Research Article

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Transforming Middle Leadership in Education and Training Board Post-Primary Schools in Ireland.

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Abstract: Distributed Leadership (DL) is a feature of education in many jurisdictions. Similarly, in Ireland the principles of DL have been adopted as part of a quality framework to underpin a system that provides high quality student care, learning and teaching. This model necessitates an alignment of senior leaders (SLs) and middle leaders (MLs) whose actions are informed by the needs and priorities of their particular school.

The traditional notion of the ML position as a management position is changing. The evolution requires a reconceptualisation, a transformation of the role and how we support and develop it to ensure that MLs are an integral part of the leadership structure of the school.

This pragmatic research explored the PD needs of MLs in Irish, Education and Training Board (ETB) post-primary schools. It involved a mixed-methods, exploratory sequential study. Stage one involved a set of five semi structured interviews with AP I post holders. These were used as an instrument to develop the online surveys. Stage two involved quantitative research. Online surveys were distributed to all ETB schools in the republic of Ireland. In stage three a summary of the findings of the survey were shared with ten AP Is who were subsequently interviewed to gain further insights.

The study illustrated that the development of MLs requires the support of SLs, skills development, a supportive school culture and combined training for senior and middle leaders which should be facilitated by an independent person.

1 Introduction

The literature expounds on the point that teaching in general has become a very pressurised and scrutinised profession with a “relentless focus on teaching and learning in recent years” (Allison, 2014, p.iii) and that high quality teachers and their leadership are essential for a highly educated society (Scotland and Scottish Government, 2011). Therefore, it is important to place a focus on leadership and the development of leaders who can support teachers to create and sustain a quality education system. The traditional notion of the middle leaders (ML) position as a management position is changing. The evolution requires a reconceptualisation of the role and a transformation of how we support and develop it to ensure that MLs are an integral part of the leadership structure of the school. When teachers take on leadership roles they require ‘a range of knowledge, skills and personal abilities that are appropriate to the tasks that they may face’ (Irvine and Brundrett, 2019, p.76). A ML needs to learn and develop a new set of skills. This requires specific support and Professional Development (PD) which is resourced and encouraged at government and local level.

2 Leadership

The role and remit of the principal is overwhelming (Drysdale, Gurr and Goode, 2016). It has grown exponentially (O'Donovan, 2015) and it is “unrealistic to think that any one person can discharge the role without the assistance of a considerable number of colleagues” (Martin, 2006, p.77). The literature acknowledges that principals require support and that the distribution of leadership roles and responsibilities is essential to relieve this burden (OECD,

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2008, and LDS, 2007). Despite this, Harris (2013a) explains that many schools are reluctant to change from the traditional style of leadership with the all-powerful individual in charge. Instead of waiting for this leader who might not materialise, Harris advocates for tapping into and realising the leadership potential within the school and subsequently distributing that leadership. Similarly, Irish educational policy (DES, 2018) advocates for the utilisation of a Distributed Leadership (DL) model in schools.

2.1 Distributed Leadership

DL has been the subject of considerable educational research and discourse in recent years and is a feature of policy frameworks in many countries (Harris, 2013a). The Irish adoption of a DL model appears to be in line with international views on its effectiveness. Torres (2018) agrees that if DL is practised effectively it is associated with an increase in teachers' work and professional satisfaction (Torres 2018) and has a significant positive relationship to teachers' organisational commitment (Hulpia and Devos, 2010).

2.2 Challenges to Distributed Leadership

DL should be carefully planned and consciously orchestrated and those in formal senior leadership roles have a responsibility to create the conditions necessary for its success (Harris, 2013b). The outcome of and evidence on DL is not all positive and there are potential concerns at individual and school level. Leithwood, Mascal and Strauss (2009) caution that DL can increase the burden and responsibility on teachers without increasing their power. There is also a question as to the level of genuine agency given to teachers, as that agency could be encouraged only to "serve managerially determined and imposed targets" (King and Stevenson, 2017, p.664) from senior leaders (SLs) and the education system. Timperley (2005) notes the importance of ensuring coherence within the school, the lack of which can create problems, if the distributees have a different agenda to the SL. She states that "distributing leadership over more people is a risky business and may result in the greater distribution of incompetence" (p.23) and is only desirable if the leadership activities contribute to more effective teaching and student achievement. Preedy (2016) suggests that if DL is to be successful it requires a shift in power. SLs must be willing to 'let go' (European Commission, 2010) of some of the power and place their trust in teachers. This is likely to

be difficult in an era of accountability and is only possible if SLs have the skills and willingness to authentically distribute leadership.

The support for a change to the power dynamic is evident in an increasing number of schools who are creating senior management teams (SMTs) (Bush and Glover, 2012; Benoliel and Somech, 2016). SMTs in Irish second level schools include the Principal, deputy principal(s) and those appointed to formal leadership positions (AP I's). AP I post holders are usually those to whom leadership is distributed (Larusdottir and O'Connor, 2017) and these MLs are important in the success or failure of a DL model in schools.

3 Middle Leaders

MLs are important for the successful functioning of schools (Turner and Sykes, 2007, Thorpe and Bennett-Powell, 2014). They have formal responsibilities which generally involve subject areas, year group pastoral care, cross-curricular coordination with special educational needs (SEN) or information and communications technology (ICT) (Bryant, 2018). Their role gives them a unique position of influence which comes with a responsibility to enact change, while still being closely connected to the classroom. Despite their important role and strategic position in the school, MLs have received little attention in literature and research (Harris and Jones, 2017).

Leask and Terrell (2013) caution that this role requires different skills and they acknowledge that at that time in the UK, MLs received little or no training. Changing from leading students to having a formal role in leading adults requires a different set of skills/capabilities.

Conventional thinking on MLs focuses mainly on managerial responsibilities and curriculum administration. One exception was a study of MLs in secondary schools in Hong Kong (Bryant, 2018) found that MLs were engaging in "capacity building, defining strategies for distributing leadership within their departments, and negotiating education system policies with school stakeholders and government officials" (p.16). This evolution in the role was possible through an investment in the MLs. The investment and support came from SLs through providing rich PD opportunities and by providing MLs with autonomy in their work. MLs who were given this support "flourished" (p.17).

The literature also reflects the evolution of this role with a change from the use of 'Middle Manager' to 'Middle Leader'. The change in titles elevates the position from

a more administrative one to a position involving strategy and staff development (De Nobile, 2018). Despite the potential and noted important role they have, MLs have received little attention in literature (Grootenboer, Edwards-Groves and Rönnerman, 2015; Bryant, 2018; Harris *et al.*, 2019; Forde *et al.*, 2019) and are under-theorised compared to those in SL roles (De Nobile, 2018). The gap in research on MLs has further complications as MLs in the literature are defined and categorised differently depending on the educational structure and systems in which they work. In this research the definition of MLs is in line with Grootenboer, Edwards-Groves and Rönnerman (2015), who describe MLs as “those with an acknowledged position of leadership but also a significant teaching role” (p.508), those who sit between the principal and the teaching staff.

Gurr and Drysdale (2013) explain that the success of MLs is dependent on how their roles are constructed coupled with their capacities, abilities and attitudes. This construction requires a package of support which would typically include “induction, coaching, mentoring, teaming, learning communities, formal and informal training, short and long-term professional learning opportunities, and a supportive performance management programme” (p.66). They concurrently note that SLs require leadership development to facilitate this provision.

De Nobile (2018) also raised concern over the position of MLs, stating that their role was not clearly defined. He noted that they had limited authority and they lacked a theoretical model. He developed the first Middle Leadership in Schools (MLiS) model, to achieve a greater understanding of the role and to guide future research in this area. The findings of this review are summarised below:

This model starts with inputs, which are the personal, organisational and other factors that will either make MLs successful or limit their success. These start with the organisational factors of principal support and school culture and move to personal factors which are knowledge of curriculum pedagogy and assessment and enthusiasm/drive. The position of PD in the middle of these is not noted

Figure 1: MLiS Model

by De Nobile as being significant but would suggest that there is both an organisational and personal responsibility towards PD. The model then looks at the various roles of MLs. The list is intentionally ordered from managerial to leadership activities. It starts with managerial roles and moves into the roles that have a greater focus on leading. The ‘How’ of the model explains that MLs carry out their various roles by managing relationships, leading teams, communicating effectively, managing time and managing self. This would suggest that these are the skills that MLs require to effectively perform their role. This finding is consistent with the ML needs identified in a 2014 study in the UK (following a major middle leadership programme). Participants in this study expressed the need for team leadership skills, time management skills and individual leadership development to reflect the complexity of the role and the different needs of each leader (Thorpe and Bennett-Powell, 2014).

3.1 Middle Leaders in Ireland

A thematic review of research in the area of leadership in Ireland from 2008-2018 (Murphy, 2019) identified a body of work on teacher leaders (TLs), MLs and DL (with most publications from 2015 to the present day) but different definitions of each exist. TLs and MLs have a pivotal role to play in the operation and improvement of schools. For clarity, we note that the focus of this study is on MLs, those with an appointed leadership role in the school. As illustrated in figure 2, O'Connor (2008) explains that the management structure in Irish post-primary schools involves the principal and deputy principal(s) (senior manage-

Figure 2: Leadership and Management Structure in Second Level Schools

ment) supported by the middle managers (currently AP I and AP IIs). She explains that the middle management structure has two tiers with the second tier (AP II, previously called special duties post) having a role which “is less onerous in terms of responsibility, accountability and time commitment and consists in the main of repetitive administrative or practical duties” (p.22).

There are two studies relating specifically to MLs in Irish schools (O'Connor 2008 and Larusdottir and O'Connor 2017). O'Connor (2008) reports that APs' professional learning is complex, emotionally charged, haphazard, time-poor and neglected both by themselves and the system (p.117). The study found that APs lacked a “knowledge base about middle leadership and the specific technical knowledge and information needed to effectively carry out tasks assigned to them” (p.118). The study also highlighted a lack of PD specific to the role of a ML, meaning that learning on the job was ‘an important and powerful feature of APs' learning’ (O'Connor, 2008, p.115).

A key finding of this study showed almost 50% of respondents were ‘unprepared and lacked confidence for their work ahead’ (p.115) and it noted a lack of formal support, induction and mentoring to support them in their role. Respondents all reported that a key issue in their role is ‘how to deal with people - students, parents and colleagues in a different way’ (p.125). They highlighted the need for training in relationships, communication, conflict management and people skills. The study also found that there was a ‘lack of personal and professional responsibility with regard to their learning’ (p.116) particularly when it came to formal learning and PD out of school time. The study called for an immediate and appropriate response by the individual, the school and the system to cater to the needs of MLs.

A 2017 study by Larusdottir and O'Connor found that MLs' workload had significantly increased and that management tasks took up most of their time leaving little time for leading. This theme of MLs as functionalist, task-orientated positions was continued when the majority of respondents felt that they lacked power or influence, seeing their role as ‘more positional than influential’ (p.436). The findings demonstrate ‘an eagerness and a motivation among MLs who would welcome greater autonomy, responsibility and decision-making powers in their day-to-day practice than currently exists in the schools in which they work’ (p.437). This indicates that any PD required to meet the needs of the ML must be coupled with PD for principals to support them to delegate appropriately and acquire the skills necessary to build the capacity of their MLs.

The notion of a ML has evolved from one of a manager who carries out tasks to one of a leader who is an essential part of the leadership structure. Internationally and in Ireland there is a necessity to improve and expand the provision of leadership preparation and development (LPD) (Murphy, 2019). Currently Irish provision focuses more on the preparation of those who aspire to a senior leadership role and appears not to prioritise the position of ML as an important role in its own right. Appropriate support and PD are fundamental to help MLs acquire and develop the skills necessary for this multi-faceted, imperative role.

4 Professional Development

The nature of the job demands that teachers engage in professional development (Day, 1999) and it is considered as one of the key factors in enhancing teacher quality (OECD, 2005,). Teachers' individual PD needs are diverse, they have needs relating to subjects, pedagogy, fulfilling legal and policy requirements and additional needs in respect of leadership responsibilities. It is important to encourage teachers to take ownership of their professional development (Loxley *et al.*, 2007; Tuli Gameda, Fiorucci and Catarci, 2014) and personalise it within their own professional and cultural contexts (Cordingley, 2005). Teachers' feelings, beliefs, needs, contexts, motivations and barriers (to PD) must become the foundations of an integrated system if authentic and effective development is to occur.

Irish educational policy values PD and advocates for a culture of life-long learning but is still on a journey to a comprehensive and implementable system wide approach.

Provisions for MLs are emerging through DES, CSL, PDST and MIC but appointed MLs are not formally inducted, trained or supported. The enhancement of a DL model in Irish schools (DES, 2018) will require an investment in the individual leaders and in the development of a supportive culture in the whole school community. Without this, there is a danger that MLs will receive increased burdens without an increase in power. Transforming from a traditional hierarchical structure to developing School Leadership Teams that utilise their collective intelligences requires an investment in rich PD (for MLs and SLs) and giving autonomy and agency to MLs. PD opportunities must address the complexities of working in teams and the clear defining of the role and remit of MLs. This will support the reconceptualisation and evolution of the role in Irish Post Primary ETBs to one which is both positional and influential.

Transforming Middle Leadership has the potential to lessen the burden on SLs and empower MLs to develop and support sustainable Leadership structures. Currently, there is a significant opportunity in Irish schools to transform this role and capitalise on its potential for the benefit of both the individual and the system.

5 Materials and Methods

This study combines a three-stage sequential research process: stage one qualitative interviews; stage two utilised the findings to inform the quantitative survey and stage three follow up qualitative interviews with AP Is (see figure 3). Creswell (2014) considers that the strength of mixed methods research is that the phases build on each other. He subsequently notes that it is challenging to conduct as additional time is required to conduct each phase. Figure 3 illustrates the pragmatic, mixed methods research design. Ethical approval for this research was granted by Dublin City University.

This study is confined to exploring the needs of AP I post holders in ETB schools. There are 16 ETBs in the

Republic of Ireland that govern 245 schools. Therefore, the study encompassed 245 schools.

6 Results

6.1 Stage one: Interviews

Stage one involved semi structured interviews (45-60 mins) and the collecting and analysing of data from five AP Is. The interviewees had a range of years' experience as post holders to reflect the needs of AP Is at different stages of their ML career.

The main challenges identified by post-holders were lack of time; workload; self-management; lack of good communication systems and dealing with colleagues.

Interviewees are identified as I (Interviewee) following by 1.1 (first round interviews and first interviewee) or 1.2 (first round interview, second interviewee):

Interviewees were complimentary of the open-door policy that senior management had but the dominant support identified was from other experienced AP Is. The support of these experienced colleagues was described as essential as they facilitated the process of converting theory into practice. This mentoring support was identified as being important for the first couple of years in the role and as being "as valuable at this stage in your career as it is when you're a newly qualified teacher." (I-1.3). AP Is recognised the on-the-job expertise of experienced post holders as "oftentimes they've tried and failed and learned from experience and it's great to get their views" (I-1.5).

Apart from one identified issue (I-1.4) of when to deal with disruptive students who were sent to them during their own class teaching time, interviewees were comfortable dealing with students and discipline. A challenge was identified in the area of pastoral care (I-1.1) and dealing with the emotional needs of students and their parents especially when high stakes exams were involved.

When asked to identify areas for PD, interviewees identified self-management (I-1.1) but cautioned that 'a couple of days training cannot prepare you for the role and you require constant support from senior management'.

The most experienced post holder (I-1.1) advised that 'you must know your limitations; you can't fix everyone; constantly seek support; don't ever think you know it all; you must always be the professional and the voice of reason; show empathy and manage your own emotions'. This advice was coupled with concern for teachers being awarded this role without adequate experience. This post holder advised that teachers should have at least 8 years'

Figure 3: Research Design Participant Profile

experience before taking on the role of year head in particular. This was echoed by another interviewee (I-1.2) who stated that her relationship with colleagues had not changed after appointment as she had years of experience in the school and had ‘gained respect of colleagues over time’. The appointment had just been like ‘a natural progression’. Both interviewees expressed that they felt part of the leadership team in the school whereby newer appointees did not.

The literature review and the data from this stage were analysed to inform the questions for the online quantitative stage. It was considered important to include the voice of AP Is at this stage to explore their PD needs. This approach is advocated by Bryman (2016) when he states that “qualitative research can be used to inform the design of survey questions” (p.651) as it gives an in-depth knowledge of the social setting. The transcribed interviews were coded and utilised to develop the survey questions. NVivo was utilised to analyse the qualitative data by open coding (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011, p.561) the data. “Codes are labels that assign symbolic meaning to the descriptive or inferential information compiled during a study” (Miles, Huberman and Saldana, 2014, p.71). Elliot (2018) explains that coding involves a decision-making process, where the researcher breaks down the data to make something new. During this process, decisions must be made, based on the context of the particular piece of research. Decisions were made regarding the names of these codes/nodes, which Elliot (2018) advises should be clear so that they convey meaning to the reader. The count on the nodes were noted, a practice that Harding (2019) recommends, as larger counts can show the importance of a node. The nodes with the higher counts indicated a greater need for support or PD in that area. Lower number counts were not discounted as the needs of post holders can vary greatly across their careers. Additionally, the number of interviews in this stage (five) was small and it was important to address each need identified. The nodes emerged as the researcher analysed each transcript. These nodes were then used to develop the online SurveyMonkey questions to distribute to the entire sample. Stage two sought the voice of all AP I post holders in ETB post primary schools to quantify and further inform the needs identified in stage one.

6.2 Stage two: Online Survey

The survey was distributed to the entire sample of AP I post holders in ETBs. The survey included a combination of closed questions and open questions which would require

further analysis (with NVivo). It yielded 122 respondents out of an estimated total of 1,225 giving a response rate of 10%.

The data was collected from a mixture of closed and open questions. The web survey produced descriptive statistics, “so that researchers can then analyse and interpret what these descriptions mean” (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011). Descriptive statistics were used, which are displayed in charts and graphs as they are easy for the reader to engage with. Cross-tabulation, where one variable is presented in relation to another was also a feature of the analysis. Five-point Likert scales were used to determine post holders need for training in particular areas and the type of professional development they were interested in. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011) advise using these scales as they “build in a degree of sensitivity and differentiation of response while still generating numbers” (p.386).

The questionnaire also contained open ended questions. These questions required further analysis than that provided by SurveyMonkey but were questions that had the potential to provide a deeper insight into the needs of post holders. These could provide “the ‘gems’ of information that might otherwise not be caught in the questionnaire” (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011, p.392). The open-ended questions were interpreted in the same manner as the information from the semi-structured interviews which involved open coding the responses in NVivo.

This study collected and analysed the voice of AP I post holders in ETB schools. A number of key findings emerged which can assist the evolution of the AP I role from a managerial position to an authentic leadership role.

The research questions are identified in italics.

What were the biggest challenges that you faced in the AP I position?

Each school is unique in its location, setting, resources, and students and therefore this was an open-ended question without specific choices being provided. The aim was to gauge the range of challenges that AP I post holders face. Similar to other open questions the response rate was lower.

Three main themes emerged which reflect some of the ‘How’ of De Nobile’s (2018) MLiS Model:

Workload and Time (time management (38) and volume of work (18))

Relationship Management (colleagues (19) and parents (6))

Figure 4: Biggest Challenges Faced in AP I Position

and

Human Resource Management (not being reported in this paper).

6.2.1 Workload and Time

Time was mentioned by 38 people as being a challenge and 18 respondents spoke about the volume of work involved both from the work involved in the AP I role and the role conflict they experienced while balancing this with the work required for their class contact hours.

In Ireland the majority of MLs are given responsibility for a particular year group. They monitor and support their progress, discipline and pastoral care. The level of responsibility associated with the role (5) was a challenge to post holders which is reflected in their words:

#102 'Weight of responsibility'.

#95 'Emotional needs of students'.

#85 'Dealing with sensitive information and/or child welfare issues'.

MLs expressed a need for more support in the area of pastoral care to help them manage the complex challenges that some students are faced with.

6.2.2 Relationship Management

Establishing and maintaining positive working relationships is an essential element in enacting a ML role. Managing these relationships can be difficult for MLs, particularly in the time following appointment (De Nobile, 2018). Learning to deal with others in their role as an AP I

post holder was a concern for many post holders. Fellow colleagues (19) were the biggest cause for concern, particularly in the period after appointment as there were negative feelings from other staff members who had applied for and were unsuccessful in obtaining the AP I position. There were also challenges having to deal with colleagues when their working relationship with them had changed. They were now viewed as occupying a leadership/management role which altered their colleagues' perception of them.

Managing relationships with students (5), parents (6), senior management (6) and the various education partners is also a concern for post holders. In particular, managing expectations that colleagues and parents have of them. AP I's expressed an increase in expectations from colleagues once appointed to the role:

#26 'People believing you have all the answers when you don't'.

#67 'Unrealistic expectations from teaching staff in dealing with discipline issues'.

The role additionally involved an increase in dealing with conflict situations which participants noted concerns about:

#85 'How to communicate with very difficult parents' and

#30 'Learning to deal with students'/parents' issues and perhaps dealing with conflict between teacher and student and resolving same'.

What are the Aspects of the Role you Feel most Comfortable with?

Of the 122 participants, 43% (52 participants) specifically stated that they were comfortable dealing with students. In addition, 12% stated that they were comfortable with all aspects of the job.

Interacting with students is the core focus of teaching and it is not surprising that it is the role that post holders feel most comfortable with. This indicates that other aspects of the role that AP Is are not trained in, require support.

14% noted being comfortable when dealing with other people, parents, colleagues and SM.

14% stated that management tasks were where their comfort level was.

Figure 5: Aspects of the Role You Feel Most Comfortable With

Less than 2% mentioned being comfortable with leadership. This is not to assert that these post holders are not leading in their schools but they do not exhibit the language of leadership theory or/and are not aware of their potential to lead.

How did you Overcome these Challenges?

In stage 1, AP Is identified other AP Is and SLs in their school as their main supports when dealing with challenges.

The answers reflect the findings in question 12 when respondents were asked who had supported them most since taking up the role. Other AP I post holders (8) and the senior management team of Principal and Deputy Principal (11) along with colleagues' support (9) were reported as a way to overcome challenges faced in their role. Utilising the existing structures in the school and working with the various teams in place in the school was important for 7 post holders.

27 of the respondents reported utilising their own skills to deal with challenges: advanced planning, organisation, communication, resilience, being professional, learning from mistakes, reflection, time management and using previous experience.

Only two people mentioned getting others to share the workload

#53 'work with others more to share the workload'.

#22 'Lots of prioritizing and some delegation'.

Utilising in-service was only mentioned by two people to help overcome challenges. This is surprising given the benefits of effective PD evident in the literature.

Figure 6: How Did You Overcome These Challenges?

6.2.3 Identifying training needs

Rich PD opportunities have been identified as important for MLs. The survey asked participants to identify their personal perceived training needs.

Figure 16: Identifying Training Needs

Combining the results from the responses to this question (appendix 1) on the training needs of AP Is, the following list is in order of priority:

- (1) Managing Conflict
- (2) Time Management
- (3) Dealing with Parents
- (4) Pastoral care of Students
- (5) Self-Management
- (6) Dealing with Colleagues
- (7) Working with other Middle Managers
- (8) Working with Senior Management
- (9) Dealing with Discipline
- (10) Presentation Skills
- (11) Communication

Managing conflict was identified as the area with the greatest need. The AP I post involves managing relationships with many people; colleagues, senior management, parents, students and other stakeholders. Managing conflict was a main priority in particular for those who had 20-30 years' experience when appointed an AP I position. 41% saying it was required and 18% saying it was essential.

6.3 Stage three: Interviews

In stage three, semi-structured interviews (30 mins) were used to verify and validate the findings from the online survey. A booklet summarising the findings was prepared

and distributed to 10 post holders (five interviewees from stage one and five additional AP Is). The purpose of this was to get their reactions to and feedback on the findings and to ascertain if a need or important element had not been identified. Overall, the interviewees agreed that:

- The support of management and other AP I post holders is important (and generally forthcoming) in the role.
- Time management skills are required as the workload is extensive.
- Relationship management and dealing with conflict skills are required. Dealing with colleagues is an issue in the stage after appointment.
- The role is mostly task-based and post holders are not realising their leadership potential.
- Post holders generally do not delegate tasks to others.
- From an overall analysis of the findings, combined training for the senior and middle leaders is suggested:

To explore distributed leadership and to come to a shared understanding of their roles and responsibilities in their particular school and ETB context.

To agree a shared vision and mission for the school and

To help them to work as a team.

Interviewees were asked if they felt there was anything that had not been identified in the research.

One interviewee noted that ‘no amount of time management could support the role if the workload was excessive and that a review of the workloads should be undertaken’. Managing time was also mentioned by I-2.6, who said that ‘no matter how prepared you are you never know what will be facing you each day when you go in’. They also stated that this was part of the ‘beauty of the role’.

I-2.6 noted that ‘post holders require training to deal with complex student and family issues in their role as year head. Anyone providing PD needs to be properly trained and that there needs to be some system of quality control on PD as some of the stuff that goes on at in-service is terrible’.

I-2.8 stated that ‘younger post holders often struggled with discipline and required a lot of support dealing with more challenging students’.

The interviewees overall agreed with the findings and reaffirmed the need for PD and support for MLs in their

current role and not just PD that is aimed at preparing them for senior leadership.

I-1.5 ‘The biggest thing for me is the lack of PD for post holders, for those who don’t want to use it as a stepping-stone, who are content to stay here’.

They agreed that there is a need for all leaders to work together and to come to a shared understanding of what leadership and management should look like in their particular school.

7 Discussion

Post Primary schools in Ireland have a system of Middle Leadership that appoints teachers at AP I and AP II level. Taking on a ML position involves a certain degree of change, change in your position in the management structure of the school, possible change in your relationship with colleagues and a change in the roles and tasks that you must undertake. Those taking on Middle Leadership roles require a new skill set to meet the new challenges and responsibilities.

7.1 Managing Relationships

Middle leaders are often the conduit between policy and practice and are well placed to support and enact policies and system changes. Establishing and maintaining positive working relationships is an essential element in enacting this pivotal role. Managing these relationships can be difficult for MLs, particularly in the time following appointment (De Nobile, 2018) and is further complicated by the absence of a clear job description. In this study, participants reported that they required additional skills in relationship management and managing conflict. A number of participants experienced a difficult relationship with some colleagues following their appointment. We propose that this issue cannot be rectified solely by providing PD to improve a leader’s skills, it requires a supportive culture that embraces a model of distributed leadership which is authentic, embedded and one which affords agency to MLs.

7.2 Leading Teams

MLs interact with class tutors, class teachers, the pastoral care team, senior management and many other stakeholders. Unfortunately, groups of people are often given the label of a team without any time being invested to design and develop these teams (West-Burnham, 1997). MLs are required to work in many teams, and team development and dynamics are complex. If a school has a vision for a true collaborative culture, then it would follow that teamwork skills should be provided through focused PD.

7.3 Communicating Effectively

Participants in this study did not prioritise communication skills when they were requested to express their training needs.

7.4 Managing Time

The notion of time, or lack of it was a recurring aspect of the responses in this study. Post holders noted that balancing the time required for their area of responsibility and their class work requirements was a difficult task. This is exacerbated by reports that the workload of posts is excessive. One respondent noted that no amount of time management skills will suffice if the workload is excessive. This indicates a need for a review of the duties and responsibilities of AP Is as was discussed earlier.

7.5 Managing Self

De Nobile (2018) reports that engaging in PD is a major factor when exploring ML's self-management. Leadership development can be viewed as a self-managed process and those in ML positions have a responsibility to "seek out opportunities to gain the knowledge, skills and capabilities to successfully carry out this work" (Gurr, 2019, p.290). Predominately, post holders in this study have exhibited a value of and willingness to engage with PD opportunities. Participants completed a combination of award-bearing and other forms of PD, prior to or in preparation for the role. A concern emerging is that the workload associated with the role will discourage them from engaging in further PD opportunities that would assist them to develop and enhance their leadership and pedagogical skills.

8 Reflections

This empirical research has transformed our understanding of middle school leaders and their needs. It has helped us identify new ways of supporting MLs, resulting in new practices and policies. Engagement in the process not only demonstrated the value of interrogating our practice but also the value of being open to challenging 'old notions' and ways of doing things. This new understanding is transformative in that it has shaped our discussion about middle school leaders within our respective fields of education, more specifically, our work across the continuum of teacher education. This has allowed the discussion about this important topic to be brought to a broader audience, such as teacher educators, preservice teachers, teacher researchers, practising teachers and school leaders. In this way, the discussion encourages further awareness of MLs' valuable role within our school system. It is challenging educators to reflect and interrogate their understanding of school leadership and the often-untapped potential of MLs.

This new understanding of the capacity of MLs to create a sustainable leadership model in schools is informing our planning and provision of programmes in the University. More importantly, it is informing policy and procedure in professional PD provision at the local and national levels. One example of this is input into the design and development of an action research project by the Centre for School Leadership (CSL) - Middle Leadership Cluster Pilot Project - to enable schools to realise the capacity and capabilities of their MLs. The pilot supports SLs and MLs to learn together, develop and nurture a shared understanding of an effective and reflective school leadership team, and transform ongoing leadership practice in 35 schools (CSL, 2021). Educational leadership in Ireland, at both policy and practice level, is at an exciting and active point in its development. The authors believe that the outcomes and insights from this pilot will warrant further exploration to maximise the potential to transform leadership policy and practice in schools in Ireland.

9 Recommendations

MLs can make a 'powerful contribution to secondary-school improvement' (Gurr, 2019, p.136) when they work well with SLs. This synergy requires system and cultural transformation to fully embrace and benefit from the potential of effective MLs. The recommendations focus on

both the individual needs of AP Is and the collective needs of the School Leadership Team.

1. Combined training should be provided for the School Leadership Team (principal, deputy principals and MLs). This training should (a) unpack the meaning of leadership in the school; and (b) support the team to come to a shared understanding of expectations and limitations of each leader in their particular context. This should be facilitated by an independent person to allow for authentic conversations and real engagement with changing the status quo.
2. PD for MLs should include time management skills, relationship management, conflict management and support to support the pastoral care of students.
3. National and local reviews should be carried out on the workload and expectations of the role of an AP I post holder.
4. Experienced AP I post holders should receive training in mentoring skills. New AP I appointees should have the formal support of an experienced post holder as they transition into their new role.
5. Team development skills are required at all levels of school life to encourage a collaborative culture where leaders (SLs, MLs and TLs) can flourish and where they can in turn build capacity in followers.
6. The experience required by teachers to be eligible to apply for an AP I position should be reviewed and possibly increased.

10 Conclusion

MLs in Irish post primary schools are venturing to embrace a DL model while battling ingrained historical hierarchical systems. This research recommends additional support to ensure that the potential of the role is reached. AP Is have been neglected in the literature and in the system and face many challenges in their role. A lack of understanding and support from senior management, lack of professional preparation and leadership development hinder their effectiveness (Gurr and Drysdale, 2013). The goal of this research is to inform a system that acknowledges the pivotal role that MLs can play and subsequently supports and utilises that role to transform Middle Leadership policy and practice in schools in Ireland.

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Appendix 1

Identifying Training Needs