



## Open Research Online

### Citation

Williams, Connor (2024). A qualitative case study that explores primary school middle leaders in Wales supporting school improvement through distributed leadership. Student dissertation for The Open University module E822 Masters multi-disciplinary dissertation: education, childhood and youth.

### URL

<https://oro.open.ac.uk/102734/>

### DOI

<https://doi.org/10.21954/ou.ro.00102734>

### License

(CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0) Creative Commons: Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

### Policy

This document has been downloaded from Open Research Online, The Open University's repository of research publications. This version is being made available in accordance with Open Research Online policies available from [Open Research Online \(ORO\) Policies](#)

### Versions

If this document is identified as the Author Accepted Manuscript it is the version after peer review but before type setting, copy editing or publisher branding

**Connor Williams**

E822

EMA Dissertation (Option SSI)

Tutor: Dr Don Bradley

A qualitative case study that explores primary school middle leaders in Wales supporting school improvement through distributed leadership.

## Abstract

This qualitative case study in a Welsh primary school explores the actions, challenges encountered and perceived difference when leadership is distributed to middle leaders to support school improvement. Three middle leaders and two senior leaders participated in a semi-structured questionnaire. The three middle leaders were then interviewed. Inductive thematic analysis of the data discovered that monitoring and target-setting, alongside administrative tasks, were significant actions. A lack of time, and completing administrative tasks were the major challenges identified. The perceived differences were utilising staff experience, expertise and interests and promoting a sense of teamwork when working towards school improvement.

Word count: 98

## Table of Contents

<i>Abstract</i> .....	<b>2</b>
<i>Chapter 1: Introduction</i> .....	<b>5</b>
<i>Chapter 2: Literature Review</i> .....	<b>8</b>
2.1 Introduction .....	<b>8</b>
2.2 The actions of middle leaders.....	<b>9</b>
2.3 The challenges that middle leaders encounter when supporting school improvement .....	<b>11</b>
2.4 Distributed leadership .....	<b>13</b>
2.5 Conclusion.....	<b>15</b>
<i>Chapter 3: Research Design</i> .....	<b>17</b>
3.1 Introduction .....	<b>17</b>
3.2 Philosophical framework .....	<b>17</b>
3.3 Methodology .....	<b>19</b>
3.4 Participants and access .....	<b>20</b>
3.5 Ethics .....	<b>21</b>
3.6 Data gathering .....	<b>23</b>
3.7 Thematic analysis .....	<b>24</b>
3.8 Evaluation .....	<b>25</b>
<i>Chapter 4: Data Presentation and Analysis</i> .....	<b>26</b>
4.1 Introduction .....	<b>26</b>
4.2 The actions of middle leaders supporting school improvement .....	<b>26</b>
4.2.1 Monitoring and setting targets .....	<b>26</b>
4.2.2 Collaborating and networking .....	<b>29</b>
4.3 The challenges that middle leaders identify when supporting school improvement .....	<b>30</b>
4.3.1 Lack of time and completing administrative tasks.....	<b>31</b>
4.3.2 Not enough direction or support from senior leaders .....	<b>33</b>
4.3.3 Motivating colleagues and resistance to change.....	<b>33</b>
4.4 The difference distributing leadership makes to supporting school improvement .....	<b>34</b>
4.4.1 Drawing on staff experience, expertise and interests .....	<b>35</b>
4.4.2 Promotes a sense of teamwork.....	<b>36</b>
4.5 Conclusion.....	<b>37</b>
<i>Chapter 5: Conclusion and Implications</i> .....	<b>38</b>
5.1 Introduction .....	<b>38</b>
5.2 The actions of middle leaders supporting school improvement .....	<b>38</b>
5.3 The challenges middle leaders face when supporting school improvement .....	<b>38</b>

<b>5.4 The difference distributing leadership makes to supporting school improvement .....</b>	<b>39</b>
<b>5.5 Implications for the school .....</b>	<b>40</b>
<b>5.6 Limitations and further research.....</b>	<b>40</b>
<b><i>Chapter 6: Narrative critical reflection .....</i></b>	<b>41</b>
<b><i>Reference List.....</i></b>	<b>43</b>
<b>Appendix A: Ethical Appraisal Form.....</b>	<b>53</b>
<b>Appendix B: Dissertation Ethical Agreement Form.....</b>	<b>56</b>
<b>Appendix C: Information Letter: Questionnaires .....</b>	<b>60</b>
<b>Appendix D: Information Letter for Middle Leader Interviews .....</b>	<b>61</b>
<b>Appendix E: Interviews Consent and Assent Form .....</b>	<b>63</b>
<b>Appendix F: Middle Leader Questionnaire.....</b>	<b>64</b>
<b>Appendix G: Senior Leader Questionnaire .....</b>	<b>65</b>
<b>Appendix H: Middle Leader Interview Questions .....</b>	<b>66</b>
<b>Appendix I: Data Protection Plan.....</b>	<b>67</b>
<b>Appendix J: Participant Summary.....</b>	<b>69</b>
<b>Appendix K: EMA Reflection Grid .....</b>	<b>70</b>

## Chapter 1: Introduction

Reforming the education system in Wales is a national priority (Welsh Government, 2017). Educational reform values the connection between leadership and school improvement (Harris, 2004), of which leadership has a significant impact on school improvement (Wallace, 2002). The multiple policy changes, shifting school curriculum landscape and increased responsibilities have led Headteachers to distribute the school leadership load to middle leaders (Irvine and Brundrett, 2016).

Middle leaders are located between teachers and senior leaders. Their role is varied and complex as they balance teaching commitments alongside a formal leadership position (De Nobile, 2018). Middle leaders occupy a crossing point where various processes converge (Bento et al., 2023) as they are associated with teachers and senior leaders. With their curricular knowledge, teaching experience and pedagogical expertise, middle leaders are talented professionals who can support senior leaders and underpin school improvement (Bush, 2024).

Considering the significant impact leadership has on school improvement and the contribution middle leaders can make, I as the researcher have conducted this small-scale inquiry (SSI) case study of a primary school in Wales, to explore primary school middle leaders supporting school improvement through distributed leadership. The study shares the actions that middle leaders take to support school improvement, the challenges they encounter and the perceived difference that distributing leadership makes.

The findings of this study have the potential to inform decision-making and influence leadership practice with respect to achieving school improvement when leadership is distributed in a primary school. Three research questions (RQ) were developed to understand the contribution middle leaders make to supporting school improvement when leadership is distributed to them, and the challenges encountered. Chapter 2 shares a review of the literature available on the topic and explains the development of the research questions:

*RQ 1 'What actions do middle leaders take to support school improvement?'*

*RQ 2 ‘What are the challenges that middle leaders identify when supporting school improvement?’*

*RQ 3 ‘What difference does distributed leadership make to middle leaders supporting school improvement?’*

The exploratory case study approach was drawn upon for this SSI to gather the participants’ perceptions of events (Cohen et al., 2017). The interpretivist paradigm is employed as middle and senior leaders narrated their reality to be interpreted rather than observed (Corbetta, 2003). Interpretation of the qualitative data identified the views, practices and values displayed by senior and middle leaders when middle leaders engaged with their leadership role. The research paradigm is explained in further detail in Chapter 3. Responding to the research questions provided an opportunity to explore themes studied on the Masters programme, and which constitute the concept of distributed leadership, how it shapes an organisation and how leaders utilise it in an education setting.

Qualitative data was gathered through middle and senior leaders participating in a semi-structured, self-completion questionnaire and then, only middle leaders participated individually in a semi-structured audio-recorded interview. The interviews were then transcribed and analysed alongside the questionnaire data using an inductive logic approach (Denscombe, 2021). Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-step approach to thematic analysis was utilised to analyse the data. The SSI was conducted in a large local authority maintained primary school in Wales. In the school, senior leaders distribute school improvement leadership roles and responsibilities to middle leaders. The aim of this SSI is to explore how middle leaders support school improvement through distributed leadership, the challenges they encounter and to understand middle leaders’ experiences when leadership is distributed to them.

The findings show that the main actions of middle leaders are monitoring, setting targets, collaborating and networking to support school improvement. The main challenges encountered by middle leaders when leadership is distributed to them are: a lack of available time; completing time-consuming administrative tasks; receiving not enough direction or support from senior leaders and motivating their colleagues while addressing resistance to change. The perceived differences that distributing leadership makes are: utilising staff

experience, expertise and interests to achieve school improvement and promoting a sense of teamwork when working towards school improvement. Chapter 4 shares the data analysis and Chapter 5 shares what enables and inhibits middle leaders, in the case study school, as they pursue school improvement when leadership is distributed to them.



## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### 2.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to identify the body of research available regarding the role of primary school middle leaders supporting school improvement through distributed leadership in the United Kingdom (UK).

To identify articles to review, a search was conducted on the Open University library using the terms ‘middle leader’, ‘primary school’, ‘school improvement’, ‘distributed leadership’, ‘Wales’, ‘England’ and ‘Scotland’. The publication date was originally set to identify articles published over the last 10 years; however, it was then expanded to 23 years to return articles published since the pivotal Spillane et al. (2001) article was published on distributed leadership. Initially, the focus was on finding studies based in the UK, but the field is limited and as such, studies from countries with education settings like the UK, such as New Zealand, were reviewed. While New Zealand’s cultural context is different to that of Wales, its education system is similar. Thirteen articles were initially identified and after reading the abstracts, eight articles were shortlisted to be read in detail. While reading the eight shortlisted articles, if the citations shared were relevant to the study, then these were located and reviewed in addition to the eight articles.

A criticism of educational leadership in Wales is its historic reluctance to adopt educational leadership as a solution to supporting school improvement (Reynolds and McKimm, 2021) compared to other settings and contexts (Chapman et al., 2016). A suggested strategy to develop educational leadership and management in Wales is to ‘focus on ‘middle management leadership’, using the large within-school variation that Wales possesses as the ‘driver’ or enabler of change’ (Reynolds and McKimm, 2021, p. 56). Furthermore, Welsh schools display a high level of within-school variation relating to pupil achievement compared to countries of similar socio-economic status (OECD, 2017), which is a further reason to utilise and develop school improvement on an individual school basis. A review by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development identified that the leadership capital of school staff in Wales required attention and developing, and to address this, they recommend that leadership is distributed amongst staff rather than being the sole responsibility of individual leaders (OECD, 2014).

## 2.2 The actions of middle leaders

Middle leaders are the tier between senior leaders and teachers, and they adopt formal roles and responsibilities of school leadership and management (Gurr and Drysdale, 2013). The middle tier in which middle leaders operate is, in the view of Harris et al. (2019), an important tier to create positive change and improvement. In my current setting, the role of a middle leader is diverse and they support the Headteacher to lead school improvement. For example, middle leaders hold responsibility for leading an area of the curriculum that is identified as a target on the school improvement plan; they also take responsibility for leading a phase and manage additional learning needs within their phase. Considering this, I seek to understand how and what middle leaders do to support school improvement when leadership is distributed and therefore, my first research question is, ‘What actions do middle leaders take to support school improvement?’.

Middle leaders have power and agency in driving change in educational contexts compared to other individual leaders, such as Headteachers, because they are close to classroom practice, are more skilled in pedagogy and are aware of the teaching culture and therefore how to address it (Nehez et al., 2022). The study which came to this conclusion (Nehez et al., 2022) was conducted in two comprehensive and two preschools and the participants interviewed were teachers, middle leaders and Headteachers. A limitation of the study is that it solely relies on interview data and translation was not observed in practice. If it were observed, it may have led to deeper understandings of how middle leaders translate ideas to enable school improvement and the impact they have. Additionally, as the study was conducted in four different settings, it is difficult to preserve the social and cultural relations of each context (Røvik, 2016), and the study returned abstract and de-contextualised results.

Middle leadership roles and responsibilities vary considerably in individual contexts, yet they are typically situated within the domains of collegial support and performance and leading and managing others (Lipscombe et al., 2023). Since 2006, middle leaders’ roles and responsibilities are no longer isolated to subject leadership (Bennett et al., 2007) and they have expanded to roles and responsibilities, such as pastoral leaders, year coordinators and heads of department (Gurr, 2019).

A case study carried out by (Bryant et al., 2020), that was small-scale in nature, identified that middle leaders support school improvement by nurturing communication networks and facilitating cross-disciplinary collaboration in school. Additionally, middle leaders are strategists in the innovation and creation of curriculum and progression arrangements (Gurr, 2019), acting as a ‘broker’ between other teachers and members of the senior leadership team, role modelling and encouraging innovative practice (Edwards-Groves et al., 2019). Middle leaders positively inspire colleagues’ perceptions and participation in school life (Li et al., 2021).

A qualitative study conducted in seven Maine (USA) schools by Fairman and Mackenzie (2015) aimed to identify the numerous ways that middle leaders engaged with colleagues to achieve school improvement. The article expands on the importance of relationships, informal collaboration, trust and collegiality as factors that enable school improvement. The successful actions of middle leaders that positively influenced school improvement were: modelling professional attitudes and dispositions, and a willingness to collaborate with colleagues (Fairman and Mackenzie, 2015). However, the article did not establish whether it was the mediating environment in which middle leaders operate, or their direct actions, that have a positive impact on school improvement.

Other positive actions demonstrated by middle leaders were: being open to a range of ideas; a willingness to take risks and reflect on actions; and a desire to question practices. Furthermore, middle leaders coached colleagues in the use of new curriculum practices, and they were strong advocates for change, utilising their position as a broker to enable it (Fairman and Mackenzie, 2015). However, the study failed to discuss in-depth the line management culture that is associated with middle leadership responsibilities, and how managerial tasks that are actioned by middle leaders impact their workload and consume their time, which could be otherwise directed purposefully on leading school improvement. The study also did not provide direct evidence relating to the impact of middle leadership on teacher practice nor school improvement, and it described interpretations of practice where generalisation could not occur.

An earlier study by Dinham (2007) shared the actions and behaviours of middle leaders operating in what he described as high-performing schools. Dinham (2007) identified eight commonalities relating to middle leaders’ behaviours and actions: (1) they are enthusiastic

and committed; (2) they demonstrate a deep understanding of content knowledge and they role model new practices; (3) they locate and utilise resources to support their colleagues; (4) they operate effective communication practices and robustly evaluate and improve practices; (5) they cultivate a culture based on investment and collaboration; (6) they encourage and nurture others; (7) they create a shared vision and model and expect high standards of professional practice; and (8) they have a genuine investment in learners' learning and attainment, and value their personal and social development. Moreover, effective middle leaders play a significant role in facilitating and modelling professional learning, demonstrating receptivity towards school improvement initiatives and enhancing learning experiences for their learners (Li et al., 2021). However, the study does not illustrate the methods and strategies used by the middle leaders to enable a leadership environment in which effective actions, which contribute to school improvement, can take place.

### 2.3 The challenges that middle leaders encounter when supporting school improvement

In my setting, middle leaders have responsibility for their own class, managing and leading a team of staff in their phase, supporting the needs of learners with additional learning needs and leading an area of the curriculum such as Languages, Literacy and Communication. Whilst upholding these responsibilities, middle leaders are expected to contribute to school improvement and therefore, it is my intention to explore research question two: 'What are the challenges that middle leaders identify when supporting school improvement?' to understand the difficulties they encounter.

The literature identifies major challenges associated with being a middle leader in schools, as Headteachers depend on their staff to share the increasing leadership and management burden. In Wales, the burden is significant considering the Welsh Government's (2017) intention to reform the curriculum and involve all stakeholders at school level in the process. It would be a challenge 'to find an educational system anywhere in the world that has been changed in its formal structures more than that of Wales in the last two decades' (Reynolds and Mckimm, 2020, p. 133). Middle leaders feel their workload has increased significantly because they are completing tasks that Headteachers would have previously completed themselves (Larusdottir and O'Connor, 2017). As a result, the time spent by middle leaders addressing administrative tasks is time taken from leading and supporting school

improvement (Larusdottir and O'Connor, 2017). On the other hand, the study reports that Headteachers are unwilling to let go of control or relinquish responsibility and accountability. In other words, middle leaders are led to believe they are taking responsibility for tasks when they are not. The study also identified the challenge of middle leaders balancing the demands of the role alongside their commitments to teaching a class.

A separate study (Bassett and Shaw, 2018) identified the position of the middle leader in a school environment challenging. Being positioned in the 'middle' of the school's hierarchy, between other teachers and senior leaders, was a source of tension for middle leaders as they acted as a communication link and advocate of their colleagues (Bassett and Shaw, 2018). While middle leaders are associated with both the teaching and senior leadership team, Struyve et al. (2014) argue middle leaders can feel a sense of loneliness as they do not belong anywhere. A middle leader's association with senior leaders and teachers means they must manage relationships longitudinally and these relationships present them with difficult challenges (Bassett and Shaw, 2018). Specifically, addressing divisive colleagues and those not adhering to school procedures cause middle leaders to feel stressed and frustrated.

A further challenge for middle leaders that was identified in Bassett and Shaw's (2018) study was middle leaders did not receive adequate non-contact time to enact their role, and this challenge has also been identified in other literature (Struyve et al., 2014; Irvine and Brundrett, 2016). Furthermore, providing middle leaders with adequate time was even more challenging in a primary school setting, the study explained, as primary school middle leaders are responsible for the same group of children for the week. Arranging class cover so they can be released for middle leader responsibilities and spending as little time as possible away from the classroom was a challenging balancing act. Furthermore, as previously explored, when middle leaders were released from the classroom, they enacted management tasks rather than leadership tasks (Bassett and Shaw, 2018).

A final key finding of Bassett and Shaw's (2018) study was that middle leaders were experiencing a lack of confidence and feeling that they were not able to enact middle leadership responsibilities. Middle leaders' leadership identity was not strong and was built on their colleagues' perception of them as leaders. Considering this, Gronn (1999) suggests a middle leader's self-belief sets the path for how a middle leader will approach the role and enact leadership. Moreover, he suggests one's positive feelings, self-esteem and competence

are valuable dispositions to enable a middle leader to successfully support school improvement (Gronn, 1999).

The present literature on middle leadership identifies the challenges of autonomy and responsibility conflicting with one-another (Donitsa-Schmidt and Zuzovsky, 2020). It also identifies middle leaders experience acute demands and challenges from senior leaders above them and teachers below them (Fullan, 2010). Despite there being several challenges which middle leaders face, the literature does not focus on the support and development middle leaders require to be effective in their role; rather, the literature is populated with the roles of middle leaders and the practices they engage with in varying contexts (Fleming 2013; De Nobile, 2017; Harris et al., 2019).

## 2.4 Distributed leadership

Distributed leadership is defined as ‘the expansion of leadership roles in schools, beyond those in formal leadership or administrative posts’ (Harris, 2010, p. 55). Distributed leadership is underpinned by the inclusion of formal and informal approaches, and vertical and horizontal dimensions of leadership (Harris, 2010) where any member of the organisation has the power to contribute to shared decision-making, and to lead and influence others (Bush, 2011). By 2009, distributed leadership was recognised as ‘a mantra for reshaping leadership practice’ (Seashore Louis et al., 2009, p. 159) and official organisations continue to encourage schools to adopt it as a practice and leadership ideal (OECD, 2014; Estyn, 2020; Estyn, 2024). As such, distributed leadership is intentionally practised in schools due to its strong connection to improve learner outcomes and facilitate school improvement (Leithwood et al., 2020). As a consequence of the popular adoption and application of distributed leadership, there are critics who share reservations over distributed leadership being widely adopted in schools (Lumby, 2013; Lumby 2018). It is also noted that ‘distributed’, ‘shared’ or ‘collective’ leadership are used interchangeably in the literature, which leads to confusion and debate over its meaning (Harris, 2012). Therefore, it is my intention to explore how distributing leadership supports school improvement through the third research question, ‘What difference does distributed leadership make to middle leaders supporting school improvement?’.

Distributed leadership is strongly advocated in the literature and is portrayed as having the potential to replace or supplement other models of leadership, such as ‘heroic’, ‘top-down’ and ‘transactional’ (Bush and Glover, 2012). However, ‘it is more difficult to empirically investigate distributed leadership because of multiple sources of influence’ (Harris et al., 2022, p. 441). Therefore, the literature does not prescribe a means to implement distributed leadership to nurture school improvement and it is acknowledged that distributed leadership has been understood and implemented in diverse ways (Diamond and Spillane, 2016). For example, Bush and Glover (2012), based on their findings, exercise Gronn’s (2010b) theory of ‘hybrid’ leadership, which combines solo and distributed practices, and it is the approach adopted by high-performing leadership teams in their study. This aligns with Harris’ (2004) view that there is no specific prescription of distributed leadership.

Distributed leadership is a redistribution of leadership to middle leaders in non-formal leadership roles, which includes not only leading but managing. The former may involve facilitating professional learning, while the latter may involve reporting and managing school budgets. A review by Lipscombe et al. (2023) discovered that when leadership was distributed to middle leaders, their time was consumed by managerial tasks in place of leadership tasks. Holloway et al.’s (2018) study discovered bureaucratic managerial expectations hindered leadership and were priorities for middle leaders in schools where a distributed leadership approach was not successful. Although there is no agreement among scholars regarding how distributed leadership in practice should be enacted (Patterson et al., 2021), in school contexts where effective practice was identified, the Headteacher promoted a culture where teachers’ skills and knowledge were valued, and teachers were expected to support school improvement in a strategic capacity (DeMatthews, 2015).

On the other hand, attempts to purposely distribute leadership failed in schools where middle leaders were not given the power or agency to practise leadership, and on occasions when they were unprepared to lead on given responsibilities (Patterson et al., 2021). Larusdottir and O’Connor’s (2017) small-scale research study explored the middle leader’s role through a theoretical distributed leadership lens. The middle leader was placed at the centre of distributed leadership and the study explored how the individual experienced leadership practice from a distributed perspective. The research discovered middle leaders are enacting the role yet, frustrations arise from middle leaders feeling powerless, as their practice and actions can have an ineffective impact on others. A limitation of the study is that the research

was conducted across a range of settings and contexts from pre-school to secondary schools, meaning there is a high variance in how middle and senior leaders operate in the differing school settings.

Considering distributed leadership has been studied broadly (Harris, 2008), its theoretical and empirical foundations are not significant, and no conclusive evidence was presented that portrayed distributed leadership as having a direct or spontaneous impact on school improvement (Hartley, 2010). However, in recent research (Harris et al., 2022) it was discovered that, under the correct conditions, distributed leadership is a contributor to positively influencing school improvement. The evidence available suggests that it is *how* leadership is distributed that matters most of all as successful distribution occurs from careful and informed design (Harris et al., 2022). Critiques of distributed leadership would suggest that its distribution can be disguised as an elegant version of delegation where responsibility for finishing tasks is at the instruction of the school's hierarchy (Hall et al., 2012).

## 2.5 Conclusion

Distributed leadership is well regarded in the literature as an approach to cultivate organisational change and support school improvement (Harris, 2008; Leithwood et al., 2007; Leithwood et al., 2020). However, there is minimal empirical work linking school leadership teams and distributed leadership (Bush and Glover, 2012); rather, current literature focuses on the role of leaders in formal leadership positions delivering school improvement (Patterson et al., 2021). The literature provides limited clarity on how leadership is distributed, who distributes leadership and what is distributed. It acknowledges that Headteachers are leadership gatekeepers and management architects in schools, and are in control of staff contribution to leadership and management. Nevertheless, the role of a middle leader is a demanding one, and it requires skills beyond those associated with a classroom teacher role; ones that are acquired in time with experience (Irvine and Brundrett, 2016).

Research on middle leaders supporting school improvement through distributed leadership in primary schools is limited from the United Kingdom. A significant proportion of the recent literature consulted originates from countries outside of the UK, including Ireland, Iceland, New Zealand and the USA (Bassett and Shaw, 2018; Larusdottir and O'Connor's, 2017; Fairman and Mackenzie, 2015; Holloway et al., 2018). This literature review has identified a



shortfall in qualitative studies relating to middle leaders supporting school improvement through distributed leadership in primary schools. One research paper was identified that investigated the effectiveness of distributed leadership in primary schools in Wales (Wallace, 2002); but no more recent studies were located. Therefore, my qualitative case study can contribute to the field of knowledge and understanding, in a contextualised manner, of what support and development opportunities middle leaders require to be effective enablers of school improvement in their role.

## Chapter 3: Research Design

### 3.1 Introduction

The literature review chapter identified a shortage of qualitative studies exploring how primary school middle leaders support school improvement through distributed leadership. The literature shared that distributed leadership does have the potential to positively influence school improvement if it is carefully distributed in an informed manner (Harris et al., 2022), and that middle leaders play an important role as brokers between senior leaders and classroom teachers (Bush, 2024). The aim of this SSI was to explore how middle leaders support school improvement through distributed leadership, the challenges they encountered and to understand the experiences of middle leaders when leadership is distributed to them. The data and conclusions from this SSI can then inform decision-making and influence practice in the ‘case’ primary school.

The purpose of this chapter is to share my pragmatic position in response to the research questions and to explain the purpose of the case study approach adopted for this SSI. This chapter will also share my research position, the methods used to gather data, ethical considerations and how the data will be interpreted.

### 3.2 Philosophical framework

This SSI explored how primary school middle leaders support school improvement through distributed leadership. It focused on their actions, the challenges they encountered and how distributed leadership contributed to the overall improvement of the school. The research questions were:

*RQ 1 ‘What actions do middle leaders take to support school improvement?’*

*RQ 2 ‘What are the challenges that middle leaders identify when supporting school improvement?’*

*RQ 3 ‘What difference does distributed leadership make to middle leaders supporting school improvement?’*

The research questions were created to complement research methods that enabled me to gather qualitative data to gain meaning by revealing and understanding middle leaders' experiences in practice (Robson, 2002). As I gathered the individual experiences of middle leaders and gained a narrative of their reality to be interpreted rather than observed, this study is interpretivist (Corbetta, 2003). My ontological world view is constructivism (Grix, 2002), whereby what there is to understand about the world 'is that of meanings attributed by individuals' (Corbetta, 2003, p. 16). A qualitative-interpretive approach identified the middle leaders' views, practices and values when enacting middle leader responsibilities in school (Atkins and Wallace, 2016). By adopting an interpretivist approach to this SSI, I acknowledged that there may be, to some extent, subjectivity regarding the researcher and participants (Atkins and Wallace, 2016), and this posed a risk to contaminating the data. Therefore, when interpreting the data I ensured steps were taken to mitigate against the influence of my values, viewpoint and preconceptions influencing the conclusions drawn from the data.

My research position was insider; I am a middle leader in the primary school in which this SSI was conducted. My knowledge and understanding of the school and context in which the middle leaders operate positively supported the analysis of the data and representation of the middle leaders' perspectives (Thomas, 2023). While insider research is associated with ethnographic research, it is gaining interest in educational research and is relevant to this SSI because it is a means to achieve an in-depth introspection (Greene, 2014) to narrate middle leaders' realities and stories. Conducting this SSI in my own setting and sharing similar formative experiences with participants meant I could understand their cognitive, emotional and psychological behaviours and precepts (Chavez, 2008). Furthermore, participants were more likely to discuss their experiences with me as I understand the environment and context (Bell, 2010). However, as I was familiar with these, I may be too subjective (Atkins and Wallace, 2016) and impede analysis of the data. There was a risk of bias where my own values and experiences could influence the methodology, or my own views were projected on to the participants or the analysis of the data (Teusner, 2020).

### 3.3 Methodology

I drew upon the exploratory case study approach for this SSI and the primary school in which I am a middle leader, my middle leader colleagues and my senior leaders represented the ‘case’ (Robson, 2002; Cohen et al., 2017). A case study reflects real people in authentic situations and can support understanding by penetrating contexts to gather participants’ perceptions of events (Cohen et al., 2017; Hitchcock and Hughes, 1989). In school, case studies can be beneficial to inform decisions and influence practice (Bassey, 1999). For this methodology to be effective, the researcher should have a comprehensive understanding of the ‘case’ (Cohen et al., 2017). Considering this, my position as an insider researcher and middle leader in the school enabled me to investigate the research questions in-depth (Costley et al., 2010).

The case involved the perspectives of three middle leaders, one Deputy Headteacher and one Headteacher in a large local authority maintained primary school in Wales. The exploratory case study approach was utilised to explore the research questions in-depth (Yin, 2009). The benefits of using a case study approach were that it had the potential to capture specific descriptions that could support understanding of the situation, and it reflects reality and social truths (Cohen et al., 2017). A case study is unambiguous and can inform practice and influence decisions because it can return actionable results (Cohen et al., 2017). However, case studies are not generalisable, replicable or representative, which limits the wider impact of the findings of the study (Denscombe, 2021). Considering this, it was not my intention to generalise this case to others; rather, it was my aim to understand the case (Thomas, 2023).

Hallmarks of a reliable case study are transparency and trustworthiness (Adams, 2011) to ensure it is reliable and valid. As the interpretive paradigm comes before the case study, their association has led to criticism with respect to its reliability and validity; this means it can be difficult to maintain traditionally high research standards (Adams, 2011). To achieve the hallmarks of a reliable case study, Cohen et al. (2017, p. 381) suggests achieving concurrent validity by ‘using multiple sources and kinds of evidence to address research questions and to yield convergent validity’. Therefore, I collected and analysed multiple sources of evidence in the form of questionnaires and semi-structured interviews to respond to the research questions and yield convergent validity.

An exploratory case study was used to arrive at an educated initial perception of events relating to school improvement and distributed leadership. When constructing this SSI, I did not identify a problem in my setting which I intended to solve. Instead, I sought to explore the topic of middle leaders supporting school improvement through distributed leadership and research an area of leadership that presents a problem that is not clearly defined (Epler, 2019). An exploratory case study complemented this SSI because it could ‘advance the understanding of a topic for which a clear understanding does not necessarily exist’ (Epler, 2019, p. 29).

### 3.4 Participants and access

The challenges and opportunities presented by curriculum reform (Welsh Government, 2017) have led to a thorough self-evaluation of practices and the curriculum provision in the case school. This process has resulted in the school identifying new school improvement plan targets to improve and achieve curriculum reform. As such, senior leaders have drawn on the leadership capital and expertise of middle leaders to support the school’s reform and improvement journey by distributing leadership to them. Considering this, all senior and middle leaders were intentionally selected as participants for this SSI and they, including me, represent the school’s leadership team. The senior leadership team consists of a Headteacher and a Deputy Headteacher. The middle leadership team consists of three of my colleagues, who are responsible for their own class and phase in the school. By exploring how middle leaders support school improvement through distributed leadership in this SSI, I gained invaluable insight into middle leaders’ perspectives and experiences when enacting their role and responsibilities (Cohen et al., 2017). Furthermore, as the senior leaders are leadership gatekeepers who distribute leadership to middle leaders to achieve school improvement (Estyn, 2020), their perceptions and experiences were valuable in understanding how and why leadership is distributed to middle leaders (Cohen et al., 2017).

The Headteacher is the gatekeeper in this setting and granted me permission to conduct this SSI, providing me with formal access to the research participants (Wanat, 2008). While I was granted permission by the Headteacher to conduct my SSI in school, this did not mean that I automatically earned the cooperation of the Headteacher and participants. Being an insider researcher meant that I was aware of the social structure of the school, so I could successfully negotiate entry to conduct my SSI (Berg, 2004) and invite colleagues to participate. The

Headteacher supported the SSI as I explained that I would use a case study approach to generate data that can inform decisions and influence practice (Bassey, 1999). Some middle leaders held reservations about participating, before they were reassured that their contributions would be confidential and not shared with senior leaders. By addressing these concerns, the middle leaders were willing to contribute data that could inform practice to support school improvement (Wanat, 2008). Social access to participants was gained through the trust and rapport I have because of positive collegial relationships (Clark, 2011).

### 3.5 Ethics

Cohen et al. (2017) articulates ‘do no harm to participants’ and throughout the SSI process, this statement was upheld to the highest standard. In preparation to act ethically and uphold ethical considerations, I completed the ‘Ethical Researcher’ online badged course, which shared the importance of ethical considerations at each stage of the research process (Open University, 2023). Ethical issues are not straight-forward and are contextually situated, which means it is the responsibility of the researcher to make decisions with ethics in mind (Cohen et al., 2017). Being a ‘virtuous researcher’ is not about simple rule-following and rather, it is about a way of being when engaging with the research process. It was necessary to act with integrity, with the interests of participants at the centre of all decisions and ensure no actions harm participants.

To uphold ‘do no harm to participants’, I completed an Ethical Appraisal form (appendix A) and completed an ethical assessment to identify any risks the SSI may present. I then met with the Headteacher to complete the Ethical Agreement Form (appendix B) and gained written consent to proceed with the SSI. Strike (2006, p. 58) explains ‘research products must be warranted’ and during my meeting with the Headteacher, I explained the purpose of, and justification for, the SSI. The Headteacher was supportive of my request and raised no further questions or concerns regarding ethics.

Before formally inviting each participant to participate in the research, I explained the SSI and its purpose to them individually. During this time, I verbally explained that they are not obliged to take part and participation was voluntary. If participants agreed to participate during the conversation, I explained that I would send an information letter as a formal invitation. This letter would provide further details about the SSI, allowing them to make an

informed decision about their participation. During the conversational invite and formal invite, I reiterated that participation was voluntary, and that they have the right to withdraw at any time without providing a reason (Wyse et al., 2017).

Not holding any positional power over my colleagues, as they are also a middle leader or a senior leader, meant hierarchical power did not influence their decision to participate. Emails were sent to the Headteacher and Deputy Headteacher containing a letter (appendix C) about the SSI and an invite to participate in a senior leadership questionnaire (appendix G). Middle leaders received an email containing a questionnaire information letter (appendix C), an interview information letter (appendix D) and an interview consent form (appendix E). The letters also shared further information about the steps that were taken to ensure strict data protection and confidentiality. A convenient time and suitable location to conduct the semi-structured interview was agreed with individual middle leaders.

When facilitating the semi-structured interview, I explained to the participants once again that procedures were in place to ensure their data was protected and their contributions would be confidential. Furthermore, they were informed what the research is about, why they have been invited to participate and how the information shared would be used. Participants were reminded that participation was voluntary, and that they had the right to withdraw from the study. Before recording the interview, I obtained verbal consent to proceed with recording. Participants were informed again that, while steps will be taken to anonymise their participation, due to the small-scale nature of the study, they might be identified by deduction (BERA, 2019). Considering this, all participants were willing to proceed and participate in the semi-structured interview and gave informed consent.

Being an insider researcher and interviewing my colleagues presented certain challenges. For example, having the dual role of researcher and colleague may have altered the information that participants shared with me, and moving forward, it will be necessary to maintain confidentiality throughout the collegial relationship in the setting post-research (Coghlan and Brannick, 2005). To address this, Van den Hoonaard (2002) suggests self-reflexivity, which involves me, as the researcher, accounting for my own consciousness. Good practice was forming and maintaining an appropriate degree of social and emotional distance to not influence their responses and data analysis (Greene, 2014).

### 3.6 Data gathering

Two research methods were used to gather qualitative data to respond to the research questions. Both senior and middle leaders participated in a semi-structured, self-completion questionnaire (appendix F and G) and following this, only middle leaders participated in a semi-structured interview (appendix H). Senior leaders were not interviewed to reduce the volume of data gathered for this SSI and with a school inspection due, their increased workload would have made it challenging for them to accommodate being interviewed. As case studies have multiple variables at play, utilising more than one data collection method was necessary to identify the effects of the variables (Cohen et al., 2017).

Before administering the questionnaire and conducting the interviews, both methods were piloted with two senior leaders and two middle leaders in a separate primary school. The purpose of piloting the methods was to discover how long it took to complete, to identify any questions that could not be answered and why, and to ensure participants were not presented with challenges when completing it (Bell, 2010; Briggs et al., 2012). Additionally, piloting the methods enabled me to conduct a preliminary analysis of the test data to establish whether the questions would return appropriate responses (Bell, 2010). The piloting stage of the questionnaire and semi-structured interview was successful, yielding positive responses and appropriate data that highlighted initial themes. Following the piloting stage, no adaptations were made to the questionnaire or interview questions.

A questionnaire was a suitable method to gather personal and honest responses from participants (Denscombe, 2021). Furthermore, a questionnaire captured authentic and rich responses purposefully, which are hallmarks of valid qualitative data (Cohen et al., 2017; Burton and Bartlett, 2005). Following administration of the questionnaire, I conducted semi-structured interviews with three middle leaders. Interviews was a flexible research tool (Coleman, 2012) and interviewing enabled me to gain knowledge through the act of conversing (Kvale, 2008). Unlike the questionnaire, the semi-structured interview enabled me to ask participants questions and depending on their response, ask follow-up questions to explore their response further and in more detail (Coleman, 2012). The interview method allowed me to explore and reveal the nuanced accounts of the participants' life worlds (Cohen et al., 2017). Additionally, the interview method empowered participants to respond to



questions (Kvale, 2008) and share their own narrative from their situation and perspective, which generated rich data for analysis (Adams, 2011).

Before conducting the interviews, I ensured I was familiar with the interview questions. With participants' permission to record the interview, I made only essential notes during the interview, ensuring I listened attentively to demonstrate my engagement in the conversation. When appropriate, follow-up questions were asked to clarify stilted or not-forthcoming responses (Drew et al., 2008). All middle leader participants explained at the end of the interview that they felt at ease, and enjoyed the opportunity to reflect on and discuss their professional role. During the interview, my biases and values were not revealed to ensure the participants had the opportunity to tell their own story without judgement (Cohen et al., 2017). Each interview was then transcribed and during the transcription process, interview notes were added to the transcription that the audio recording did not capture, such as the tone of voice, emphasis of response, the mood of the participant and pauses during responses.

### 3.7 Thematic analysis

The data generated was stored in line with a Data Protection Plan (appendix I). The participants' data was stored in a password protected folder on a password protected device. Each participant was given a code to distinguish their response and differentiate responses from middle leaders and those from senior leaders. An inductive logic approach (Denscombe, 2021) was used to analyse the data and seek answers to the research questions. Thematic analysis, adhering to Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step method, was used to identify emerging patterns and themes relating to the research questions. The participants' responses were then used to construct broader themes and create a theory linking the themes (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2017).

The literature reviewed as part of this SSI and my position as an insider researcher contributed to the analysis and representation of the participants' perspectives (Thomas, 2023). Drawing on thematic analysis to analyse the questionnaire and interview data was an action to ensure the findings were trustworthy, and credibility was achieved by triangulating the data at the point of analysis (Guba, 1981). Adhering to a realist thematic analysis method, the experiences, meanings and participants' realities were reported (Braun and Clarke, 2006). I used my judgement as an insider researcher to determine the naturally occurring themes and

their significance regarding the research questions (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Using the inductive approach, the data was coded without an attempt to fit it into a pre-existing coding frame and with no commitment to my theoretical or epistemological interests. During data analysis, I noticed patterns that were of potential interest, and these were revisited throughout the analysis to report the content and explain the patterns identified.

There were some disadvantages of thematic analysis, which I considered when analysing the data. It has limited interpretive influence beyond description if it is not associated with an existing theoretical framework to support the claims (Braun and Clarke, 2006). In this instance, the available literature and its findings were used to cross-reference conclusions. Furthermore, thematic analysis is subjective, and themes are not confirmed unless they are quality assured by research colleagues (Thomas, 2023); however, this was not an option as I was a solo researcher undertaking a Masters qualification.

### 3.8 Evaluation

The data gathered from the research methods was rich to analyse and respond to the research questions. The questionnaire gathered data effectively in a timely manner; however, it did not capture in-depth data, such as the participants' thoughts and feelings, compared to the interview data. This was apparent when analysing the questionnaire data alongside the interview data to achieve convergent validity. The flexibility of the interview method and the ability to ask follow-up questions during the interview to explore responses further (Coleman, 2012) provided valuable data. During this SSI, senior leaders were not interviewed. However, if they were, it would have benefited the study and provided greater insight, from a senior leader perspective, to respond to the research questions.

## Chapter 4: Data Presentation and Analysis

### 4.1 Introduction

The questionnaires and interview transcripts were coded and thematically analysed revealing common themes evident in the data. The data shared how primary school middle leaders support school improvement through distributed leadership; identifying their actions, the challenges they face and the difference distributing leadership makes to achieving school improvement. The aim of this analysis is to inform decisions and influence practice in the case study school. A table containing contextual information for each participant is shared in appendix J.

### 4.2 The actions of middle leaders supporting school improvement

RQ1 - *‘What actions do middle leaders take to support school improvement?’*

#### 4.2.1 Monitoring and setting targets

Monitoring activities emerged as the most significantly engaged-with action that middle leaders undertake as part of their responsibilities. This varied from monitoring pupils’ books, facilitating ‘listening to learners’ discussions and monitoring an area of the curriculum which they are responsible for. In this school, each middle leader is given the title of curriculum lead for their own subject, and they are responsible for monitoring progress and standards in that curriculum area. Both middle and senior leaders shared that middle leaders monitor to support school improvement because they are responsible for areas of the curriculum (Bush, 2024).

*ML1 ‘I scrutinise pupil work to support or generate improvement targets.’*

*ML2 ‘As part of the school’s monitoring cycle I have responsibility of overseeing the Health and Well-being curriculum.’*

*ML3 ‘So what I do is I oversee the long-term planning for that subject to make sure that there is coverage, progression and consistency. I then do listening to learners, learning walks, book looks, book scrutiny and sharing of practice.’*

*SL1 'Middle leaders monitor progress of school improvement initiatives.'*

*SL2 – 'Middle leaders continually evaluate the effectiveness of teaching and learning via monitoring activities including book scrutiny, data analysis and professional dialogue with colleagues.'*

The redistribution of school leadership and managerial responsibilities to middle leaders has been in response to an increased focus on school improvement (Grice, 2019). Considering their pedagogical and content knowledge, middle leaders can positively influence school improvement (Bryant, 2019) through monitoring practices and, in response to their findings, share effective practice, mentor colleagues and set targets. Lipscombe et al. (2021) suggests it is middle leaders' pedagogical and content knowledge that are the source of their authority. ML2 commented on setting targets and creating action plans following monitoring activities to support school improvement. SL2 explained middle leaders set targets following monitoring activities to engage teaching staff to achieve school improvement.

*ML2 'I ensure I have a rapid action plan in place to deliver the targets that I have set out.'*

*SL2 'Following monitoring activity rapid action plans are shared with staff and targets/expectations are clearly conveyed.'*

Part of the monitoring and target setting process is maintaining up-to-date pedagogical and content knowledge to support staff and school improvement. ML2 and ML3 commented on the need to independently maintain up-to-date knowledge regarding their area to effectively monitor and address school improvement plan targets. Whereas ML1 shared an interest in the curriculum area which they lead, but they do not class themselves as a specialist.

*ML2 'I'm trying to keep myself in with the current, you know, new things that are going on and then trying to adopt those strategies and put those in place in our school.'*

*ML3 'I know what, for example, I might teach reception, but I need to know what is achievable in year six and what is realistic.'*

*ML1 'There are aspects of Humanities that I like, but I wouldn't in no way, shape or form class myself as an expert.'*

It is suggested that distributing and specifically assigning titled leadership roles and responsibilities to middle leaders is progressive (Gronn, 2010a) and can promote ownership, leadership practice and a moral commitment to the role (Grootenboer and Hardy, 2017). This, in turn, can build capacity for school improvement (Grice, 2019). If middle leaders are to achieve school improvement through monitoring and setting targets, they need to be willing to lead, develop their professional learning and engage in research (Wilkinson and Kemmis, 2015) to support their colleagues and the school. When delegating roles to middle leaders, senior leaders consider middle leaders' strengths and expertise and their areas for development.

*SL1 'I follow their strengths and expertise. I delegate areas that they are not familiar with to promote professional development.'*

*SL2 'Middle leaders' strengths and professional development skills and areas to be developed are taken into consideration and tasks can sometimes be delegated according to this.'*

Distributing leadership is not as simple as giving a role to a middle leader (Youngs, 2017). To monitor and lead their curriculum area effectively and achieve school improvement, it is recommended that senior leaders support middle leaders' professional development (Koh et al., 2011) in the areas of leading and management, teaching, learning and the curriculum (Thorpe and Bennett-Powell, 2014). In turn, this will prepare middle leaders to accurately identify, implement and monitor attainable ways to achieve school improvement.

### 4.2.2 Collaborating and networking

Middle leaders collaborate with senior leaders and staff, operating as a broker between the two, to influence school improvement. To enable school improvement, they explore and utilise professional networks to gain knowledge and practices. ‘Collaborating builds trust’ (Grice, 2019, p. 166) and mediating a school environment where trust is valued encourages interaction and collective action towards school improvement.

Middle leaders described, in a positive manner, ways in which they collaborate with their colleagues and engage in professional networks. To extend their professional effectiveness, middle leaders explained they openly seek advice and support, work with their colleagues, mentor others and, through collaborating, enable improvement.

*ML1 ‘So I feel more than confident to speak to anyone who is a middle leader.’*

*ML3 ‘I am able to encourage teamwork in the foundation phase... I think that is one of my skills that I am good at is that I can get everybody onboard and work together with a high level of enthusiasm.’*

Where distributed leadership is present and staff are collaborating, the combination contributes to school improvement (Harris, 2004) and a school’s capacity to develop. In the school, middle leaders spoke highly of their commitment to supporting the staff they lead, nurturing collaborative relationships and portraying themselves as approachable.

*ML3 ‘I would like to think that the staff feel well supported, that they know that they can come and ask me anything. And I support them, even when perhaps it’s a little bit unpopular.’*

Accessing the wider education community through professional networks was described by all middle leaders as a way to seek support and benefit school improvement. Middle leaders shared experiences when they accessed professional learning networks and returned to school with ideas to develop staff and pupil learning. A hallmark role of middle leaders is to support and collaborate with teachers in the sole interest of pupils’ learning (Fitzgerald and Gunter, 2006).

*ML1 'If you go to a different school, for example, and identify a good practice, you'd then want to bring it back to help school improvement in our school.'*

*ML2 'I came about Jigsaw [a school improvement] through network meetings.'*

*ML3 'I also enjoy working with colleagues outside of the school building such as cluster work.'*

Knowledge and authority can be distributed to middle leaders to influence practices and others (Bush, 2014) in school. Following engagement with a professional network, middle leaders explained distributed leadership empowered them to facilitate staff meetings to share the knowledge and influence practices in the school. Senior leaders described middle leaders contributing to staff meetings as a meaningful way to engage teaching staff in school improvement initiatives. Time allocated to allow staff to meet is an opportunity to have structured discussions relating to school improvement priorities and strategies.

In response to RQ1, middle leaders enact several actions to address their responsibilities and carry out their role in school. A significant part of their role relates to monitoring standards and progress in the curriculum area, which they are responsible for. Middle leaders lead teachers and learning, drawing on and valuing the benefits of collaborating with their colleagues. Middle leaders engage with professional learning networks in the interest of improving their professional learning and that of their colleagues. Their actions balance learning and leading to support their teachers and senior leaders to achieve school improvement.

### 4.3 The challenges that middle leaders identify when supporting school improvement

*RQ2 - 'What are the challenges that middle leaders identify when supporting school improvement?'*

### 4.3.1 Lack of time and completing administrative tasks

As middle leaders balance the increasing leadership and management burden with acute demands placed upon them (Fullan, 2010), it has generated time constraints. Lack of time presented as a dominant challenge for middle leaders and as a barrier to supporting school improvement. Both middle and senior leaders described the limited availability of time and time pressures as a challenge faced by middle leaders.

*ML1 'We don't get an awful lot of non-contact time at all and at the moment, I'd say there's lots of time constraints.'*

*ML3 'I would say time is the biggest challenge of all. I would like to have non-contact time because I've had one day.'*

ML3 further explained that a challenge relating to time is when senior leaders assign unexpected, ad hoc tasks to be completed. Senior leaders do not allocate non-contact time to achieve the task and make unreasonable assumptions that the task can be completed in class during the teaching day.

*ML3 'When I'm set a task and I'm not given any time to do it and they say, well, it's okay, you can sit in the corner in golden time and do it.'*

During the interview, a further challenge that ML3 experienced, which stemmed from a lack of time, was having to complete middle leader tasks at home.

*ML3 'So we're all moaning about time, but we always make the time. If it's in our own time, if it's, you know, evenings, weekends, we still do it.'*

Senior leaders acknowledged that middle leaders are challenged by a lack of time, and this contributes to overwhelming workloads (Lipscombe et al., 2023) when enacting their role in school.

*SL2 'Lack of time and time management can be a big challenge especially as middle leaders also have a full-time class teacher role.'*



Larusdottir and O'Connor (2017) explain that a middle leadership role can be demanding and a commitment to teaching a class only adds to the workload. All middle leaders explained administrative roles are a burden on their time and attention. This was especially the case when they lacked confidence, which resulted in a distraction from leadership and minimal time for it (Bassett and Shaw, 2018; Fitzgerald, 2009).

*ML1 'Take for instance something basic, like return-to-work interviews. That's challenging because there's no time in my day for that and that's not leadership, that's management. And these time constraints impact upon my capacity to undertake or achieve leadership tasks.'*

*ML2 'As Phase Leader, there is no time for me to write behaviour letters to parents. But, if it comes to me, the expectation is I've written a letter and sent an email and written in a book and sent it back to a teacher on the same day. If you're going to do it, you have to stop teaching to do it.'*

Allocation of time contributes a significant role in enabling distributed leadership (Denee and Thornton, 2021). However, middle leaders expressed that their working conditions do not favour leading and they can just about manage to accommodate administrative tasks, such as return to work interviews and recording behaviour incidents, into their schedule. Achieving the Welsh Government's (2017) intention to reform the curriculum has increased the leadership workload in school, meaning middle leaders are completing tasks that senior leaders would have previously completed (Larusdottir and O'Connor, 2017). ML1 acknowledges there are management aspects of the job; however, when responding to the question, ML1 explained it as the senior leaders delegating unwanted responsibilities to ease their own workload (Hall et al., 2012).

*ML1 'There are management aspects of the job. I get it that senior leadership say, well, they'd be swamped if they had to do all of that. And I've no time built into my day to do those things, so those aspects are probably the most challenging I would say.'*

There is a clear tension between middle leaders leading and managing in a time-poor environment. The expectation for middle leaders to accommodate these demands present a challenge and in the view of middle leaders, it is not manageable.

#### 4.3.2 Not enough direction or support from senior leaders

With a titled responsibility for leading a curriculum area, middle leaders are responsible for ensuring their curriculum area adapts and meets the demands of curriculum reform (Welsh Government, 2017). A challenge identified by middle leaders was receiving a lack of direction and support from senior leaders during their efforts to achieve school improvement. ML1 noticed a change in the guidance offered by senior leaders and expressed feeling isolated at times. ML2 described leading a school improvement challenging in the absence of senior leader support.

*ML1 'We went from too much direction to no direction. And they say, "Go and improve this, go and improve that." then you're feeling like you're on your own.'*

*ML2 'We've had a very prescriptive curriculum in the past, whereas now it is left to us. And I feel sometimes that if I haven't got the support from the Deputy or Headteacher, then what I'm trying to put in place is just not going to happen.'*

Middle leaders adopt a broad and complex leadership role (Bassett, 2016) and if senior leaders do not share their professional leadership and specialist knowledge then it can hinder school improvement (Holloway et al., 2018).

#### 4.3.3 Motivating colleagues and resistance to change

Middle leaders have a direct and indirect impact on the motivation and morale of teachers (Jarvis, 2008). Motivating their colleagues was identified as a challenge when leading school improvement as individuals have varying abilities, agendas and priorities (Koh et al., 2011), which impacts their engagement. With school-wide responsibilities, middle leaders encountered difficulties persuading staff to work collectively at the same pace toward the same goal.

*ML2 'Obviously, leading change involves people which I find is a barrier. If you've got staff onboard that's great, but you can't make them do, can you? So, it's very tricky. Obviously if you communicate in a way that gets staff onboard and they realise it's a positive outcome for all if they do what you want them to do. It's hard when staff are not committed to help deliver and support.'*

*ML1 'I've been sat in so many meetings before, I thought nobody's actually open to genuine contribution. It's all resistance. It's massive resistance. I'm in a room of, this is the way we do it. There's resistance at every level there.'*

ML2 explained that the positionality of the role meant you are not recognised as a senior leader. Therefore, your leadership actions are not received by the staff in the same way as they would be if given by a senior leader.

*ML2 'I think as a middle leader, you're not seen by people within the school as a Headteacher or Deputy Headteacher.'*

The hierarchical position from which middle leaders operate when enacting school improvement tasks and responsibilities result in displays of resistance to change. A further challenge is to motivate staff to pursue school improvement agendas. In the absence of a formal leadership status being assigned to middle leaders and with responsibilities to achieve delegated tasks from those with a leadership status means altering the way middle leaders work. To be successful when navigating these challenges, middle leaders must invest in and foster positive relationships with staff (De Nobile, 2018), through building trust, collegiality and cohesion. Effective communication also contributes to positive relationships and can reduce ambiguity, which can be an enabler of resistance, and serve as a source of information to enable staff to contribute to school improvement (Fairman and Mackenzie, 2015).

#### 4.4 The difference distributing leadership makes to supporting school improvement

*RQ3 'What difference does distributed leadership make to middle leaders supporting school improvement?'*

#### 4.4.1 Drawing on staff experience, expertise and interests

Distributed leadership allows for a collective contribution and influence towards improving schools by distributing leadership responsibilities among others (Urick and Bowers, 2014). Middle leaders, with their experience and expertise, are key actors when distributing leadership (Larusdottir and O'Connor, 2017) to achieve school improvement. An emergent theme in the data was senior leaders distributing leadership roles to middle leaders based on their individual skills, experience and interest. Furthermore, middle leaders were leading areas in school that they have an interest in, feel passionate about or care deeply for.

The senior leaders explained that the factors they consider when they distribute roles to middle leaders are their expertise and strengths.

*SL1 'I follow their strengths and expertise.'*

*SL2 'Middle leaders' strengths and professional development skills and areas to be developed are taken into consideration and tasks can sometimes be delegated according to this.'*

Middle leaders also acknowledged that their roles, and the roles of their colleagues, were distributed based on their knowledge and expertise.

*ML3 'Some of us are good at data, some of us are good with coming up with wacky ideas, some of us are good with the pastoral care and some of us have an interest in a subject. We have a range of people leading in early years and key stage two with a range of expertise.'*

*ML2 'Middle leadership allows levels of expertise and experience to be accessed and shared.'*

Halverson and Clifford (2013) explain this form of distributed leadership as having intellectual links to 'distributed cognition'. This is defined as, depending on individual experience and expertise, the distribution of a task to a specific person in an informed manner, to give it the best chance of being achieved (Kelley and Dickers, 2016). ML2 shared

an experience when they felt this enabled them to distribute a school improvement task to a teaching assistant to draw upon their well-being expertise. ML2 was then able to act in a supervisory capacity and develop the pedagogical expertise and knowledge of another.

*ML2 'So I analyse the data and then task the teaching assistant, and I will work alongside them if they need me, with implementing interventions with the children.'*

Middle leaders' personal interest in a curriculum area, their knowledge of it and their closeness to classroom practice (Nehez et al., 2022), means they can make informed decisions and address school improvement in a manner that senior leaders, who are one or several steps removed, may not be able to.

*SL2 'They [middle leaders] play a crucial role in developing and maintaining the nature and quality of the pupils' learning experience and they can make informed school improvement decisions because of their position.'*

#### 4.4.2 Promotes a sense of teamwork

Teamwork and shared decision making emerged as a positive theme in the data and were attributes of a distributed model of leadership. Conjoint agency stemming from distributed leadership (Gronn, 2000) allowed middle leaders, senior leaders and teachers to gain a sense of collective engagement in a school improvement endeavour. Distributed leadership fostered a sense of belonging to a team and replaced school improvement being the responsibility of one leader (Larusdottir and O'Connor, 2017). It was explained that, with a distributed leadership dynamic, information is shared between more and less experienced members of the team, developing individual capability and, in turn, increasing human capacity (Harris, 2004).

Middle leaders expressed that, when a sense of team is developed and staff are working in unison, attaining school improvement goals becomes more achievable. The sum of all teachers working towards a goal is greater than what could be achieved alone. Distributed leadership could be a key to nurturing and harnessing the rewards of teamwork and collectively working towards a common goal (Harris et al., 2022).

*ML1 'Distributed leadership results in a sense of teamwork and it means there's a team ethos and we're all working towards something.'*

*ML3 'Distributed leadership helps me encourage teamwork and I am very lucky as I have a cooperative team. So, I feel that as a whole team [senior leaders, middle leaders and teachers] the way that roles are distributed, and it's distributed to me, you get the benefits. Teamwork makes the dream work.'*

*SL2 'Distributed leadership allows leaders at all levels to collectively work together to drive school improvement by working towards agreed goals.'*

## 4.5 Conclusion

The analysis of questionnaire and interview data has identified the actions middle leaders take when supporting school improvement, the challenges they encounter and the perceived difference that distributing leadership makes to support school improvement. As part of their role, middle leaders monitor standards and set targets to ensure the school stays on course to improve practice and provision. To overcome challenges, middle leaders collaborate and network with other professionals. However, challenges such as limited time, administration burdens, the absence of support from senior leaders and difficulty motivating colleagues can hinder progress.

In the school, if senior leaders were to understand the actions, challenges and perceptions of middle leaders supporting school improvement through distributed leadership, it may alter practices. Alterations to practice may further nurture an environment which promotes distributed leadership and provides the conditions in which middle leaders can thrive, while supporting school improvement. If conditions are created that nurture distributed leadership, then staff expertise, interests and experiences can be utilised to benefit school improvement and promote a sense of teamwork to achieve collective success.

Chapter 5 shares a summary of the findings of this SSI and recommends how middle leaders can be effectively utilised in school to support school improvement when leadership is distributed to them.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion and Implications

### 5.1 Introduction

This SSI has explored the actions of middle leaders, the challenges encountered, and the perceived difference distributing leadership makes when supporting school improvement in a primary school. Significant themes were identified in the data and used to respond to the research questions. The end of this chapter shares the implications for the school and identifies the limitations and opportunities for further research.

### 5.2 The actions of middle leaders supporting school improvement

In response to RQ1, the middle leaders' actions to support school improvement were varied, yet the most regular actions were those related to performance, collegial support and leading and managing others (Lipscombe et al., 2023). They were not isolated to subject leadership (Bennett et al., 2007). Management tasks such as monitoring progress and standards and, consequently, setting targets to achieve further progress and increase standards, were a prevailing action of middle leaders. Additionally, collaborating with colleagues and networking with other professionals were significant actions.

Despite middle leaders' actions varying in nature from leadership to management, the middle leaders often engaged in management tasks to lighten the workload of senior leaders, which negatively impacted middle leaders' time to lead. What is also evident is that middle leaders perceived their management responsibilities as encroaching on their leadership capacity: middle leaders' actions were dominated by engaging with time-sensitive managerial tasks rather than leading school improvement. A recommendation is for senior leaders to promote and value the actions, which enable middle leaders to facilitate school improvement-orientated leadership.

### 5.3 The challenges middle leaders face when supporting school improvement

In response to RQ2, senior and middle leaders acknowledged the role of a middle leader is complex and challenges are encountered. A lack of time, completing administration tasks, not enough direction or support from senior leaders and motivating colleagues while addressing resistance to change were significant challenges shared by the participants.

These challenges implicate middle leaders in school when leadership is distributed to them. They feel unsatisfied with their contribution to school improvement because there are multiple tasks and audiences competing for their time and attention. This environment and its conditions amplify the feeling that a lack of support from senior leaders is available and contributes to a feeling that there is an overwhelming workload. To address the challenges, it would be of benefit to middle leaders in the school to have a description of the role and responsibilities, alongside an awareness of the resources allocated to them to enable them to fulfil their role.

#### 5.4 The difference distributing leadership makes to supporting school improvement

In response to RQ3, this study identified a positive and effective relationship between distributed leadership and school improvement. Senior and middle leaders discussed distributed leadership as a vehicle for school improvement; however, the data revealed ‘hybrid’ leadership (Gronn, 2010b) where individual and distributed actions occurred in the interest of school improvement. This reflects the literature stating that there is no prescription for distributed leadership and its application can vary (Harris, 2004; Diamond and Spillane, 2016).

Distributed leadership provides an opportunity to access staff experience, expertise and interests when pursuing school improvement and it can successfully promote a sense of teamwork. Participants commented on enhanced trust, agency, autonomy and a sense of empowerment, while not being held accountable, when leadership is distributed. Distributing leadership to middle leaders is essential to ensure that all leadership tasks are handled by a competent person and the experience and expertise of staff are utilised effectively. Therefore, placing an emphasis on distributed leadership (Estyn, 2020) can involve middle leaders and drive school improvement (Harris et al., 2019).



## 5.5 Implications for the school

Administrative monitoring and target setting as a self-evaluation process emerged as the most significant action that middle leaders engage with to support school improvement. However, due to the lack of time afforded to middle leaders being a significant challenge, middle leaders are not always able to accurately lead on important school improvement initiatives. Contending with balancing time between classroom teaching and middle leadership was identified in the literature (Struyve et al., 2014; Bassett and Shaw, 2018; Irvine and Brundrett, 2016) as challenging.

The middle leaders are not scheduled to receive regular non-contact time to enact their role and responsibilities, and this could be a worthwhile investment. I would recommend middle leaders are provided with sufficient non-contact time away from their classroom to engage with their role and support school improvement. With sufficient time, middle leaders can nurture collaboration and engage in professional networks (Bryant et al., 2020) to source new ideas, develop strategies and gain knowledge. If this time is scheduled on the same day weekly, then it will limit the disruption of class routines and ensure consistency for pupils and staff.

## 5.6 Limitations and further research

There are limitations to this SSI. First, this was a small-scale case study with five participants and the findings are not generalisable, replicable or representative (Denscombe, 2021). This SSI revealed administrative tasks were significant actions that consumed middle leaders' time and attention. As a result, middle leaders discussed actual leadership activities minimally compared to the administrative tasks they engaged with. A suggestion for future research would be to engage with middle leaders that are given regular non-contact time to enact their roles and responsibilities in the interest of school improvement.

## Chapter 6: Narrative critical reflection

I have encountered both academic and professional challenges and achievements as a novice researcher studying this module and writing this dissertation. At the end of the previous module, EE812, I reflected on my Personal Development Plan (PDP) achievement and progress, and I used this information to create my PDP with respect to the E822 module. Appendix K shares my EMA reflection grid to support this narrative critical reflection.

A challenge I encountered during EE812 was critically analysing literature and research. During EE812, I was beginning to develop the academic skill of independently reading academic publications with a critical perspective, but I was not confident. At the start of E822, I made a commitment to develop my confidence to engage with the skill and improve my critical voice when reading literature. TMA01 presented an opportunity to practise reading literature with the intent to critically analyse it. During the TMA01 guidance tutorial, I asked my tutor specific questions about how to approach critical analysis of literature, and I used the tutorial as an opportunity to clarify my understanding of critical analysis. Following this, I spent time consulting material that explained and modelled critical analysis to develop my personal approach. Furthermore, I read a broad range of literature to understand how other authors have critically analysed their work and the work of others. My critical analysis of key literature received positive feedback from my tutor during TMA01, and my critical approach received positive feedback in TMA02.

I feel my confidence to critically analyse has improved and I have achieved the skill of reading with a critical perspective during E812. I can go beyond surface-level reading of literature and discover the deeper themes and messages in the text. I can evaluate arguments, consider biases and assess the strength of evidence when reading critically. My experiences relating to development of this skill have also contributed to improving my cognitive and comprehension skills.

When reviewing the PDP at the start of the module, I wanted to ensure that I established a healthy and positive routine to manage work and study demands simultaneously. This academic year has been challenging at times with managing a full-time teaching and middle leadership position in school, moving house and a school inspection whilst writing the dissertation. My commitment to study on a set day regularly benefitted my progress and

preparation for the dissertation. To stay on track when the study demands increased, I found it was important to manage my time effectively and set clear goals. One method that supported me with this was time blocking. I would divide my day into time blocks, decide on my priorities for the day and split the individual tasks required to achieve the priorities into one-hour blocks. This approach not only improved my productivity with respect to writing my dissertation, but also supported my productivity regarding my middle leadership role and responsibilities in school.

Total word count: 12,041

## Reference List

- Adams, J. (2011) *Applying theory to educational research: An introductory approach with case studies*. [Online], Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell. Available at: <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/open/reader.action?docID=7104529> (Accessed 2 July 2024).
- Atkins, L. and Wallace, S. (2016) *Qualitative Research in Education*. [Online], London: SAGE. Available at: <https://methods-sagepub-com.libezproxy.open.ac.uk/book/atkins-qualitative-research-in-education/n2.xml> (Accessed 26 June 2024).
- Bassett, M. (2016) 'The role of middle leaders in New Zealand secondary schools: Expectations and challenges', *Waikato Journal of Education*, vol. 21, no. 1, pp. 97-108 [Online]. Available at: <https://web-p-ebsohost-com.libezproxy.open.ac.uk/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=0&sid=4ecb1097-1782-4f86-b179-979f61dce1b0%40redis> (Accessed 9 August 2024).
- Bassett, M. and Shaw, N. (2018) 'Building the confidence of first-time middle leaders in New Zealand primary schools', *International journal of Educational Management*, vol. 32, no. 5, pp. 749–760 [Online]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJEM-05-2017-0101> (Accessed 1 June 2024).
- Bassey, M. (1999) *Case Study Research in Educational Settings*. [Online], Buckingham: Open University Press. Available at: <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/open/detail.action?pq-origsite=primo&docID=4960695> (Accessed 2 July 2024).
- Bell, J. (2010) *Doing Your Research Project*. 5<sup>th</sup> edn. [Online], Berkshire: McGraw-Hill Education. Available at: <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/open/detail.action?docID=771407&pq-origsite=primo> (Accessed 1 July 2024).
- Bennett, N., Woods, P., Wise, C. and Newton, W. (2007) 'Understandings of middle leadership in secondary schools: a review of empirical research', *School Leadership & Management*, vol. 27, no. 5, pp. 453–470 [Online]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13632430701606137> (Accessed 1 June 2024).
- Bento, F, Adenusi, T. and Khanal, P. (2023) 'Middle level leadership in schools: a scoping review of literature informed by a complex system perspective', *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, ahead-of-print, pp. 1-27 [Online]. Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/13603124.2023.2234329?needAccess=true&role=button> (Accessed 10 August 2024).
- Berg, B. L. (2004) *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences* 5<sup>th</sup> edn. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006) 'Using thematic analysis in psychology', *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, vol. 3, no. 2, pp. 77-101 [Online]. Available at: <https://www.open.ac.uk/libraryservices/resource/article:105712&f=28647> (Accessed 3 July 2024).

- Briggs, A. R. J., Coleman, M. and Morrison, M. (2012) *Research Methods in Educational Leadership & Management*. 3<sup>rd</sup> edn. [Online], Los Angeles: SAGE Publications Ltd. Available at: <https://www.open.ac.uk/libraryservices/resource/ebook:9781446260470/provider/SAGE&f=31536> (Accessed 2 July 2024).
- British Educational Research Association (BERA) (2019) *Ethical guidelines for educational research*. 4<sup>th</sup> edn. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.bera.ac.uk/publication/ethical-guidelines-for-educational-research-2018-online> (Accessed 2 July 2024).
- Bryant, D. A. (2019) ‘Conditions that support middle leaders’ work in organizational and system leadership: Hong Kong case studies’, *School Leadership & Management*, vol. 39, no. 5, pp. 415-433 [Online]. Available at: [https://libkey.io/libraries/810/articles/211747955/full-text-file?utm\\_source=api\\_328](https://libkey.io/libraries/810/articles/211747955/full-text-file?utm_source=api_328) (Accessed 5 August 2024).
- Bryant, D.A., Wong, Y.L. and Adames, A. (2020) ‘How middle leaders support in-service teachers’ on-site professional learning’, *International Journal of Educational Research*, vol. 100, pp. 101530 [Online]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2019.101530> (Accessed 2 July 2024).
- Burton, D. and Bartlett, S. (2005) *Questionnaires and Interviews*. [Online], London: SAGE Publications Ltd. Available at: <https://methods-sagepub-com.libezproxy.open.ac.uk/book/practitioner-research-for-teachers/d10.xml> (Accessed 3 July 2024).
- Bush, T. (2011) *Theories of educational leadership and management*. 4th ed. London: Sage Publications.
- Bush, T. and Glover, D. (2012) ‘Distributed leadership in action: leading high-performing leadership teams in English schools’, *School Leadership & Management*, vol. 32, no. 1, pp. 21-36 [Online]. Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13632434.2011.642354> (Accessed 31 May 2024).
- Bush, T. (2014) ‘Applying distributed leadership across contexts’, *Educational Management, Administration & Leadership*, vol. 42, no. 5, pp. 601-602 [Online]. Available at: <https://journals-sagepub-com.libezproxy.open.ac.uk/doi/epub/10.1177/1741143214541369> (Accessed 8 August 2024).
- Bush, T. (2024) ‘Middle leadership and school improvement: Interpreting external and internal mandates’, *Educational Management, Administration & Leadership*, vol. 52, no. 3, pp. 517–519 [Online]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/17411432241236577> (Accessed 20 June 2024).
- Chapman, C. et al. (2016) *The Routledge international handbook of educational effectiveness and improvement: Research, policy, and practice*. 1st edn. [Online], London: Routledge. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315679488> (Accessed 31 May 2024).

- Chavez, C. (2008) 'Conceptualizing from the Inside: Advantages, Complications, and Demands on Insider Positionality', *Qualitative report*, vol. 13, no. 3, pp. 474–494 [Online]. Available at: <https://go-gale-com.libezproxy.open.ac.uk/ps/i.do?p=AONE&u=tou&id=GALE|A186470545&v=2.1&it=r> (Accessed 1 July 2024).
- Clark, T. (2011) 'Gaining and Maintaining Access: Exploring the Mechanisms that Support and Challenge the Relationship between Gatekeepers and Researchers', *Qualitative Social Work: QSW: research and practice*, vol. 10, no. 4, pp. 485–502 [Online]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1473325009358228> (Accessed 2 July 2024).
- Coghlan, D. and Brannick, T. (2005) *Doing Action Research in your Own Organization*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. London: SAGE.
- Cohen, L., Manion, L. and Morrison, K. (2017) *Research Methods in Education*. 8<sup>th</sup> edn. [Online], Abingdon: Taylor & Francis. Available at: <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/open/reader.action?docID=5103697&ppg=404> (Accessed 2 July 2024).
- Coleman, M. (2012) *Research Methods in Educational Leadership & Management*. 3<sup>rd</sup> edn. [Online], London: SAGE Publications Ltd. Available at: <https://sk-sagepub-com.libezproxy.open.ac.uk/books/research-methods-in-educational-leadership-and-management-3e/n17.xml> (Accessed 2 July 2024).
- Corbetta, P. (2003) 'Paradigms of Social Research' in Corbetta, P. (ed.) (2003), *Social Research: Theory, Methods and Techniques*, London: Sage Publications Ltd [Online]. Available at: <https://methods-sagepub-com.libezproxy.open.ac.uk/book/social-research-theory-methods-and-techniques/n1.xml> (Accessed 23 June 2024).
- Costley, C., Elliott, G. and Gibbs, P. (2010) *Doing Work Based Research: Approaches to Enquiry for Insider-Researchers*. [Online], London: Sage. Available at: <https://methods-sagepub-com.libezproxy.open.ac.uk/book/doing-work-based-research> (Accessed 2 July 2024).
- Creswell, J. W. and Plano Clark, V. L. (2017) *Designing and conducting mixed methods research*. 3<sup>rd</sup> edn. Los Angeles: SAGE.
- DeMatthews, D. E. (2015) 'Clearing a Path for Inclusion: Distributing Leadership in a High Performing Elementary School', *Journal of school leadership*, vol. 25, no. 6, pp. 1000–1038 [Online]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/105268461502500601> (Accessed 31 May 2024).
- Denee, R. and Thornton, K. (2021) 'Distributed leadership in ECE: perceptions and practices', *Early Years*, vol. 41, no. 2-3, pp. 128-143 [Online]. Available at: <https://www-tandfonline-com.libezproxy.open.ac.uk/doi/pdf/10.1080/09575146.2018.1539702?needAccess=true> (Accessed 9 August 2024).

- De Nobile, J. (2018) 'Towards a theoretical model of middle leadership in schools', *School Leadership & Management*, vol. 38, no. 4, pp. 395–416 [Online]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2017.1411902> (Accessed 1 June 2024).
- Denscombe, M. (2021) *The Good Research Guide: research methods for small-scale social research projects*. 7<sup>th</sup> edn. [Online], Maidenhead: Open University Press. Available at: <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/open/detail.action?pq-origsite=primo&docID=6888276> (Accessed 2 July 2024).
- Diamond, J.B. and Spillane, J.P. (2016) 'School leadership and management from a distributed perspective: A 2016 retrospective and prospective', *Management in Education*, vol. 30, no. 4, pp. 147–154 [Online]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0892020616665938> (Accessed 31 May 2024).
- Dinham, S. (2007) 'The secondary Head of Department and the achievement of exceptional student outcomes', *Journal of Educational Administration*, vol. 45, no. 1, pp. 62–79 [Online]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1108/09578230710722458> (Accessed 1 June 2024).
- Donitsa-Schmidt, S. and Zuzovsky, R. (2020) 'The effect of formal, nonformal and informal learning on teachers' promotion to middle leadership roles in schools', *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, vol. 23, no. 4, pp. 371–387 [Online]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603124.2018.1508754> (Accessed 1 June 2024).
- Drew, C. J., Hardman, M. L. and Hosp, J. L. (2008) *Designing and Conducting Research in Education*. [Online], Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications. Available at: <https://methods-sagepub-com.libezproxy.open.ac.uk/book/designing-and-conducting-research-in-education/n8.xml> (Accessed 3 July 2024).
- Edwards-Groves, C., Grootenboer, P. Hardy, I. and Rönnerman, K. (2019) 'Driving change from "the middle": middle leading for site based educational development', *School Leadership & Management*, vol. 39, no. 3–4, pp. 315–333 [Online]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2018.1525700> (Accessed 1 June 2024).
- Epler, P. (2019) 'Types of Case Studies', in Baron, A. and McNeal, K. (eds.) (2019) *Case Study Methodology in Higher Education*, Hershey, PA: IGI Globe [Online]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-5225-9429-1> (Accessed 2 July 2024).
- Estyn (2020) *Using distributed leadership to drive improvement* [Online]. Available at: <https://www.estyn.gov.wales/effective-practice/using-distributed-leadership-drive-improvement> (Accessed 31 May 2024).
- Estyn (2024) *How Adamsdown Primary used distributed leadership to support successful self evaluation processes and implement whole-school changes* [Online]. Available at: <https://www.estyn.gov.wales/effective-practice/how-adamsdown-primary-used-distributed-leadership-support-successful-self> (Accessed 31 May 2024).
- Fairman, J.C. and Mackenzie, S.V. (2015) 'How teacher leaders influence others and understand their leadership', *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, vol. 18,



- no. 1, pp. 61–87 [Online]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603124.2014.904002> (Accessed 1 June 2024).
- Fitzgerald, T. (2009) ‘The Tyranny of Bureaucracy: Continuing Challenges of Leading and Managing from the Middle’, *Educational Management, Administration & Leadership*, vol. 37, no. 1, pp. 51-65 [Online]. Available at: <https://journals-sagepub-com.libezproxy.open.ac.uk/doi/epdf/10.1177/1741143208098164> (Accessed 9 August 2024).
- Fitzgerald, T. and Gunter, H. (2006) ‘Leading Learning: middle leadership in schools in England and New Zealand’, *Management in Education*, vol. 20, no. 3, pp. 6-8 [Online]. Available at: <https://journals-sagepub-com.libezproxy.open.ac.uk/doi/epdf/10.1177/08920206060200030201> (Accessed 8 August 2024).
- Fleming, P. (2013) *The Art of Middle Management in Secondary Schools: A Guide to Effective Subject and Team Leadership*. London: Routledge.
- Fullan, M. (2010) *All Systems Go: The Change Imperative for Whole-system Reform*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Greene, M. J. (2014) ‘On the Inside Looking In: Methodological Insights and Challenges in Conducting Qualitative Insider Research’, *The Qualitative Report*, vol. 19, no. 15, pp. 1-13 [Online]. Available at: <https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/document?repid=rep1&type=pdf&doi=8080c261057e61bd39503cd067809f92a5786066> (Accessed 1 July 2024).
- Grice, C. (2019) ‘007 Spies. Surveillance and pedagogical middle leadership: for the good of the empire of education’, *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, vol. 51, no. 2, pp. 165-181 [Online]. Available at: <https://www-tandfonline-com.libezproxy.open.ac.uk/doi/pdf/10.1080/00220620.2019.1583173?needAccess=true> (Accessed 5 August 2024).
- Grix, J. (2002) ‘Introducing Students to the Generic Terminology of Social Research’, *Politics*, vol. 22, no. 3, pp. 175-186 [Online]. Available at: <https://journals-sagepub-com.libezproxy.open.ac.uk/doi/epub/10.1111/1467-9256.00173> (Accessed 24 June 2023).
- Gronn, P. (1999) *The Making of Educational Leaders*. London: Cassell.
- Gronn, P. (2000) ‘Distributed properties: A new architecture for leadership’, *Education Management and Administration*, vol. 28, no.3, pp. 317-338 [Online]. Available at: <https://journals-sagepub-com.libezproxy.open.ac.uk/doi/epdf/10.1177/0263211X000283006> (Accessed 10 August 2024).
- Gronn, P. (2010) ‘Leadership: its Genealogy, Configuration and Trajectory’, *Journal of Educational Administration and History*’ vol. 34, no. 4, pp. 405-435 [Online]. Available at: <https://www-tandfonline-com.libezproxy.open.ac.uk/doi/pdf/10.1080/00220620.2010.492959?needAccess=true> (Accessed 8 August 2024).



- Gronn, P. (2010b) 'Where to next for educational leadership?' in Bush, T., Bell, L. and Middlewood, D. (eds.) (2010), *The principles of educational leadership and management*, London: SAGE.
- Grootenboer, P. and Hardy, I. (2017) 'Contextualizing, orchestrating and learning for leading: The praxis and particularity of educational leadership practices', *Educational Management, Administration & Leadership*, vol. 45, no. 3, pp. 402-418 [Online]. Available at: <https://journals-sagepub-com.libezproxy.open.ac.uk/doi/epub/10.1177/1741143215595418> (Accessed 8 August 2024).
- Guba, E. G. (1981) 'Criteria for assessing the trustworthiness of naturalistic inquiries', *Educational Communication and Technology*, vol. 29, no. 2 [Online]. Available at: <https://www-jstor-org.libezproxy.open.ac.uk/journal/educcommtech> (Accessed 3 July 2024).
- Gurr, D. and Drysdale, L. (2013) 'Middle-Level Secondary School Leaders: Potential, Constraints and Implications for Leadership Preparation and Development', *Journal of Educational Administration*, vol. 51, no. 1, pp. 55–71 [Online]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1108/09578231311291431> (Accessed 1 June 2024).
- Gurr, D. (2019) 'School middle leaders in Australia, Chile and Singapore', *School Leadership & Management*, vol. 39, no. 3–4, pp. 278–296 [Online]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2018.1512485> (Accessed 1 June 2024).
- Hall, D., Gunter, H. and Bragg, J. (2013) 'Leadership, New Public Management and the re-modelling and regulation of teacher identities', *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, vol. 16, no. 2, pp. 173–190 [Online]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603124.2012.688875> (Accessed 2 June 2024).
- Halverson, R. and Clifford, M. (2013) 'Distributed Instructional Leadership in High Schools', *Journal of School Leadership*, vol. 23, no. 2, pp. 389-419 [Online]. Available at: <https://journals-sagepub-com.libezproxy.open.ac.uk/doi/epdf/10.1177/105268461302300207> (Accessed 10 August 2024).
- Harris, A. (2004) 'Distributed Leadership and school improvement: Leading or misleading?', *Educational Management, Administration and Leadership*, vol. 32, no. 1, pp. 11-24 [Online]. Available at: <https://journals-sagepub-com.libezproxy.open.ac.uk/doi/abs/10.1177/1741143204039297> (Accessed 31 May 2024).
- Harris, A. (2008) 'Distributed leadership: according to the evidence', *Journal of Educational Administration*, vol. 46, no. 2, pp. 172–188 [Online]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1108/09578230810863253> (Accessed 2 June 2024).
- Harris, A. (2010) 'Distributed Leadership' in Bush, T., Bell, L. and Middlewood, D. (eds.) (2010), *The Principles of Educational Leadership and Management*, London: Sage Publications.

- Harris, A. (2012) ‘Distributed Leadership: Implications for the role of the principal’, *Journal of Management Development*, vol. 31, no. 1, pp. 7-17 [Online]. Available at: <https://www-emerald-com.libezproxy.open.ac.uk/insight/content/doi/10.1108/02621711211190961/full/pdf> (Accessed 31 May 2024).
- Harris, A., Jones, M. and Ismail, N. (2022) ‘Distributed leadership: taking a retrospective and contemporary view of the evidence base’, *School Leadership & Management*, vol. 42, no. 5, pp. 438-456 [Online]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2022.2109620> (Accessed 31 May 2024).
- Hartley, D. (2010) ‘Paradigms: How Far Does Research in Distributed Leadership “Stretch”?’’, *Educational Management, Administration & Leadership*, vol. 38, no. 3, pp. 271–285 [Online]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143209359716> (Accessed 2 June 2024).
- Hitchcock, G. and Hughes, D. (1989) *Research and the Teacher*. London: Routledge.
- Holloway, J., Nielsen, A. and Saltmarsh, S. (2018) ‘Prescribed distributed leadership in the era of accountability: The experiences of mentor teachers’, *Educational Management, Administration & Leadership*, vol. 46, no. 4, pp. 538–555 [Online]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143216688469> (Accessed 31 May 2024).
- Irvine, P. and Brundrett, M. (2016) ‘Middle leadership and its challenges: a case study in the secondary independent sector’, *Management in Education*, vol. 30, no. 2, pp. 86–92 [Online]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0892020616643158> (Accessed 1 June 2024).
- Jarvis, A. (2008) ‘Leadership lost: A case study in three selective secondary schools’, *Management in Education*, vol. 22, no. 1, pp. 24-30 [Online]. Available at: <https://journals-sagepub-com.libezproxy.open.ac.uk/doi/epdf/10.1177/0892020607085627> (Accessed: 9 August 2024).
- Kelley, C. and Dickers, S. (2016) ‘Framing Feedback for School Improvement Around Distributed Leadership’, *Educational Administration Quarterly*, vol. 52, no. 3, pp. 392-422 [Online]. Available at: <https://journals-sagepub-com.libezproxy.open.ac.uk/doi/epub/10.1177/0013161X16638416> (Accessed 10 August 2024).
- Kvale, S. (2008) *Doing Interviews*. [Online], London: SAGE Publications. Available at: <https://methods-sagepub-com.libezproxy.open.ac.uk/book/doing-interviews/n2.xml?term=views> (Accessed 2 July 2024).
- Larusdottir, S. H. and O’Connor, E. (2017) ‘Distributed Leadership and middle leadership practice in schools: a disconnect?’, *Irish Educational Studies*, vol. 36, no. 4, pp. 423-438 [Online]. Available at: [https://library-search.open.ac.uk/permalink/44OPN\\_INST/j6vapu/cdi\\_informaworld\\_taylorfrancis\\_310\\_1080\\_03323315\\_2017\\_1333444](https://library-search.open.ac.uk/permalink/44OPN_INST/j6vapu/cdi_informaworld_taylorfrancis_310_1080_03323315_2017_1333444) (Accessed 31 May 2024).

- Leithwood, K. *et al.* (2007) ‘Distributing Leadership to Make Schools Smarter: Taking the Ego Out of the System’, *Leadership and policy in schools*, vol. 6, no. 1, pp. 37–67 [Online]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15700760601091267> (Accessed 1 June 2024).
- Leithwood, K., Harris, A. and Hopkins, D. (2020) ‘Seven strong claims about successful school leadership revisited’, *School Leadership & Management*, vol. 40, no. 1, pp. 5–22 [Online]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2019.1596077> (Accessed 31 May 2024).
- Li, S.C., Poon, A. Y. K., Lai, T. K. H. and Tam, T. C. (2021) ‘Does middle leadership matter? Evidence from a study of system-wide reform on English language curriculum’, *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, vol. 24, no. 2, pp. 226–243 [Online]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603124.2018.1529823> (Accessed 1 June 2024).
- Lipscombe, K., Tindall-Ford, S. and Lamanna, J. (2023) ‘School middle leadership: A systematic review’, *Educational Management, Administration & Leadership*, vol. 51, no. 2, pp. 270–288 [Online]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143220983328> (Accessed 31 May 2024).
- Lumby, J. (2013) ‘Distributed Leadership: The Uses and Abuses of Power’, *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, vol. 41, no. 5, pp. 543–693 [Online]. Available at: <https://journals-sagepub-com.libezproxy.open.ac.uk/doi/epub/10.1177/1741143213489288> (Accessed 31 May 2024).
- Lumby, J. (2019) ‘Distributed Leadership and Bureaucracy’, *Educational Management, Administration & Leadership*, vol. 47, no. 1, pp. 5–19 [Online]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143217711190> (Accessed 31 May 2024).
- Nehez, J., Blossing, U., Torkildsen, L. G., Lander, R. and Olin, A. (2022) ‘Middle leaders translating knowledge about improvement: Making change in the school and preschool organisation’, *Journal of Educational Change*, vol. 23, no. 3, pp. 315–341 [Online]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10833-021-09418-2> (Accessed 31 May 2024).
- OECD (2014) *Improving Schools in Wales: an OECD Perspective* [Online]. Available at: <https://www.oecd.org/unitedkingdom/Improving-schools-in-Wales.pdf> (Accessed 31 May 2024).
- OECD (2017) *The Welsh Education Reform Journey: A rapid policy assessment* [Online]. Available at: <http://www.oecd.org/education/The-Welsh-Education-Reform-Journey.pdf> (Accessed 31 May 2024).
- Open University (2023) Open Learn: Becoming an Ethical Researcher. Available at: <https://www.open.edu/openlearn/education-development/becoming-ethical-researcher/content-section-overview?active-tab=description-tab> (Accessed 20 November 2023).

- Patterson, J. A., AlSabatin, H., Anderson, A., Klepacka, M., Lawrence, J. and Miner, B. (2021) 'A Distributed Leadership Perspective on Implementing Instructional Reform: A Case Study of an Urban Middle School', *Journal of school leadership*, vol. 31, no.3, pp. 248–267 [Online]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1052684620904942> (Accessed 31 May 2024).
- Reynolds, D. and Mckimm, J. (2020) 'Education in Wales: Attempting Systemic Reform to Combat Underachievement, 2000–2018', in Jones, M. and Harris, A. (eds.) (2020), *Leading and Transforming Education Systems*. Singapore: Springer Singapore Pte. Limited [Online]. Available at: [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-4996-0\\_10](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-4996-0_10) (Accessed 1 June 2024).
- Reynolds, D. and McKimm, J. (2021) 'Educational management and leadership in Wales: promise, performance and potential', *School leadership & management*, 41(1–2), pp. 54–72. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2020.1816955> (Accessed 31 May 2024).
- Robson, C. (2002) *Real World Research*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Røvik, K. A. (2016) 'Knowledge Transfer as Translation: Review and elements of an instrumental theory', *International Journal of Management Reviews*, vol. 18, no. 3, pp. 290–310. Available at: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/ijmr.12097> (Accessed 28 July 2024).
- Seashore Louis, K., Mayrowetz, D., Smiley, M. and Murphy, J. (2009) 'The Role of Sensemaking and Trust in Developing Distributed Leadership' in Harris, A. (ed.) (2009), *Distributed Leadership: Different Perspectives*. London: Springer.
- Spillane, J.P., Halverson, R. and Diamond, J.B. (2001) 'Investigating School Leadership Practice: A Distributed Perspective', *Educational researcher*, vol. 30, no. 3, pp. 23–28 [Online]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X030003023> (Accessed 31 May 2024).
- Strike, K. A. (2006) 'The Ethics of Educational Research', in Green, J. L., Green, J., Camilli, G., Elmore, P. B. and Elmore, P. (eds.) (2006) *Handbook of Complementary Methods in Education Research*, Oxford: Taylor & Francis Group [Online]. Available at: <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/open/reader.action?docID=446575> (Accessed 3 July 2024).
- Struyve, C., Meredith, C. and Gielen, S. (2014) 'Who am I and where do I belong? The perception and evaluation of teacher leaders concerning teacher leadership practices and micropolitics in schools', *Journal of Educational Change*, vol. 15, no. 2, pp. 203–230 [Online]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10833-013-9226-5> (Accessed 1 June 2024).
- Teusner, A. (2020) 'Qualitative Insider Research' in Atkinson, P. (ed.) (2022), *Sage Research Methods Foundations*, London: SAGE Publications Ltd [Online]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781526421036845676> (Accessed 1 Jul 2024).

- Thomas, G. (2023) *How to Do Your Research Project: A Guide for Students*. 4<sup>th</sup> edn. London: SAGE Publications.
- Thorpe, A. and Bennett-Powell, G. (2014) 'The perceptions of secondary school middle leaders regarding their needs following a middle leadership development programme', *Management in Education*, vol. 28, no. 2, pp. 52-57 [Online]. Available at: <https://journals-sagepub-com.libezproxy.open.ac.uk/doi/epub/10.1177/0892020614529808> (Accessed 8 August 2024).
- Urick, A. and Bowers, A. J. (2014) 'The Impact of Principal Perception on Student Academic Climate and Achievement in High School: How Does It Measure Up?', *Journal of school leadership*, vol. 24, no. 2, pp. 386-414 [Online]. Available at: <https://journals-sagepub-com.libezproxy.open.ac.uk/doi/epdf/10.1177/105268461402400207> (Accessed 10 August 2024).
- Van den Hoonaard, W. C. (2002) *Walking the tightrope: Ethical issues for qualitative researchers*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Wallace, M. (2002) 'Modelling Distributed Leadership and Management Effectiveness: Primary School Senior Management Teams in England and Wales', *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, vol. 13, no. 2, pp. 163–186 [Online]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1076/sesi.13.2.163.3433> (Accessed 1 June 2024).
- Wanat, C.L. (2008) 'Getting Past the Gatekeepers: Differences Between Access and Cooperation in Public School Research', *Field Methods*, vol. 20, no. 2, pp. 191–208 [Online]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1525822X07313811> (Accessed 2 July 2024).
- Welsh Government (2017) *Education in Wales: Our National Mission*. Cardiff: Welsh Government.
- Wilkinson, J. and Kemmis, S. (2015) 'Practice Theory: Viewing leadership as leading', *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, vol. 47, no. 4, pp. 342-358 [Online]. Available at: <https://libkey.io/libraries/810/articles/61927869/full-text-file> (Accessed 5 August 2024).
- Wyse, D., Selwyn, N. and Smith, E. (2017) *The BERA/SAGE handbook of educational research*. [Online], London: SAGE Publications Ltd. Available at: <https://sk-sagepub-com.libezproxy.open.ac.uk/reference/the-berasage-handbook-of-educational-research/i752.xml> (Accessed 2 July 2024).
- Yin, R. K. (2009) *Case study research: Design and methods*. 4<sup>th</sup> edn. [Online], California: Sage. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.33524/cjar.v14i1.73>. (Accessed 2 July 2024).
- Youngs, H. (2017) 'Developing an Alternative Ontology Through Leadership-as-Practice', *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, vol. 39, no. 2, pp. 140-154 [Online]. Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1360080X.2017.1276662> (Accessed 8 August 2024).

## 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 participants.**

**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.**

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	Connor Williams
b.	PI	
c.	Project title	A qualitative case study that explores primary school middle leaders in Wales supporting school improvement through distributed leadership.
d.	Supervisor/tutor	Dr Don Bradley
e.	Qualification	Masters in Education
		Masters in Childhood and Youth



f.	MA pathway (where applicable)	Education Leadership and Management
g.	Intended start date for fieldwork	April 2024
h.	Intended end date for fieldwork	May 2024
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>	Wales, United Kingdom

<b>Section 2: Ethics Assessment</b>		<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>
1	Does your proposed research need initial clearance from a ‘gatekeeper’ (e.g. Local Authority, head teacher, college head, nursery/playgroup manager)?	X	
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>	X	
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>	X	
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 non-public places)? If so, have you specified appropriate debriefing procedures? <sup>3</sup>		X

<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>		X
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?	X	
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?	X	
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?	X	
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?	X	
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?		X
11	Will financial inducements (other than reasonable expenses and compensation for time) be offered to participants?		X
12	Will the study involve recruitment of patients or staff through the NHS or the use of NHS data?		X

---

<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: Dissertation Ethical Agreement Form



**E822 Multidisciplinary Dissertation: Education, Childhood and Youth**

**E822 Dissertation Ethical Agreement Form**

Return this completed form by the TMA01 cut-off date in November, by emailing a scanned version which makes clear the handwritten signatures to email address: [WELS-ECYS-Masters@open.ac.uk](mailto:WELS-ECYS-Masters@open.ac.uk), marked in the subject line 'For the attention of the E822 module team'. If you need to change your decision from an SSI to an EP at a later date this should be only after discussion with your tutor. A new version of this form should be completed and returned as above.

Student details: [Redacted] PI number: [Redacted]

**Student declaration**

I accept that the Open University is unable to offer liability insurance to cover any negative consequences of my actions in carrying out research as part of this dissertation module, which in particular relates to my decision to carry out the small-scale investigation format of this dissertation module.

Should I wish to carry out the small-scale investigation:

In order to explain the expectations of this module, I have shared the Letter to Setting Gatekeepers and Guidance for Setting Gatekeepers with the Setting Gatekeeper.

I agree to work with the Setting Gatekeeper and/or Supervisor to ensure that I adapt the processes and protocols supplied by the Open University to fulfil any legislative requirements and guidance relevant to that setting.

I understand that the setting will have expectations of me with respect to safeguarding practices related to interacting with participants who are aged under 18/vulnerable adults and the disclosure of criminal activities.

Should my participants be aged under 18/vulnerable adults, I have shared with the Setting Gatekeeper a copy of my Disclosure and Barring Service enhanced disclosure (DBS) certificate\* (see page 3) (or equivalent for those outside the UK). If I do not have the stated certification, I have completed Annex 1 of this document and my Gatekeeper is happy that there will be safe arrangements for me to carry out data collection with participants aged under 18/vulnerable adults.

I commit to using both University and setting advice to support me in taking responsibility for completing my small-scale investigation safely for all involved, ensuring that that the privacy, autonomy and dignity of individuals is preserved.

Please tick one of the boxes below:

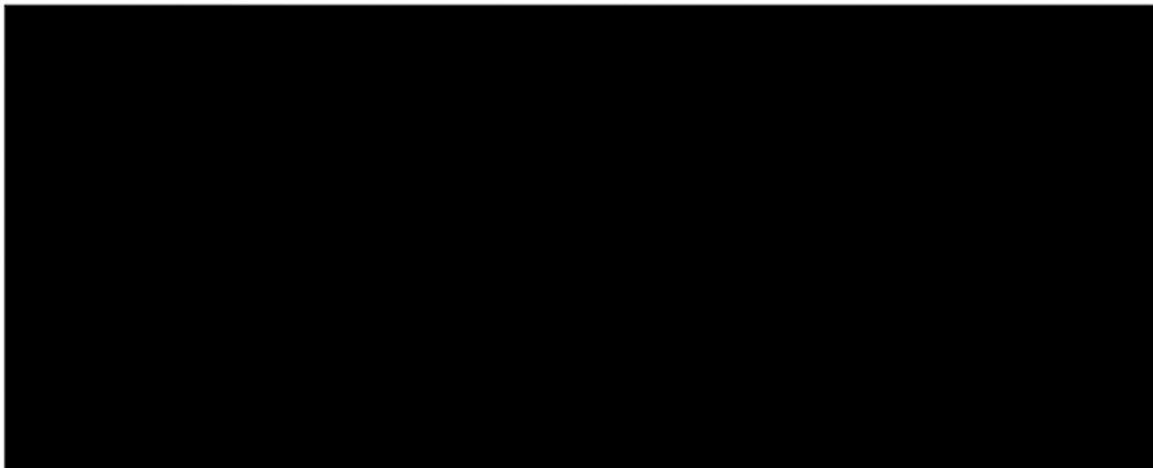
1. I will be undertaking my data collection in a practice setting as part of a small-scale investigation (SSI) for my dissertation.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
2. I have decided not to complete data collection in a setting and will be conducting the extended literature review and proposal (EP) form of my dissertation.	<input type="checkbox"/>

Signed: [Redacted]

***If you have ticked box 1, please complete the following section in conjunction with a leader who will act as the gatekeeper to the setting. This should be someone who can confirm you have permission to conduct data collection in your chosen setting, and who is either willing themselves or able to identify for you someone willing to supervise\*\* your conduct while***

*collecting data. (\*\*See the Guidance for Setting Gatekeepers for further information about the role of a Setting Supervisor).*

*If you are not planning to conduct research directly in a research setting, and do not need to request support from the setting (and this has been agreed with your tutor), sign as the gatekeeper. In these cases you are also signing to say that you will let the leaders of the setting know about your plans for research as a courtesy and offer them a chance to comment before you start your research.*



Please complete this form and return pp. 1–2 to the E822 Module team by the TMA01 cut-off date in November. No data collection should be made unless a signed form has been returned declaring the agreed arrangements for this to take place. We will keep this form for 2 years from the start of your study on E822 and then destroy it. If you need to change your decision from an SSI to an EP at a later date this should be only after discussion with your tutor. A new version of this form should be completed and returned to the email address on p1.

**\*The Disclosure and Barring Service disclosure certification (or equivalent in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland) must bear the same name as that given by you on p.1. Students in Scotland will also need to evidence that they meet the requirements of the Protection of Vulnerable Groups Scheme. You must have a clear, enhanced DBS disclosure (or appropriate equivalent) which is current. It must be appropriate for the setting in which you intend to carry out your research and must be recent, i.e. within the last two years.**

## Annex 1: E822 Dissertation Ethical Agreement Self-Declaration

*This form is an opportunity to self-declare and provide assurances that you do not pose a level of risk to others, in particular to those under the age of 18 and vulnerable adults, and should be completed if box 1 has been ticked on p.1 of this agreement for those unable to provide a clear DBS or national equivalent certificate. Annex 1 should be shared with the Setting Gatekeeper and should not be submitted in the documents returned to the University.*

I confirm that (please tick the right-hand boxes as relevant to each statement):

I have no criminal convictions or conditional cautions considered to be unspent under the terms of the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974***	✓
I have no spent cautions (reprimands or warnings) and convictions for serious violent and sexual offences or other offences of relevance for posts concerned with safeguarding children and vulnerable adults, nor any convictions resulting in a custodial sentence, whether or not suspended.	✓
To my knowledge there is no information held by the authorities that would be considered relevant to working with children and young people under the age of 18 or vulnerable adults.	✓
To my knowledge I am not on any barred lists of people not considered suitable for working with children and young people under the age of 18 or vulnerable adults.	✓

\*\*\*The Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974 aims to give those with convictions or cautions the chance in certain circumstances to start afresh. Under the Act, eligible convictions or cautions become 'spent' after a specified period of time known as the 'rehabilitation period', the length of which varies depending on how the individual was dealt with. You can refer to the relevant extract from the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974 explaining rehabilitation periods at: <http://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN01841/SN01841.pdf> and criteria by which offences will be filtered from official Disclosure and Barring Service Checks, on which this form is based, at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/filtering-rules-for-criminal-record-check-certificates/filtering-rules-for-dbs-certificates-criminal-record-checks>

The wording of this form has been guided by that taken from the Disclosure and Barring Service website, in particular from the Sample Policy for the Recruitment of Ex-Offenders <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/dbs-sample-policy-on-the-recruitment-of-ex-offenders/sample-policy-on-the-recruitment-of-ex-offenders> and Checking Someone's Criminal Record as an Employer <https://www.gov.uk/dbs-check-applicant-criminal-record>

Signed:

Date:

---

## Appendix C: Information Letter: Questionnaires

**Faculty of Wellbeing, Education, Language and Sport  
Study related to Masters module ‘E822 Multidisciplinary  
Dissertation: Education, Childhood and Youth’  
For participants invited to complete a questionnaire**

**E822 Information Letter: Questionnaires**

Dear [enter name]

I am currently studying on the Masters module ‘E822 Multidisciplinary Dissertation: Education, Childhood and Youth’ at the Open University in the Faculty of Wellbeing, Education, Language and Sport. My studies are being supervised by a personal tutor and I am following research protocols recommended by the University which have been approved by a named supervisor in this setting. I am using a range of ways of collecting information to answer the following questions ‘What actions do middle leaders take to support school improvement?’, ‘What are the challenges that middle leaders identify when supporting school improvement?’ and ‘What difference does distributed leadership make to middle leaders supporting school improvement?’ as part of a small-scale investigation. This small-scale investigation is aimed to help me better understand and develop how primary school middle leaders support school improvement through distributed leadership here, and to share my findings with others for whom the findings will be relevant to changing practice.

I invite you to complete a survey by questionnaire in [redacted]. The questionnaire is estimated to take no longer than [add estimated time]. This is to be completed online and I would appreciate the return of the questionnaire by Monday 20<sup>th</sup> May 2024. This has been agreed with the organisational leadership, [redacted]. Please feel free to ask me any questions about the questionnaire in advance of offering your consent to participate.

Information collected will be de-identified and kept confidential, being stored securely on password protected devices. In the case of paper copies of the questionnaire these also will be kept confidential and responses typed up as soon as possible. The original notes will then be destroyed. If you do not consent to participate, this is absolutely fine: simply do not complete the questionnaire. It is not possible to withdraw your consent because the questionnaires are de-identified and therefore cannot be identified for removal.

If you consent, please complete and return the questionnaire. If you would like more information about the questionnaire before completing it, please contact me on [redacted]

Yours sincerely

Connor Williams



## Appendix D: Information Letter for Middle Leader Interviews

### **E822 Information letter for adults (aged over 18): Middle Leader Interviews**

#### **What is the aim of this interview?**

The aim of the interview is to gain an individual's perspective on an aspect of education, childhood and youth studies as part of a small-scale investigation for a Masters qualification designed to contribute to knowledge and practice in my chosen area of specialism. This particular interview is designed to help answer 'What actions do middle leaders take to support school improvement?', 'What are the challenges that middle leaders identify when supporting school improvement?' and 'What difference does distributed leadership make to middle leaders supporting school improvement?'.

#### **Who is conducting the research and who is it for?**

This interview is part of my studies on the Open University Masters module E822 'Multi-disciplinary dissertation: Education, Childhood and Youth'. On this module I have an opportunity to design a small-scale investigation which will generate findings relevant to and of value to practice settings. The interview has been agreed with my tutor to be an important part of this design to allow me to include the perspectives of selected participants in addressing the above research question. I will be analysing the data collected and reporting my findings in the dissertation I submit to the University as my final assessment for my Masters qualification.

#### **Why am I being invited to participate in this research?**

You have been chosen as your experiences and opinions would be highly valuable in helping to address a question which is considered one which will have value for your setting and others like it.

#### **If I take part in this research, what will be involved?**

The interview is intended to last no longer than [add estimated time] minutes and a place which I will negotiate with you and others in the setting to be mutually convenient. If there is anyone else affected by the interview, such as a member of staff, they will also have been consulted about when would be a convenient time and permission has been granted from [REDACTED]. I would like to ask your consent to make an audio recording of our discussion so that I can refer back to what was said more accurately than would be possible just from my notes. If you do not wish to be audio recorded, I will accept your wish, and rely only on my written notes. Only I will have access to the audio recording. I do not need to share this with those at the University or in this practice setting. I will transcribe and anonymise the interview before sharing any part of this with my tutor or it form part of the final dissertation. Your contribution will be recognised by a pseudonym and you will be asked if you would like to suggest what name should be used. Any other real names referred to during the interview will be removed and renamed.

#### **What will we be talking about?**

The focus of the interview will be to find out your perspective on how you, as a middle leader, support school improvement and the challenges you face when supporting school improvement. I can share the questions with you in advance, if you would like.

#### **Will what I say be kept confidential?**

Your participation will be treated in **strict confidence** in accordance with the Data Protection Act (2018). No personal information will be passed from me to anyone else. Your consent forms will be stored safely in our professional setting as agreed with the senior leader overseeing the safe conduct of this research. In the case of the audio recording and my notes of the interview, these will be kept confidential and typed up as soon as possible. However, if you disclose anything during your interview which I consider means that you might be unsafe or have been involved in a criminal act, because this is a safeguarding concern, I will

need to pass this immediately to the organizational Designated Safeguarding Officer. The anonymised records of the interview will be stored securely on password protected devices and the original notes and recording will then be destroyed. I will be submitting an analysis of the data collected from the interviews as part of my dissertation submitted as the end-of-module assessment. I also plan to present my findings to relevant audiences. I can confirm that neither you as an individual nor the setting will be identifiable in any of these reports and presentations.

### **What happens now?**

After reading this information sheet, please review and complete the consent form. Your participation is entirely voluntary and you can withdraw your consent at any point up by letting me know, until the time I am using your data in my University assessments. As soon as you let me know you wish to withdraw, your consent forms and any data collected will be destroyed [add date].

### **What if I have other questions?**

If you have any other questions about the study I would be very happy to answer them. Please contact me at [REDACTED]

## Appendix E: Interviews Consent and Assent Form

ECYS/WELS

### **E822 INTERVIEWS CONSENT AND ASSENT FORM (Middle Leaders)**

**(to be completed by all participants and, if the participant is a child/young person under age 18, with and by their parent/carer/guardian)**

If this request relates to a child/young person under the age of 18 and a child or young person would benefit from this, please would a parent, carer or guardian read these questions to them and, if necessary, complete the replies for them.

Please indicate YES or NO for each of the questions below and return the completed form by Friday 10<sup>th</sup> May 2024 to Connor Williams using the email address [REDACTED]

Have you read (or had read to you) the information about this interview?	YES	NO
Has someone explained this interview to you?	YES	NO
Do you understand what this interview is about?	YES	NO
Have you asked all the questions you want?	YES	NO
Have you had your questions answered in a way you understand?	YES	NO
Do you understand it is OK to stop taking part at any time?	YES	NO
Will you have an adult present with you?	YES	NO
Are you happy for the interview to be audio recorded?	YES	NO
Are you happy with how your data will be stored?	YES	NO
Do you understand that your and any other real names as well as any identifiable information will be removed from what will be shared after the interview?	YES	NO
Do you understand that due to the small nature of the study and the small number of participants, you may be identified through the process of deduction?	YES	NO
Are you happy to take part?	YES	NO

If any answers are 'no' you can ask more questions. But if you **don't** want to take part, please let me know and **don't** sign your name.

If you **do** want to take part, please write your name and today's date

Your name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_



## Appendix F: Middle Leader Questionnaire

### **Middle Leader Questionnaire**

When responding to this questionnaire, please read the following information on distributed leadership:

*Distributed leadership is engaging many individuals in leadership activity and leadership practice (Harris, 2004).*

RQ1. What actions do middle leaders take to support school improvement?

- Can you describe the actions you take to support school improvement?
- How do you engage with senior leaders to update them on school improvement?
- How do you engage with teaching staff to achieve school improvement?

RQ2. What are the challenges that middle leaders identify when supporting school improvement?

- What challenges do you encounter when supporting school improvement?
- How do the challenges you identify impact you in your role as a middle leader?
- Can you share an experience when you felt unsupported as a middle leader and what could have been done differently?

RQ3. What difference does distributed leadership make to middle leaders supporting school improvement?

- What difference do middle leaders make in supporting school improvement?
- How does distributed leadership empower you to lead school improvement as a middle leader?

## Appendix G: Senior Leader Questionnaire

### Senior Leader Questionnaire

When responding to this questionnaire, please read the following information on distributed leadership:

*Distributed leadership is engaging many individuals in leadership activity and leadership practice (Harris, 2004).*

RQ1. What actions do middle leaders take to support school improvement?

- Can you describe the actions middle leaders take to support school improvement?
- How do middle leaders update you on school improvement?
- How do middle leaders engage with teaching staff to achieve school improvement?

RQ2. What are the challenges that middle leaders identify when supporting school improvement?

- What challenges have middle leaders brought to your attention when supporting school improvement?
- Can you share an experience when you supported or guided a middle leader to achieve school improvement?

RQ3. What difference does distributed leadership make to middle leaders supporting school improvement?

- What difference do middle leaders make in supporting school improvement?
- How do you decide what responsibilities to delegate to middle leaders?
- How does distributing leadership to a middle leader support school improvement?

## Appendix H: Middle Leader Interview Questions

### Middle Leader Interview Questions

Remind participants of the following:

*Distributed leadership is engaging many individuals in leadership activity and leadership practice (Harris, 2004).*

RQ1. What actions do middle leaders take to support school improvement?

- Can you tell me about your role as a middle leader in school?
- What do you enjoy about your role as a middle leader and why?
- How do you approach leading an area of school improvement – can you give an example?
- If you were given more non-contact time, how would this change the actions you take to support school improvement?

RQ2. What are the challenges that middle leaders identify when supporting school improvement?

- What middle leader responsibilities do you find challenging and why?
- How are you supported by senior leaders?
- How would you like to be supported by senior leaders?
- How do you work with colleagues to support school improvement?
- What challenges have you experienced when supporting curriculum reform in school (achieving the Curriculum for Wales)?
- Can you share an experience when you were unable to achieve school improvement? What were the barriers?

RQ3. What difference does distributed leadership make to middle leaders supporting school improvement?

- What is your impact, as a middle leader, on supporting school improvement?
- When leadership is distributed to you in your role, does it help you achieve school improvement?
- How does distributed leadership empower you to lead staff to achieve school improvement?

## Appendix I: Data Protection Plan

**Data Protection Plan**

<b>Data</b>	<b>Type of data</b>	<b>Participants</b>	<b>Storage location</b>	<b>Points to note</b>
Questionnaire responses	Online form/survey	Middle and senior leader questionnaire respondents	Google Forms or Microsoft Office Forms  Password protected folder on personal computer	Personal laptop password protected.  Download as PDF document and store in a password protected folder on personal computer.  Identities of participants protected by assigning them a code.  Backup on iCloud in a password protected folder.
Interview recordings	Audio recording	Middle leader interviewees	Smart phone  Digital voice recorder device  Password protected folder	Personal laptop password protected.  Phone is passcode protected.  Store digital voice recorder device in a locked cupboard.  Store in a password protected folder.  Delete audio files when interviews have been transcribed.  Backup on iCloud in a password protected folder.

<p>Interview notes (contingency plan)</p>	<p>Handwritten notes</p>	<p>Middle leader interviewees</p>	<p>Paper copy – handwritten  Password protected folder</p>	<p>Personal laptop password protected.  Type onto a Word document and then store on personal laptop in password protected folder.  Scan handwritten notes and convert to PDF document. Store in password protected folder on personal computer.  Destroy physical paper notes. (Store in a locked cupboard until transcribed.)  Backup on iCloud in a password protected folder.</p>
<p>Interview transcript</p>	<p>Word document</p>	<p>Middle leader interviewees</p>	<p>Personal laptop (password protected folder) and iCloud</p>	<p>Personal laptop password protected.  Identities of participants protected by assigning them a code.  Backup on iCloud in a password protected folder.</p>

## Appendix J: Participant Summary

**Participant Summary**

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Leadership position</b>	<b>Leadership responsibilities</b>
ML1	Middle leader	Phase leader Curriculum leader Phase Additional Learning Needs Coordinator
ML2	Middle leader	Phase leader Curriculum leader Phase Additional Learning Needs Coordinator
ML3	Middle leader	Phase leader Curriculum leader Phase Additional Learning Needs Coordinator
SL1	Headteacher	Responsible for the whole school
SL2	Deputy Headteacher	Strategic support for the Headteacher Professional learning Curriculum development

## Appendix K: EMA Reflection Grid

**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>Feedback from TMA01 (E822): In response to my comment in the TMA ‘there is minimal research to respond to my questions in practice’ my tutor shared ‘there is now quite a literature on middle leaders in education.’</p>	<p>I used literature search techniques to search the Open University library for specific articles relating to my area of interest. I then used my research journal to note the articles that were of interest, and I read their abstracts. Based on the abstract, I would decide whether to read the article further or not. From consulting the available literature, I was able to develop my knowledge of the subject and prepare a rationale for my research and appropriate research questions. This process helped deepen my understanding of the topic and discover findings from previous studies. Additionally, I was able to identify gaps in the literature, notice trends and patterns and develop my ability to critically analyse literature.</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;</p>	<p>When completing my PDP at the start of the module, I set a target to develop my critical analysis of literature.  Feedback from TMA01 (E822): ‘There is some criticality here and you</p>	<p>During the module EE812 I experienced a steep learning curve with respect to engaging critically with literature. As I started E822, I made a commitment to develop my knowledge, confidence and ability to critically analyse. To achieve this, I asked questions about critical analysis in tutorials, read the work of other writers with the intention of identifying their critical analysis,</p>

<p>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>have been evaluative in your narrative, as well as describing what writers have said.’</p> <p>Feedback from TMA02 (E822): ‘There is criticality here and you have been evaluative in your narrative, as well as describing what writers have said.’</p>	<p>read books and watched tutorial videos. At times, I felt as if I was an impostor and not skilled enough to critically analyse the work of authors. However, this year I feel my commitment to develop my critical analysis has paid off. The feedback received from my tutor with regards to critical analysis and evaluation for TMA01 and TMA02 was positive and reassured me I was on the right track to developing my own critical perspective 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>PDP target: ‘To establish a healthy and positive routine to manage work and study demands simultaneously.’</p> <p>PDP target: ‘To inform decisions and influence practice in my setting as a result of conducting the study.’</p>	<p>At the start of the module, I took the time to review the expectations and guidance for the dissertation to allow myself to comprehend the end goal and the commitment required to achieve it. I then made a commitment to allocate my study time to a set day and time each week which kept me mostly on track with the study calendar. My tutor’s advice to work through the module ‘little and often’ was also impactful and I tried to adopt this. To effectively manage my time, I adopted a time blocking practice that encouraged me to identify my daily priorities and then allocate one-hour time blocks throughout the day to achieve them.</p> <p>As I reflect on the module, I feel that my commitment to study regularly, little and often has resulted in a healthy and positive routine and enjoyment of the module.</p>



		<p>Engaging with this SSI has significantly benefitted my professional and leadership knowledge. Having a knowledge of the actions and challenges middle leaders face when supporting school improvement enables me to positively influence practice (with ethics in mind).</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>Feedback from TMA01 and TMA02 (E822):          ‘You do present useful descriptions and analysis throughout the narrative.’</p>	<p>I have taken a careful approach to writing this dissertation to maintain a high standard regarding structure, communication and presentation like my previous TMAs. I created a detailed plan to structure each chapter, sought feedback from my tutor through draft chapter submissions and invested time in revising and editing the dissertation.</p> <p>I also researched appropriate data analysis software to support me when analysing the data for this dissertation. I chose NVIVO to code and analyse my data. NVIVO allowed me to approach analysis in a structured and organised manner which influenced my data analysis and presentation chapter.</p>