studied -the primary school- is similar in many ways to other UK primary schools. Indeed, it has the same core purpose, similar curriculums, and similar staffing structures. However, it has its own practice architectures. For example, these are made manifest through the organisational culture, the way in which information is communicated, and the relationships between individuals in the school. Critically, it can be argued that practice architectures “do not simply exist as arbitrary isolated entities” but exist in an ecosystem of other practices and practice architectures (Edwards-Groves *et al*, 2016, p.376). A UK primary school is also interconnected with external practice architectures, such as those from a multi-academy trust, or statutory practices mandated by government. This highlights and reflects the complexities involved and the socially constructed nature of leadership practices and trust.

The conceptual framework of practice architectures is also a useful tool for data analysis, as *doings*, *saying* and *relatings* can be identified alongside the factors that enable or constrain them (Salo *et al*, 2014). This allows for thematic analysis and coding, within a clear and structured framework.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has critically evaluated the literature regarding social theories and practice architectures. There are challenges involved in applying this methodological framework to the research, such as the contextual, subjective, and unpredictable nature of the conclusions that can be made. However, using qualitative methods, underpinned by social theories will allow the voices of teachers to be heard and their perceptions of their reality to be unpicked. Furthermore, using a framework such as practice architectures will allow the data to speak for itself, enabling an inductive analysis but within a scope and structure. The next chapter will propose a more detailed methodology of how the practices of middle leaders, relating to trust, will be uncovered.

## Chapter 4: The Research Proposal

**(Words: 581)**

This dissertation is a case study of how trust (by teachers) in middle leaders affects the perceived practice of middle leadership in an English primary school. The review of the literature has revealed both the tensions experienced by middle leaders in their positions (Lipscombe *et al*, 2019) and the key role of trust in building relationships. However, there is a gap in the literature concerning the perceived ability of trust to mediate these tensions and allow middle leaders to practice their roles successfully. Indeed, the literature review has provided some initial assumptions regarding the impact of trust on middle leadership, but no clear, pre-existing hypotheses about the practices involved (Burdett, 2022). The interpretivist paradigm allows for these assumptions to be explored. As a researcher, I will let the data speak for itself, allowing conclusions to be inductively developed from these initial assumptions.

My own positionality as a researcher has developed, throughout the process. From the beginning, I wanted to understand the participants' views and how their realities are socially constructed (Mackenzie and Knipe, 2006). This position was heavily influenced by social-exchange theory and Bourdieu's meta-theories. The research also has the aim to be useful to myself, as a practitioner of middle leadership. It is rooted in my own practice, values, beliefs, and interests. Subsequently, the development of practice architectures as a conceptual framework is relevant because it allows the focus of the research to be on practices. This means an emphasis on what is happening in a school, rather than a theory of what might, or could happen. However, as each participant has their own constructed social realities, the findings can only be understood as their perceptions of that reality. Therefore, the word 'perceived' was added to the dissertation title.

This research will adopt the methodological approach of a case study. Other research framed by practice architectures (Edwards-Groves *et al*, 2016; Lipscombe *et al*, 2019), also uses a case study approach. Furthermore, this approach will enable a "detailed investigation" of the topic, in the case of the primary school (Hartley, 2004, p.323).

### Research Question Development

The research questions have been developed and refined since E822 TMA01. Indeed, the first iteration of the questions involved trust and the ability of middle leaders to lead professional development. During the literature review process for E822 TMA02, the focus on leading professional development was removed because I found that this was an area with an existing abundance of research. The emergence of practice architectures as a conceptual framework also led to a deeper interest in the specific practices of middle leaders. Therefore, the second research question then became related to the *doings*, *sayings*, and *relatings* of middle leaders.

Finally, following reflection on the feedback from E822 TMA02, it was decided that the research questions needed a narrower focus. Within the scope of this research, it was not feasible to study trust from the perspective of all staff in the school. Therefore, it was concluded that trust in middle leaders from the perspective of teachers, would be the focus. Indeed, the voices of teachers are underrepresented in the middle leadership literature.

The final research questions are:

- From the perspective of teachers, how does trust affect perceptions of the practice of middle leadership in an English primary school?
- What do middle leaders do, say, and relate to, to enable them to build trust and trustworthiness?

The research methods related to these questions will be explored further, in the next chapter.

# Chapter 5: Research Design, Research Methods and Methods of Analysis

(Words: 2928)

## Introduction

This chapter will outline the proposed methodological approach and the associated methods for this research. A justification for the approach is given, as it is informed by critique of the literature. The desired participants of the research and the context in which it will take place are then described. Next, this chapter will outline the considerations given to ethics and the quality of the research. Finally, the proposed methods of data analysis are explored.

## Case Study Approach

A case study approach has been chosen, as it will allow for an in-depth investigation of middle leadership and trust, within the context. This research seeks to understand the practices of middle leadership. Moreover, it can be argued that case studies are the best approach to enable an understanding of “everyday practices and their meanings” (Hartley, 2004, p.325). However, it can be argued that the *case* is the place (the school) which will be studied, not the topic of investigation (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015). This research is therefore bounded within the single case of the specific primary school – the unit of analysis (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015).

In the previous chapters of this dissertation, a loose set of theories have been developed, alongside a general framework. The case study approach will allow data to be collected in relation to these theories. However, the overall research will be guided by the data analysis. Indeed, it can be argued that case study research is an inductive process, allowing a move from the general to the specific during the data collection and analysis stages (Mills *et al*, 2010). Therefore, a case study approach is useful for research, such as this, where no pre-existing hypothesis is being tested. The findings and themes will emerge during the social process of the research itself. Critically, it can be argued that a case study is an end-product of field-based research, rather than a method itself (Wolcott, 1992 cited by Merriam and Tisdell, 2015). The final disseminations of the research will be the *case study*. Furthermore,

the methodological processes leading to this final point, such as data collection and analysis, are designed to inductively develop the findings.

Merriam and Tisdell (2015) argue that the findings from case studies are often descriptive in nature. Therefore, whilst the findings from case studies are not generalisable, their strength is that they are relatable to other cases and contexts (Burton and Bartlett, 2011). Indeed, Mills *et al* argue that the objective of a case study “is not to find universal rules but to understand the cases deeply in their own unique environment” (2010, p4).

Case study approaches are also beneficial because they are flexible (Mills *et al*, 2010). Therefore, the research plan can change and adapt during the process. This is especially important when researching complex organisations such as schools. Indeed, changes may need to be made during the research for a variety of reasons. For example, a participant may leave their employment at the school during the research, or changes to the school calendar might mean that research timings require flexibility.

### **Research Methods**

Case Study approaches tend to include multiple methods of data collection. This is because complex processes can be best understood through the use of several methods (Hartley, 2004). It also better enables an attempt to “triangulate data and theory (and thereby improve validity)” (Hartley, 2004, p.324). Therefore, this research will use two data collection methods: semi-structured interviews and non-participant observations.

### **Interviews**

Interviews are the most common data collection method in case study research (Mills *et al*, 2010). Marvasti and Freie (2017) argue that the researcher should identify which interview type would best serve to answer the research questions. Therefore, this research proposes to use semi-structured interviews. This will allow the interview to be guided by the participants’ answers. Moreover, this approach is best suited to ensuring that the participants’ perceptions, in relation to the research questions, are constructed and heard.

Semi-structured interviews tend to use a mix of open-ended and structured questions. However, it is how these questions are used that determines the direction and style of the interview (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015). In this research, they will be used in no particular

order, to structure a conversation that serves to explore the topic of interest. Following this approach means that it is highly unlikely that any two interviews will follow the same structure. A draft set of prompt questions, to be used during the interviews, can be seen in Appendix D.

Within the paradigm of this research, the interview is considered a “social setting” (Roulston, 2010, p.218), where meanings are constructed by the interviewer and interviewee during the conversation. Moreover, interviews will provide a situated account of how participants make sense of their realities (Roulston, 2010). Additionally, this approach means that the interview data can be analysed topically for key themes, but also structurally, in terms of how the interactions are constructed (Roulston, 2010).

As mentioned above, non-participant observations will also be used to collect data. It can be argued that interviewing is important when observations do not sufficiently provide insight into how people behave, interact and interpret in their worlds (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015). Therefore, interviews allow the reliability of the case study to be developed further and for its findings to be triangulated.

However, Mallozzi discusses two main criticisms of using interviews (2009). Firstly, it has been found that participants often misunderstand interview questions. However, this research will mitigate this risk, by carrying out semi-structured interviews. Therefore, prompt questions will be given (Appendix D) but the discussion will be led by the participants. Indeed, the way in which a question is interpreted by a participant is itself of interest, as it provides insight into their constructed realities. Secondly, Mallozzi argues that *interviewer-interviewee relational energy* can affect interviews (2009). This is most commonly a problem in insider research, where existing relationships between the researcher and participants can affect the interview exchanges. Whilst this dissertation is not proposing research from inside the researcher’s workplace, the setting is within the same multi-academy trust. Therefore, some familiarity may occur. It can be argued that there is a chance that familiarity causes more emotionally charged responses (Perryman, 2011). The risk of this is mitigated by having an awareness and openness about this, at each stage of the research.

### Observations

Observations will be used as a second data collection method, alongside interviews. This is because using these two methods together will allow for a deeper study of the *case*.

Merriam and Tisdell argue that observations are a “firsthand encounter” with the area of interest (2015, p.137). They differ from interviews which serve to provide a “secondhand account” of the phenomenon being studied (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015, p.137).

Observations have been chosen because they will provide unique insights into the dynamics of the interactions between middle leaders and their colleagues. Non-participant observations will take place, meaning that the researcher will not directly participate in the activities being observed. These observations will be overt, meaning that participants will always be aware when they are being observed. Consent will always be sought before observing any participants.

The literature discusses how effective qualitative researchers narrow their focus during observations. It is argued that initially, the researcher’s interests and curiosity drives the observations (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015). Then, over time, patterns emerge and the meanings of interactions become clearer. Liu and Maitlis (2012) split this process into three stages which will be followed by this research. Firstly, descriptive observations with a broad topical focus occur. After a while, observers are able to filter their interpretations and carry out narrow focussed observations. Finally, Liu and Maitlis (2012) argue that a point of theoretical saturation is reached, where observations no longer add anything new to the understanding of the context.

Two middle leaders will be observed separately, on different days. The researcher will shadow them for the day, focussing on the interactions with other staff members. However, primary school middle leaders often have significant teaching responsibilities of their own. Teaching will not be observed. Leadership activities, such as staff development meetings will be observed, along with breaktimes. Indeed, breaktimes are often where small, but vital, social exchanges take place between colleagues in primary schools.

A potential challenge that may occur here is the emergence of the *Hawthorne Effect*. This, it is argued, is the tendency for participants to change their behaviours because they are being observed (Burton and Bartlett, 2011). Therefore, data from the interviews will be used to

triangulate and assess a level of reliability to these behaviours. Furthermore, it can be argued that observations are never complete (Liu and Maitlis, 2012). Ultimately, the researcher must make a choice of what is and is not noted. There will be a focus on the social exchanges and interactions that develop relationships.

Observations can be critiqued as a data collection method because they rely on the subjective perception of the researcher (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015). However, as an interpretivist piece of research, the entire qualitative study is dependent on the researcher's interpretations. This is considered appropriate, as the positionality of the researcher is acknowledged throughout.

### **Research Participants**

Whilst it would be ideal to interview all the teachers at the primary school, this is not possible within the small-scale scope of this research. Indeed, carrying out that many semi-structured interviews would likely produce significant and overwhelming amounts of data to transcribe and analyse. Therefore, a stratified sample of three teachers will be selected for interview, ensuring that there is a balance between teachers in different year groups. Furthermore, two middle leaders will be selected for observation. These might be key-stage leaders, pastoral or curriculum leaders or core subject leaders. The leaders will be chosen in partnership and agreement with the organisation.

Before any research takes place, the researcher must build a professional relationship, via clear communications with the gatekeeper of the school. This may take time, but is important for the research. A values approach will be taken here, ensuring that integrity, professionalism, and transparency are upheld at all times. The research will be planned to take place over a time period of two seasonal terms. The three teachers will be interviewed twice over that period, and the middle leaders observed on a flexible timetable (but for no more than three whole days). This flexibility will ensure that leadership activities, not teaching, are the main focus of observation. The timescale and number of participants involved in the research has been carefully decided. The limitations of this small-scale research have been balanced with the extra burden of workload that would be placed on the participants and the researcher. However, despite the small-scale, this approach still allows for a credible study.

Furthermore, factors affecting school staff such as the school holidays, examination periods, inspections and workload will also be taken into account. Importantly, the chosen case study approach allows for this degree of flexibility and for late changes to be made. To maintain credibility, any changes made throughout the process will be clearly outlined in the final disseminations of the research.

Before any data collection takes place, the researcher must build trust with the research participants, especially those being observed. It can be argued that this can reduce the *Hawthorne Effect*. However, a professional balance must be maintained, Liu and Maitlis (2012) warn of the dangers of *going native*. This is when a researcher overidentifies with the participants and findings can be skewed in the other direction. In this research, the risk of this is deemed to be low, as the observations will not take place over extended periods of time. Indeed, this risk is higher in participant-based observations and ethnographic work. Moreover, as detailed below, a clear set of ethical guidelines will be adhered to throughout. This will ensure that appropriate researcher and participant relationships are maintained.

During the observations, the interactions of middle leaders will be noted. However, these interactions could occur with any member of staff. Therefore, before the data collection begins, consent would be sought from the entire staff body. It will also be recognised that, in schools, some conversations are confidential (for example, linked to safeguarding concerns) and therefore would not be appropriate to be observed. Whether an interaction should be observed, will therefore be decided by the researcher and participant, on a case-by-case basis. The researcher will remain sensitive to the situation at all times. If it is felt that an observation is affecting the outcome of an interaction, then it will be stopped.

### **Ethical Issues**

If this research is to be valid and reliable, it must be undertaken in an ethical way (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015). The research will take ethics very seriously. Good ethical practice will be considered at all times during the study. Respect and integrity will always be upheld, and ethical issues will be reviewed and anticipated throughout the process. The set of ethical guidelines for educational research, published by BERA (2018), have been reviewed and applied to this proposal.

The benefits of the research will be clearly communicated with the participating school before any data collection takes place. This will include the potential for the research to benefit the practice of the middle leaders. The parameters of the research will be agreed beforehand with the gatekeeper (headteacher) of the school. Also, informed consent will be sought from all participants. If consent is not gained, alternative participants or sites will be found, or changes to the proposal may be considered.

During the research, it must be taken into account that participants may not provide their true beliefs during interviews and interactions (BERA, 2018). Indeed, they may feel at risk of professional harm and not want to be seen to represent their school in a negative way. This risk will be considered throughout, as it has the potential to affect the reliability of the results. However, within the paradigmatic approach of this research, the participants' responses and the way they are constructed are themselves of interest. Indeed, not telling the truth, does itself provide insights about trust in an organisation.

Privacy and anonymity will be afforded to participants during data collection and analysis. However, anonymity is difficult to promise. This is due to the small-scale nature of the study and the likelihood that insiders would be able to identify specific individuals from the descriptive nature of the data. The researcher will make this clear to participants before any research takes place, ensuring that informed consent is obtained.

### **Credibility and Dependability**

It is argued that qualitative research samples do not attempt to be statistically representative of a wider population, but they "serve an investigative purpose" (Carter and Little, 2007, p.1318). Therefore, this study will aim to be relevant to researchers and practitioners, as a relatable and comparable case study. In this way, the research cannot aim to be generalisable, but should be credible. Furthermore, in a qualitative study, the quality of the research cannot be assessed in the same way as that of a quantitative study (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015; Burton and Bartlett, 2011). In qualitative research, the author must evaluate why the topic of study is important and outline how the study was carried out. This, it is argued, should be followed by a persuasive analysis of the findings (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015). This research proposal has attempted to follow these criteria and has justified the topic and methodologies throughout the chapters. Following the observations and

interviews, they will be analysed and presented in a report. The analysis process is detailed below.

### **Methods of Analysis**

In case study research, it is argued that “testing the theory is less important than examining the data in a complex and precise manner” (Mills *et al*, 2010, p.3). Therefore, it can be argued that the methods of analysis are particularly significant to this research proposal. To prepare the data for analysis, the interviews will be recorded live and then transcribed. The observation notes will be written up at the time, or as soon as possible afterwards. This will ensure that key data is not missed or forgotten. It is important to also note that some analysis will be conducted concurrently with data collection. For example, as mentioned above, the focus of observations will be narrowed as specific themes emerge. This will involve a requirement for quick interpretations to be made by the researcher.

Overall, a thematic analysis of the data will take place. This approach is a “a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p79 cited in Vaismoradi *et al*, 2013, p.400). The data will be coded into three groups, in relation to practice architectures: sayings, doings and relating. These will then be interpreted for recurring themes. An inductive approach will be taken, whereby the data will guide the interpretations. The themes generated will allow meanings and relationships to be found, in a ‘bottom-up’ process. However, interpretations always begin with the researcher’s assumptions, values, and worldview (Firmin, 2008). Therefore, the findings will not be entirely ‘neutral’; they will be underpinned by the theoretical framework of this research. Moreover, the conclusions drawn will be subjective to the researcher (Mills *et al*, 2010).

### **Conclusion**

In summary, this chapter has outlined the methodological approach to the research proposal. It has critiqued and justified the methods chosen. Practical and logistical issues have also been described. Importantly, this is not an exhaustive list. Indeed, it is expected that further issues will arise and be confronted during the process. However, it is believed that the flexible and reflective approach taken here will allow for successful research.

## Chapter 6: Postscript Narrative Critical Reflection

**(Words: 515)**

Since beginning the EMA on the Stage 2 module, I struggled to think of a topic that I wanted to research. I chose the modules because I wanted to learn more about educational leadership and develop my own practice. I did not feel that the heavy emphasis on research methods, in the modules, was helping me do this. This was a factor in my decision to choose the EP route. After discussions with my tutor in Stage 2, I was able to see how carrying out some research could be beneficial to me, if it was focussed on practice. At the time of conceptualisation, I was an aspiring school middle leader and was aware of a general lack of trust in the existing middle leaders in my context. Therefore, I was able to consider what makes a good middle leader and what I would do differently in practice. Despite this initial spark of an idea, I then needed to refine and reduce this into a manageable research proposal.

As can be seen in Appendix E, the initial proposal was too ambitious. I addressed this by refining my research title and questions, as I read more and developed my ideas through the literature. However, even after refining the research questions, I have still faced difficulties in specifically understanding exactly the research I was proposing. This was evident from tutor feedback on a draft chapter, where it was suggested that I had left the reader to do a lot of their own sense-making. This was not necessarily a reflection of my critical synthesis abilities, but an acknowledgement of a lack of coherence and structure in my own mind. The ideas were not fully formed in my head before I started writing, so I began writing with no logical sense of where I might end. After this draft feedback, I worked to add in structural devices and to signpost key themes. Proof-reading my own work helped, as it gave me an overall sense of the arguments that I had made.

Managing my time and workload has also been exceptionally challenging this year, as I have balanced full-time teaching, having a young family, completing another qualification and this Masters study. Setting myself clear targets and goals has, therefore, been vital to my success in completing the work. In advance, I planned in specific times in school holidays when I would be able to work on the module. When completing the Stage 2 EMA in the summer break, I worked on it gradually over the whole 6 weeks. This had a negative impact

on my mental health, as I was not rested for the new school term. I learned from this and planned to write the entire dissertation in a two week block, allowing me to enjoy the rest of the summer. Carrying out the PDP Skills Audit, at the beginning of the module enabled me to set personal targets and goals. I reflected heavily on skills 1.3 and 1.4, regarding enthusiasm and work-life balance. This helped me manage my workload and mental health.

**(Entire Word Count: 12008)**

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## Appendix A: Ethical Appraisal Form

# E822 Ethical Appraisal Form

Masters: Education, Childhood and Youth



**NB: it should be noted that The Open University is unable to offer liability insurance to cover any negative consequences students might encounter when undertaking 'in-person' data collection. It is therefore very important that you follow appropriate research protocols which should include seeking Gatekeeper permissions to undertake any data collection within your setting and adhering to ethical principles for the safety of yourself and your**

**Because ethical appraisal should precede data collection, a completed version of this form should be included with TMA02 for those developing a Small-Scale Investigation (SSI) and as part of the EMA submission for those completing an Extended Literature Review and Research Proposal (EP) form of the Dissertation.**

**participants.**

Fill in section 1 of this document with your personal details and brief information about your research.

For section 2, please assess your research using the following questions and click yes or no as appropriate. If there is any possibility of significant risk please tick yes. Even if your list contains all "no" you should still return your completed checklist so your tutor/supervisor can assess the proposed research.

## Section 1: Project details

a.	Student name	Michael Burdett
b.	PI	
c.	Project title	A Study of How Trust, by Teachers, in Middle Leaders Affects the Perceived Practice of Middle Leadership in an English Primary School.
d.	Supervisor/tutor	Maggie Gidney
e.	Qualification	Masters in Education <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
		Masters in Childhood and Youth <input type="checkbox"/>

f.	MA pathway (where applicable)	Leadership and Management
g.	Intended start date for fieldwork	September 2022
h.	Intended end date for fieldwork	April 2023
i.	Country fieldwork will be conducted in  <i>If you are resident in the UK and will be conducting your research abroad please check <a href="http://www.fco.gov.uk">www.fco.gov.uk</a> for advice on travel.</i>	UK

Section 2: Ethics Assessment		Yes	No
1	Does your proposed research need initial clearance from a 'gatekeeper' (e.g. Local Authority, head teacher, college head, nursery/playgroup manager)?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2	Have you checked whether the organisation requires you to undertake a 'police check' or appropriate level of 'disclosure' before carrying out your research? <sup>1</sup>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3	Have you indicated how informed consent will be obtained from your participants (including children less than 16 years old, school pupils and immediate family members)? Your consent letters/forms must inform participants that they have the right to withdraw from the study at any time. <sup>2</sup>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4	Will your proposed research design mean that it will be necessary for participants to take part in the study without their knowledge/consent at the time (e.g. covert observation of people in nonpublic places)? If so have you specified appropriate debriefing procedures? <sup>3</sup>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

<sup>1</sup> You must agree to comply with any ethical codes of practice or legal requirements that maybe in place within the organisation or country (e.g. educational institution, social care setting or other workplace) in which your research will take place. If required an appropriate level of disclosure ('police check') can be obtained from the Disclosure and Barring Service (England and Wales), Disclosure Scotland, AccessNI (Northern Ireland), Criminal Records Office (Republic of Ireland), etc.

<sup>2</sup> This should normally involve the use of an information sheet about the research and what participation will involve, and a signed consent form. You must allow sufficient time for potential participants to consider their decision between the giving of the information sheet and the gaining of consent. No research should be conducted without the opt-in informed consent of participants or their caregivers. In the case of children (individuals under 16 years of age) no research should be conducted without a specified means of gaining their informed consent (or, in the case of young children, their assent) and the consent of their parents, caregivers, or guardians. This is particularly important if your project involves participants who are particularly vulnerable or unable to give informed consent (e.g. children under 16 years, people with learning disabilities, or emotional problems, people with difficulty in understanding or communication, people with identified health problems). There is additional guidance on informed consent on the Masters: Education and Childhood and Youth website under Project Resources.

<sup>3</sup> Where an essential element of the research design would be compromised by full disclosure to participants, the withholding of information should be specified in the project proposal and explicit procedures stated to obviate any potential harm arising from such withholding. Deception or covert collection of data should only take place where it has been agreed with a named responsible person in the organisation and it is essential to achieve the research results required, where the research objective has strong scientific merit and where there is an appropriate risk management and harm alleviation strategy.

5	Does your proposed design involve repetitive observation of participants, (i.e. more than twice over a period of more than 2-3 weeks)? Is this necessary? If it is, have you made appropriate provision for participants to renew consent or withdraw from the study half-way through? <sup>4</sup>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6	Are you proposing to collect video and/or audio data? If so have you indicated how you will protect participants' anonymity and confidentiality and how you will store the data?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7	Does your proposal indicate how you will give your participants the opportunity to access the outcomes of your research (including audio/visual materials) after they have provided data?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8	Have you built in time for a pilot study to make sure that any task materials you propose to use are age appropriate and that they are unlikely to cause offence to any of your participants?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
9	Is your research likely to involve discussion of sensitive topics (e.g. adult/child relationships, peer relationships, discussions about personal teaching styles, ability levels of individual children and/or adults)? What safeguards have you put in place to protect participants' confidentiality?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10	Does your proposed research raise any issues of personal safety for yourself or other persons involved in the project? Do you need to carry out a 'risk analysis' and/or discuss this with teachers, parents and other adults involved in the research?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
11	Will financial inducements (other than reasonable expenses and compensation for time) be offered to participants?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
12	Will the study involve recruitment of patients or staff through the NHS or the use of NHS data?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

If you answered 'yes' to questions **12**, you will also have to submit an application to an appropriate National Research Ethics Service ethics committee (<http://www.nres.npsa.nhs.uk/>).

<sup>4</sup> Where participants are involved in longer-term data collection, the use of procedures for the renewal of consent at appropriate times should be considered.

**Appendix B: Draft Interview Prompts**

This research looks at how middle leaders build trust. It is particularly interested in how you perceive middle leadership actions, and how these may affect trust.

**Warm up:**

1. What is your role?
2. What interested you about taking part in this research?

**Prompts: (Some or all may be asked)**

1. What does trust mean to you?
2. Tell me about the middle leaders in the school? Who are they? What do they do?
3. Is there anything that middle leaders do specifically that you feel is effective/ineffective?
4. Is there anything that middle leaders say specifically that you feel is effective/ineffective?
5. How do middle leaders communicate with you?
6. How do they communicate their values?
7. Do you trust your middle leaders? Why? Why not?
8. What makes a trustworthy leader?
9. Do you feel that the middle leaders here are trustworthy? What makes you trust them?
10. Do you consider middle leaders do be teachers, like you, or a part of the management structure? Perhaps both?
11. Tell me about a time when you have had to trust a middle leader?
12. What makes an untrustworthy leader?
13. What do you think about the middle leadership structure here?
14. How do middle leaders help you do your job?
15. Other questions may arise during the interview. The interviewee will lead the content.

**Appendix C: EMA Reflection Grid**

<b>Category</b>	<b>Feedback received, targets achieved, and areas of development worked on</b>	<b>How did this shape my dissertation?</b>
<p><b>Knowledge and understanding:</b> Targets, reflections or feedback relating to knowledge of current debate and issues in your specific area of focus; drawing out concepts and themes; choosing a focus area for your dissertation; identifying and overcoming ethical issues.</p>	<p>TMA01 Feedback: Initial focus of dissertation is too large. "You are perhaps overly ambitious about a future piece of research"</p>	<p>Throughout the process, I gradually refined the scope of the dissertation, changing parts of the research questions and title.</p>
<p><b>Critical analysis and evaluation:</b> Targets, reflections or feedback relating to justifying or challenging your personal perspective; interpreting and critically analysing evidence and methodologies from your own and others' research; analysing and evaluating themes and issues; sourcing and critically reviewing a wide range of publications; creating an academic argument using synthesis; comparing and connecting practice and theory.</p>	<p>Target from first draft chapter feedback to ensure that I signpost ideas better, to assist with reader's sense-making. This is done through a better synthesis of the literature.</p>	<p>I adapted my chapters, structuring them differently, giving more signposting detail, e.g. subheadings, introduction and conclusions. I also better focussed each paragraph around specific themes/pieces of literature.</p>
<p><b>Links to professional practice:</b> Targets, reflections or feedback relating to: designing and/or applying research methods; developing ideas from previous research and frameworks; reflecting and making adaptations during the research and writing process; addressing problems in research design; identifying implications for practice and professional debate; challenging your own assumptions; managing workload and personal motivation.</p>	<p>As I chose EP, I knew that I would not be (and did not want to be) carrying out the research, so struggled to consider deeply how I would carry out the research in practice, choosing appropriate methodologies, ethics, issues etc.: I ensured that I watched all relevant methods tutorials and carried out further reading, to try and better conceptualise my design.</p>	<p>This struggle shaped my dissertation, as I would argue that my methods chapter is the weakest.</p>
<p><b>Structure, communication and presentation:</b> Targets, reflections or feedback relating to using academic style and referencing; presenting, managing and sharing information in different modes; communicating concepts, findings and ideas for different audiences.</p>	<p>Personal target: To write more clearly for the 'uninformed reader'. Ensure that others can follow my thinking, whilst still maintaining an academic style. (From TMA02 feedback reflections)</p>	<p>I had to consider writing less formally/academically in some parts. For example, using first person, e.g. "I considered..." "I decided..."</p>