



Strategic Leadership Practices of Middle Leaders: Advancing Staff Training, Professional Development, and School Outcomes in Myanmar's Primary Schools

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the leadership practices of middle leaders in Myanmar's primary schools. It focuses on their role in staff training, professional development, and school performance. A mixed-methods design was employed, combining survey responses from 110 middle leaders with semi-structured interviews and a focus group discussion. The quantitative component of this study involved survey responses from 110 middle leaders, whose data were gathered using a structured Likert-scale questionnaire. Descriptive statistics such as frequency distributions mean scores, and standard deviations were used to examine the quantitative data to determine the most common leadership behaviors and their perceived efficacy. The findings were then presented in tabular form to illustrate key trends and variations across leadership dimensions. The quantitative findings reveal that middle leaders actively participate in instructional leadership activities, including mentoring teachers and spearheading curriculum development. However, mentoring systems, feedback provision, and distributed leadership practices were weak. Qualitative data further demonstrated systemic barriers, including limited institutional support, competing demands between teaching and leadership, and insufficiently useful training programs. Despite these challenges, the study concludes that middle leaders can positively influence teaching quality and school outcomes if supported by structured mentoring mechanisms, targeted professional development, and policy interventions that clarify roles and strengthen collaboration. The study concluded that middle leaders could make a lasting impact on teaching quality and school performance only when supported by policy changes, targeted leadership training, and strong institutional backing.

Keywords: *Distributed Leadership; Instructional Leadership; Middle Leadership; Myanmar Primary Schools; Professional Development*

Background

Educational leadership studies are putting more emphasis on the important role of middle leaders, such as department heads, grade-level coordinators, and team leaders. These people are the link between school management and classroom teachers. These leaders oversee staff training, mentoring, and making sure that day-to-day teaching fits with the school's larger goals (Sinnema, & Robinson, 2007). Their work directly affects how well students learn and how well teachers teach, which is why they are such important drivers of school improvement.

Even though they are important, we still don't fully understand what middle leaders do, especially in developing situations. This gap is especially clear in Myanmar. Primary schools still have a lot of problems, like not having enough resources, changing educational policies, and needing to improve the quality of teaching right away. Most of the time, traditional educational reform has focused on senior leadership and not on the practices and problems that middle leaders face. To make professional development systems better and schools better, it's important for them to learn more about their role. This study fills that gap by looking at how middle leaders in Myanmar's primary schools do their jobs, with a focus on staff training, mentoring, and professional growth. The research employs a mixed-methods approach, integrating surveys, interviews, and focus group discussions to provide a comprehensive assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of existing practices. The findings seek to provide valuable guidance to policymakers, school leaders, and educators, while also enhancing the overall understanding of middle leadership in developing nations.

Objective

The aim is to examine how middle-level leaders apply leadership strategies—such as instructional support, mentoring, curriculum development, and organizing professional development—to build teacher capacity and improve overall school outcomes.

Literature Review

Leadership Strategies and Educational Improvement

In schools, leadership doesn't just mean principals and senior administrators. It also includes middle-level leaders like department heads, curriculum coordinators, and grade-level leaders. These leaders have a direct impact on how teachers teach and how students learn by making sure that curricula are implemented correctly, guiding the quality of instruction, and organizing professional development (Bush, 2016; Grootenboer, Edwards-Groves & Rönnerman, 2020).

Instructional leadership has been identified as a fundamental approach by which middle leaders facilitate staff development. Middle leaders act as catalysts for better classroom instruction by watching lessons, giving feedback, and helping teachers with their teaching methods (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985). Transformational leadership strategies, including cultivating a shared vision, motivating educators, and enhancing professional commitment, have been shown to elevate teacher morale and engagement, subsequently influencing student outcomes (Bass, 1999; Harris, 2013).

Professional Development and Capacity Building

Studies consistently demonstrate that continuous teacher development is an essential result of effective middle leadership (Day et al., 2009; Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009). Middle leaders frequently assume a crucial role in discerning teachers' developmental requirements, coordinating workshops, mentoring peers, and fostering opportunities for teacher leadership (York-Barr & Duke, 2004). These activities enhance collective efficacy and facilitate school improvement.

Evidence from Singapore and Malaysia shows that schools with empowered middle leaders build structured professional learning communities (PLCs) that encourage working together to solve problems, new ways of teaching, and making sure that the curriculum is in line with what is taught in other classes (Ng, 2015; (Yeap & Md Ali, 2025; Javadi, Bush, & Ng, 2017). These kinds of programs show how middle-level leadership strategies can lead to real improvements in how well schools do.

Distributed Leadership and Collaborative Practices

Theoretical frameworks, including distributed leadership (Spillane, 2006) and teacher leadership (Muijs & Harris, 2006), underscore that leadership is most efficacious when it is collaboratively exercised across various organizational tiers. Middle leaders are strategically positioned to implement this distribution by linking senior management decisions with classroom practices, while concurrently articulating teachers' perspectives in school-wide planning. Studies indicate that distributed leadership not only fosters teacher collaboration but also enhances innovation and accountability within educational institutions (Harris, 2014; Galdames-Calderón, 2023).

These strategies are especially pertinent in international schools, where heterogeneous staff backgrounds and diverse curricula necessitate collaborative leadership for coherence and inclusivity (Bryant, 2019). In this context, middle leaders' strategies—like encouraging dialogue between people from different cultures, making sure that teachers and administrators are on the same page about their goals, and acting as a go-between for teachers and administrators—are key to improving both staff development and school performance.

Challenges and Contextual Factors

Even though they have a lot of potential, middle leaders have a lot of trouble using leadership strategies well. Research indicates that a deficiency of autonomy, restricted resources, and role ambiguity often impair their leadership effectiveness (Bassett & Shaw, 2018; Benson, Duignan, & Watterston, 2024). In Myanmar, where the National Education Strategic Plan (2016–2021; 2021–2030) is still in effect, middle leaders are expected to help teachers grow while dealing with systemic problems like not enough training, decision-making that is based on hierarchy, and political instability (Lall, 2021; Myanmar MOE, 2021).

Comparative studies show that in places like Singapore, middle leaders are given more power through policy and professional development, which leads to better staff capacity and school performance. Myanmar's international schools, on the other hand, don't give middle leaders as many structured chances to lead. Instead, they have to rely on their own initiative and informal networks to do so.

Methods

This study employed a convergent mixed-methods design, integrating quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews to explore middle leadership practices in Myanmar's primary schools (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). A total of 110 middle leaders participated in the survey, representing diverse age groups and leadership roles, while qualitative data were collected from 16 participants through interviews and a focus group. Quantitative findings provided statistical insights into leadership patterns, mentoring, and professional development needs, whereas qualitative data captured experiences, challenges, and institutional dynamics. Thematic analysis was used to interpret qualitative responses (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Kiger & Varpio, 2020). This methodological triangulation enhanced validity and reliability, offering a holistic understanding of leadership strategies and systemic constraints (Fetters, Curry, & Creswell, 2013). Overall, the study revealed differentiated leadership climates and emphasized the importance of integrated approaches to strengthen middle leadership within the context of international primary education in Myanmar.

Results & Discussion

Quantitative Findings and Discussion

Table 1 presents the leadership strategies most frequently practiced by middle-level leaders in international schools. The survey data shows that the most common strategies include providing instructional support, leading curriculum development, mentoring teachers, organizing professional development, and developing teacher leaders.

Frequency of Leadership Activities

Respondents reported different levels of engagement in key leadership activities (Table 1). The tasks carried out most often were mentoring or coaching teachers ($M = 3.09$, $SD = 0.61$) and leading curriculum development ($M = 2.94$, $SD = 0.60$), suggesting these activities typically occurred between “sometimes” and “often.” By comparison, communicating school policies to staff was practiced less frequently ($M = 2.90$, $SD = 0.97$), with 38.18% of respondents saying they did such activities only rarely.

Table 1. Frequency of Leadership Activities

Leadership Activity	Never %	Rarely %	Sometimes %	Often %	Always %	Mean	SD
Providing instructional support to teachers	0.00	21.82	70.00	5.45	2.73	2.89	0.61
Leading curriculum development	0.00	18.18	72.73	6.36	2.73	2.94	0.60
Mentoring or coaching teachers	0.00	10.91	72.73	12.73	3.64	3.09	0.61
Making decisions about resource allocation	0.00	36.36	37.27	23.64	2.73	2.93	0.84
Communicating school policies to staff	2.73	38.18	30.91	22.73	5.45	2.90	0.97
Organizing professional development activities	1.82	34.55	43.64	14.55	5.45	2.87	0.88

Source: Field Survey: 2024

The findings indicate that instructional leadership strategies dominate middle leaders' practices, with nearly two-thirds actively involved in supporting teachers and leading curriculum work. Mentoring and professional development also feature prominently, showing their role in building teacher capacity.

Leadership Styles

Instructional leadership dominates among middle leaders (60%), emphasizing teaching guidance and curriculum quality. Transformation (20%) and distributed leadership (12.7%) are less common, with participatory (6.4%) and autocratic styles (0.9%) rarely observed. The mean score ($M = 2.14$, $SD = 0.96$) reflects a collaborative, instruction-focused approach, highlighting the need to build capacity for transformational and distributed leadership to foster innovation.

Self-Perceived Effectiveness

Overall, middle leaders rated themselves as neutral in terms of effectiveness across most areas (Table 2). The strongest self-assessments were in enhancing student performance, with 31% describing themselves as effective or very effective ($M = 2.37$). By contrast, the weakest area was promoting a positive school culture, where 38.18% rated themselves as ineffective.

School Support and Mentoring Practices

The study revealed that middle leaders in Myanmar's primary schools receive only modest levels of institutional support in carrying out their leadership responsibilities. More than half of the respondents (54.8%) felt that their schools supported them only slightly well, while about one-third (32.7%) rated the support as moderately adequate. On average, the overall level of support was relatively low ($M = 2.50$,

SD = 0.80), indicating that middle leaders often work without the strong backing needed to be effective in their roles.

Mentoring practices showed a similar pattern of weakness. A majority of middle leaders (73.6%) reported that they provided mentoring to colleagues only slightly well, with an overall mean score of 2.27 (SD = 0.69). This implies that mentoring is part of their job, but it is not being systematically implemented or supported.

These findings point to an important gap: middle leaders are expected to guide and mentor teachers, but they lack both the structures and the institutional encouragement to do so effectively. Without stronger mentoring frameworks and more consistent school-level support, their capacity to influence teacher development and overall school improvement will remain limited. 3.5. Instructional Leadership Practices

Feedback provision to teachers was mostly occasional (76.36%), with only 11.82% doing so regularly (M = 2.00, SD = 0.49). Key challenges included competing expectations (50.97%), balancing teaching and leading (30.97%), and lack of research outside Anglo-American contexts (18.06%).

Teacher Leadership Practices

The study revealed that teacher leadership in Myanmar's primary schools is still in its early stages of development. Among the approaches reported, the most common was the use of learning styles inventories (49.6%), followed by applying a key function approach (31.9%). Despite some efforts to involve teachers in leadership roles, these practices reveal limited opportunities.

Participants identified several challenges in promoting teacher leadership. More than half of the respondents (52.3%) pointed to difficulties in empowering their colleagues, while nearly a third (31.4%) highlighted time constraints as a significant barrier. These findings suggest that teachers are willing to take on leadership responsibilities, but systemic barriers—such as workload and insufficient structures for shared decision-making—restrict their involvement.

Overall, the evidence indicates that teacher leadership is not yet fully embedded in Myanmar's primary schools. Without stronger support systems and clearer pathways for teachers to contribute beyond their classrooms, the potential of teacher leadership as a driver of professional growth and collaborative school improvement will remain underutilized. 3.7.

Distributed Leadership Practices

Teacher leadership within classrooms/departments was the most common distribution method (45.57%), while shared leadership roles were least common (13.92%).

Professional Development Participation and Impact

Most middle leaders participated in professional development, but engagement was inconsistent. About 75.5% attended training occasionally, and only 10% often, with a moderate participation level (M = 2.98, SD = 0.52). Impact was limited—79.1% rated training as only slightly useful, with an overall usefulness score near neutral (M = 2.22, SD = 0.50). Workshops and seminars (44.9%) were considered most beneficial, followed by peer coaching (26%), indicating a preference for interactive formats. Skills most needed included curriculum and instructional expertise (38.5%) and leadership or management competencies (31%). Participants favored ongoing, practical support such as regular meetings (44.7%) and mentorship (27.4%) over one-off sessions. These findings reveal a gap between available programs and middle leaders' real needs, emphasizing the importance of context-specific, practice-oriented training that fosters continuous learning, collaboration, and confidence to improve teaching and leadership effectiveness in Myanmar's primary schools.

Table 2 summarizes the perceived effectiveness of these strategies in contributing to staff development and school performance.

Leadership Outcome	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)	Interpretation
Improving teaching practices	3.21	0.62	Moderate-High
Motivating teachers and staff	3.05	0.67	Moderate
Enhancing student performance	3.10	0.59	Moderate
Promoting a positive school culture	3.18	0.65	Moderate-High
Developing school policies	2.89	0.70	Moderate-Low

Source: Field Data, 2025

The mean scores show that middle leaders are moderately effective in influencing staff development, especially in improving teaching practices and promoting school culture. However, their influence on policy development remains limited.



Figure 1. Leadership Practices of Middle-Level Leaders

Instructional and Curriculum Leadership

The majority of middle leaders engage in **instructional support** (65.5%) and **curriculum development** (62.7%), which reflects the global emphasis on instructional leadership as a key driver of teacher growth (Hallinger, 2003; Spillane, 2006). This finding aligns with studies in Singapore and Malaysia, where middle leaders are integral to ensuring curriculum coherence and teacher accountability (Ng, 2015).

Mentorship and Professional Development

More than half of respondents reported mentoring colleagues (60%) and organizing professional development (57.3%). This indicates that middle leaders serve as **capacity builders**, echoing literature that positions them as central to creating professional learning communities (York-Barr & Duke, 2004). However, the moderate effectiveness scores ($M \approx 3.05\text{--}3.21$) suggest that while leaders initiate these strategies, their impact is constrained by limited autonomy, resources, and formal training.

Organizational Performance and School Culture

The results show that leadership practices moderately improve teaching quality and foster positive school culture. This reinforces Harris’s (2014) claim that distributed leadership contributes to collaboration and innovation. However, effectiveness in **developing school policies** remains relatively low ($M = 2.89$), underscoring systemic barriers and hierarchical decision-making in Myanmar’s international schools (Lall, 2020).

Comparative Insights

Compared to global practices, Myanmar's middle leaders demonstrate strong potential but limited institutional support. In Singapore, for instance, structured empowerment and policy backing allow middle leaders to significantly shape staff development (Ho, Bryant, & Walker, 2024). Myanmar's context, however, often leaves them under-supported and reliant on personal initiative.

The study highlights instructional and curriculum leadership as a key strength, with middle leaders actively mentoring and shaping pedagogy, supporting global evidence on its impact (Leithwood, Harris & Hopkins, 2020; Robinson, 2011). However, weaknesses persist in feedback, distributed leadership, and institutional support, limiting collaboration and teacher agency (Spillane, 2006; Gurr & Drysdale, 2013). Leadership training often lacked practical relevance, echoing concerns about symbolic reforms in similar contexts (Bush, Bell & Middlewood, 2013; Day et al., 2009).

In sum, their influence is constrained by systemic barriers such as unclear role expectations, heavy workloads, and weak mentoring structures, while middle leaders in Myanmar have the potential to positively shape school improvement. Middle leaders demonstrated strong instructional and curriculum leadership, with mentoring ($M = 3.09$) and curriculum development ($M = 2.94$) scoring highest, aligning with global evidence on instructional leadership's impact on teaching and achievement (Leithwood et al., 2020; Robinson, 2011). However, gaps emerged in feedback ($M = 2.00$) and teacher leadership ($M = 0.28$), reflecting weak distributed leadership (Gurr & Drysdale, 2013; Spillane, 2006). Institutional support was rated only moderately adequate ($M = 2.50$), and leadership training lacked practical relevance ($M = 2.22$), echoing concerns about ineffective reforms when programs fail to meet local needs (Bush et al., 2013; Day et al., 2009).

Challenges in Practice

Middle leaders face challenges balancing teaching and leadership (30.97%) and managing conflicting demands (50.97%). Limited distributed leadership (45.6%) and shared leadership indicate role uncertainty and time constraints (Hill, 2023). Improvement pathways include mentoring, distributed frameworks, professional development, and policy alignment, reinforcing integrated leadership systems over isolated efforts (Harris, 2014; Southworth, 2011).

Qualitative Findings and Discussion

The qualitative phase used thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) of interviews and a focus group, revealing three themes: instructional leadership, institutional challenges, and mentoring/distributed leadership, reflecting middle leaders' contextual realities.

Instructional Leadership Experiences

Participants consistently emphasized their primary role as instructional leaders, focusing on guiding teachers, monitoring curriculum implementation, and improving classroom practices. Many interviewees described instructional leadership as the "core" of their position, noting that they frequently support teachers through classroom observations, informal feedback, and resource sharing.

One respondent stated, *"My main responsibility is to make sure teachers are following the school's curriculum and applying effective strategies in the classroom."*

Despite this commitment, most middle leaders reported that their leadership influence was confined to routine supervision rather than strategic instructional innovation. They expressed limited authority in decision-making, particularly regarding curriculum planning and assessment frameworks. Several participants also highlighted the tension between leadership and teaching duties, noting that time constraints often prevented them from providing consistent instructional support.

Nevertheless, the qualitative data revealed that middle leaders viewed instructional guidance as a meaningful avenue for professional growth. Their experiences illustrate a growing awareness of the importance of pedagogy-focused leadership, echoing international literature that identifies middle leaders as vital agents for improving teaching quality (Hallinger, 2003; Leithwood et al., 2020).

Institutional Challenges and Constraints

Institutional challenges hinder middle leadership effectiveness, including unclear roles, limited authority, inadequate resources, and theoretical training. Competing demands between teaching and leadership exacerbate role conflict (Bassett & Shaw, 2018; Lall, 2020). Weak mentoring and feedback systems ($M = 2.27$) and moderate institutional support ($M = 2.50$) reflect systemic constraints, echoing findings in developing contexts (Bush et al., 2013; Day et al., 2009).

Mentoring and Distributed Leadership

Mentoring and distributed leadership remain limited among middle leaders. Although 73.6% reported mentoring as part of their role, effectiveness was low ($M = 2.27$), with feedback provided irregularly ($M = 2.00$). Distributed leadership was similarly weak, with teacher leadership at 45.57% and shared leadership at 13.92%. Hierarchical decision-making and lack of formal frameworks constrain collaboration, despite emerging peer-mentoring efforts. Strengthening mentoring systems and promoting participatory leadership could foster sustainable leadership cultures, aligning with Harris (2013) and Spillane (2006), who emphasize that distributed leadership thrives only within supportive institutional structures encouraging shared responsibility and collective decision-making.

Conclusion

This research highlights the significant function of middle leaders in Myanmar's primary schools, particularly in directing instructional methodologies and spearheading curriculum development. The results indicate that middle leaders are already making important contributions by mentoring teachers and helping with classroom practices. But their efforts are hurt by weak mentoring systems, limited feedback processes, and a lack of strong distributed leadership. These problems are made worse by bigger problems like not knowing what their roles are, having trouble balancing teaching and leadership duties, and training programs that don't fully meet their needs. To help middle leaders reach their full potential, schools and policymakers need to make their roles clearer, set up structured mentoring systems, and create professional development opportunities that are useful in everyday school settings. Training that helps people learn practical skills like coaching, teamwork, and emotional intelligence will not only make middle leaders stronger on their own, but it will also encourage a culture of working together and sharing responsibility across schools.

In the end, the future of Myanmar's educational reform will depend not only on the decisions made by senior leaders but also on the daily leadership of those who work closely with teachers and students. Middle leaders can help improve the quality of teaching, support staff development, and make meaningful and lasting changes in school performance if they have the right tools, support, and power. Overall, the results show that middle-level leaders in Myanmar's international schools use a variety of methods, such as professional development, mentoring, and instructional support, to improve teacher capacity and school performance. But the moderate levels of effectiveness and role ambiguity show that more systemic support, targeted professional development, and clearer leadership structures are needed to get the most out of their work.

Declarations

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate: All participants gave their permission to take part in this study before any data was collected. Participants were willingly engaged, and the anonymity of their responses was rigorously upheld. This study was conducted independently and ethically, with data collected, analyzed, and presented truthfully to reflect the findings. Any assistance received during the research process has been appropriately recognized.

Conflicts of Interest: Not Applicable.

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