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School Middle Leaders and Change Management: Do They Need to Be More on the "Balcony" than the Dance Floor?

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Abstract: The term "middle leader" in the context of English education has evolved into an overarching title to describe a leadership position for practitioners who have school wide responsibilities in addition to their classroom duties. Such responsibilities can consist of pastoral leadership; curriculum leadership; leadership of additional student support; leadership of a team or phase and leadership of a specific school improvement priority. Educational middle leadership is founded on the notion of bringing together the duty of contributing to a strategic leadership remit whilst remaining firmly within the role of a classroom practitioner. It is argued that this 'space' for middle leadership is due to the increasingly hierarchical organisational structures of schools; consequently, being viewed as the 'middle layer'. However, it is often unclear how much real authority or autonomy middle leaders have either to act strategically or make leadership decisions for their school. Despite many studies having previously explored the impact of senior leadership in improving school systems through deploying varied leadership styles, there is an absence in literature underpinning what constitutes effective strategic middle leadership. This study explored and interrogated the strategic ability of middle leadership, to contribute to this discourse. It critically reflected on the effectiveness of middle leadership, in a small-scale context, when making sustainable curriculum changes to a primary school's maths curriculum. The research methodology adopted was an autoethnographic approach. It used a documentary method, that consisted of a reflective journal, kept by the first researcher, who was also a maths curriculum middle leader within an English primary school. The reflective journal was used as an authenticated document for elucidation and analysis. The main findings suggested that collective leadership was appropriate for this research context. The study further evidenced the reality of how personal, yet important understanding leadership cultures are, in all levels of leadership. The conclusion pointed to the direction of middle leaders being more successful if they were strategic, and therefore must both find and develop systems that assist them to be located on the "balcony" rather than only the dance floor.

Keywords: middle leader; curriculum; change management; culture; situational leadership

1. Introduction

Internationally, school leadership has long been regarded as a vital factor in improving school-wide effectiveness, teacher quality and student achievement. Recently, there has been a greater move to a systemic approach to lead and manage schools in England and we recognise this might be different in a global context. Consequently, this has since attracted increased attention to the development of middle leadership in terms of becoming system's leaders themselves. Being both a teacher and leader of learning, although rewarding, is not without conflict, as it attracts both pressure from the top and bottom of an organization [1]. The success of a middle leader lies heavily on their ability to engage with colleagues in both supportive and innovative ways [2]. However, in terms of becoming true "change agents", this is dependent on whether they have either the autonomy or capacity to act upon this. This study explored the reality of this notion in the context of leading curriculum change in maths within an English primary school.

As a consequence of continual shifts in UK government policy and publication, English schools have been faced with continuous structural school-wide changes, in terms of curriculum, assessment and leadership. This persistent shift has left school leaders/principals/administrators (referred to as school leaders from now on) accustomed to both improbability and uncertainty, in terms of what constitutes as best practice when orchestrating change and leading whole school improvement [3]. In the curriculum context of this study, namely maths, the implementation of the new Primary maths curriculum, in 2014, brought about a huge shift in terms of pedagogical understanding, which has since posed many challenges to the maths curriculum middle leaders in terms of how they plan for, instigate and sustain school wide curriculum change [4].

In terms of leadership structures, policy such as the forced academisation launched by the Labour government in 2002, has brought with it multiple challenges. This obligatory academisation means that schools previously maintained under local authority control are legally managed by a multi-academy trust, often bringing with it, new layers of strategic leadership, whereby new executive roles emerge. Consequently, school leaders, the governing body and staff now have to think and act differently, in how they continue to provide a high-quality education within this new structure. The academy legislation intended to raise the standards of education within the most disadvantaged communities [5], similar to the one the study context serves, yet has since become one of the most "radical and encompassing programmes of school reform" ([5], p. 1107). This has inevitably changed the way schools are now lead and managed.

The school described in this study is a member of a multi-academy trust. This study reflected critically on the early experiences of one middle leader, with the curriculum responsibility of maths and observed how she made changes to the current curriculum. Therefore, such observations were situated in the context of her ability to plan for, instigate and sustain curriculum change. The multi-academy trust initially orchestrated these changes to align the school's maths curriculum with the other partner primary academies. The need to understand how change occurs requires space and time for reflection, evaluation of both personal and organisational leadership cultures, and an understanding of what it means in practice to fluidly move between the "dance floor" and the "balcony" [6]. A conceptual framework informed this understanding, which follows on next.

2. Developing the Conceptual Framework

Educational leadership is a complex, often intangible, "multi-faceted" notion ([7], p. 125). Habitually, the notions of leadership and change morph into one dependent on the other. However, the adoption of any leadership style needs to be beneficial to both the pupils and community [8]. Many authors, normatively state that leaders transform lives through their skills of enabling, influencing, challenging and supporting, risk taking, managing conflict, and developing high levels of commitment to a shared vision from their teams [9–11]. Therefore, educational leadership discourse is highly nuanced, as what we understand in one context/country may not necessarily be generalised or transferred into another [12]. The extant literature includes the US, Hong Kong, the Netherlands [13] and Africa [14].

The perspective of how middle leaders in English primary schools see themselves as leaders remains to be told, as there is a distinct lack of research in this area and even more so comparatively, globally. However, key challenges remain for these leaders such as how to build confidence levels, buy-in and motivation in middle leaders-those perhaps closest to pupils, delivery and change [15]. Central to this argument is that middle leaders demonstrate high calibre teaching skills and are well prepared to be potentially effective leaders for effective pupil outcomes [16–18].

For middle leaders to grow in confidence in their role, they need to be actively engaged with expertise within the organization, a redistribution of power, and for it not to be simply viewed as a process of delegated leadership but one of shared values and cultural change [19,20]. Leadership needs to orchestrate and nurture the space for

distributed leadership to occur, suggesting that it would be difficult to achieve without the support of senior leaders [3]. It is arguable that the creation of collegial norms is essential, and in addition, teachers need time to meet if collective leadership is to become a reality. Cordial relationships are required with leaders-who may feel threatened by teachers/middle leaders taking on leadership roles.

The structure of staffing in many English primary schools is hierarchical, with the head teacher/principal/administrator positioned at the top layer, and then deputy head/principal/administrator and where finances allow, middle leaders/key stage coordinators heading up the key curriculum areas. Middle leaders fundamentally bring the policy to life as classroom practitioners, having the privileged position of seeing change from the "dancefloor" [6,21].

Many of the bureaucratic structures in schools have failed to facilitate genuine collaboration between the school leader and deputy roles [22]. School leaders must recognise, respect and respond to organisationalcultures, which namely include how things are carried out and how systems work [18]. Beugelsdijk and Welzel [23] refer to Hofstede's cultural dimensions to describe the various power regimes that normatively exist in schools [24,25]. The notion of middle leaders as change agents is critiqued next.

Middle Leaders as Change Agents

There may be a correlation between leadership and change [22,26]. Central to any change management strategies is making certain stakeholders are engaged in decision-making. This is a challenging activity given the complexity of school structures and the opportunity for everyone to meet [27]. Nevertheless, it is vital to have an inclusive culture where different voices are listened to and acted upon as appropriate to bring about sustainable change [28].

In the context of this study, the maths curriculum, Boylan [29] describes how this change management approach resonates with Shanghai's collaborative leadership practice, the mastery "Teacher Research Group (TRG)". The mastery "TRG" is a vehicle that assists collaboration across different schools to draw upon and share the reality of current classroom practice. Often facilitated by a maths curriculum leader, the mastery "TRG" facilitates the opportunity to reflect upon the reality of curriculum changes, often instigated by government policy on a nationwide scale. Thus, it enables maths curriculum leaders to act as good change agents, consequence of it being founded on shared mutual respect, and a common commitment and responsibility to all-what Fullan [28] calls, culture-based accountability.

Leading and managing change can be difficult to initiate as different leadership styles are enacted for specific context [27]. Change is constant and evolving, resonating with Lewin's [30] change management paradigm, which has three stages: unfreezing, changing and refreezing. This thus forms change as a circular process [30]. Although acclaimed as an effective approach to managing change, this model has been criticised for being oversimplified and lacking empirical evidence and leaving it open to multiple interpretations [31]. Regardless of this restriction, it is a paradigm, which depicts change as a constant journey, leaving it to be tailored in line with the requirements of the school. Consequently, we thought it a suitable paradigm to be adapted, forming as a theoretical change management framework, in our study.

3. Summary

In summary, looking at what constitutes effective leadership for effective change management is both complex and contested, requiring further research informed by reflections from global perspectives. Seeing middle leaders as strategic leaders in change management and not "just managers" is what we were interested in. This study both revealed and recognised that leadership is a process of personal development and both an "intellectual struggle" ([18], p. 6). This struggle may well be observed in the context of nuance leadership as depicted by Fullan [28], across global audiences. Nuance leadership is a leadership trait, which has both collaboration and sustainability at the heart. Yet, it could be deemed

contentious, as it is described as a leadership quality that is earned. Furthermore, this study observed how curriculum reforms do not routinely develop into sustainable changes [27], rather, that it is hampered by both contextual and cultural constraints alongside subjective factors, which in turn, result in unpredictable outcomes [32]. This underpinned our focus being situated in order to observe the reality of not only how a middle leader planned for and instigated change but in their ability to sustain it, in spite of the constraints listed within the literature. We now justify our methods in the next section.

4. Methods and Methodology

This study was both a critical reflection and analysis that interrogated the strategic capacity of middle leadership in our primary school context. This was observed in terms of their ability to plan for, instigate and sustain successful school-wide curriculum change; a consequence of their middle leadership responsibility being situated as maths curriculum leader. The first researcher, the middle leader, captured these experiences. The second researcher was a University lecturer, who posed as a critical researcher, remaining detached from the context, observing the findings and sharing insights with her-away from the current situation. The first researcher was therefore in a good place to capture the lived experiences of moving flexibly between the "dancefloor" and the "balcony" to act strategically. To critically capture this journey, an autoethnographic methodology was adopted.

Autoethnography enabled us to describe, analyse and understand cultural experiences as a form of self-narrative. We chose this approach because it enabled observations of the curriculum changes in maths undertaken by teachers to be observed and recorded as an observer. This gave the first researcher the opportunity to reflect upon and analyse rich data in the field. We therefore considered the autoethnography approach to sit well as a research tool with potential to capture and record critical incidents in situ. However, it is noted that there are sceptics of this approach, as language used by researchers when capturing and reflecting on data collected in such a way, may be read/heard differently by different actors and in different global contexts. Its subjective nature can cause contention.

To continue to gain rich data, we adopted the use of a reflective journal method [33]. These entries were primarily based on the first researcher's observations. The reflective journal formed a basis for discussion and critical reflection with the second researcher situated in a critical friend capacity. Thus, this use of continuous co-researcher dialogue enabled this study to be kept "intellectually sharp" ([34], p. 80). In the design phase of the research, the time for discussion and dissemination was built in.

Meetings were conducted on a weekly basis and reflected upon what the first researcher had recorded in her reflective journal. There were limitations, due to COVID that meant the second researcher was not allowed into the school. In hindsight, there would have been additional rigour added to the research data, had the second researcher been able to visit the school, meaning he too would have been able to keep a reflective journal noting and witnessing the first researcher's actions in situ. However, this research restriction was overcome, because of these regular, virtual meetings.

However, it is recognised that although such a method allowed the first researcher to collect authentic evidence, it had the potential to become biased [34]. To challenge these limitations, the first researcher deployed two types of reflective practice: "reflection in action", and "reflection on action". These differed in the sense that reflection in action occurred now, in situ, whilst reflection on action involved stepping back from the situation. This was good practice, in that, locating research within collaborative practices is invaluable in ensuring the research remains honest and ethical [34]. Being a small-scale study there were limited generalisations from the evidence.

In conclusion, for some, the methods used could be criticised for being too subjective, putting the researchers' inferences at the heart of data analysis [35]. Therefore, it was important for us to use the critical friend and co-researcher approach. We were mindful of our responsibility to be ethical researchers, so took every precaution to gain ethical

consent, agreement to undertake this research in the school and completed the necessary ethical forms prior to start of data collection. To protect the anonymity of the school where research was conducted, its name was not used. Next, we look at the findings of the study.

5. Findings

The findings are presented through the themes of leadership culture and middle leaders as change agents. Furthermore, this study evidenced that middle leaders need to be more strategic, as suggested by the title of this paper. Since this paper was situated to observe middle leader's in the context of curriculum leadership and change management, we observed this is terms of their ability to plan for, instigate and sustain these changes. This is explored throughout the findings. The evidence referred to is informed by data collected by the first researcher's reflective journal, with support of collaborative, critical conversations held with the second researcher.

5.1. Leadership Culture

There existed in the school, multiple cultures that required different leadership approaches, such as transformative or situational [24,25,27]. The leadership styles deployed by the first researcher and middle leader differed, and to an extent conflicted, with the senior leadership team, being more managerial in approach than strategic in intent. Such findings posed an interesting angle to both understand and analyse [24]. Referring to Handy's [24] model of the four types of culture: power, role, task and person, it was noticed that within the school context, these cultures were enacted and represented differently, between senior leaders and the first researcher. Initial evidence from the reflective journal entries depicted this:

> "It is evident that in terms of senior leadership, what resonates most is a more "task culture". Conversations stem around bringing together resources to have a task complete, evidencing this "task" driven culture. Upon reflection, my personal leadership culture is in contrast founded on a personal/supportive culture. When planning for curriculum change, my actions are driven by my teacher's individual needs. I know these well, as I work so closely with them, on the "dancefloor", whilst also sharing new teaching and curricular experiences with them;
>
> Arguably, fostering an educational empathy. Whilst planning for and preparing my curriculum change, I am endeavouring to create structures that exist to serve and assist the individuals within it (including myself, as a teacher), and knowing my colleagues so well personally, and in this capacity, is at the heart of ensuring this happens successfully."

At this point, the second researcher, acting as a critical friend, made note of this apparent 'clash' of culture, which Johnson et al. [36] argue can inhibit the collective approach and continual development of a school in terms of how senior and middle leader's work collectively. The following journal entry evidenced the impact of this:

> "In terms of acting strategically, I don't believe I will be able to move to the "balcony", whilst holding onto such a contrasting culture. Do I need to change my stance, on a personal-centred culture, towards being more "task" centred, for my senior leaders to create space for me to be on the "balcony"? I believe this difference in culture is consequence of where my role is situated, as I spend most of my time working closely with colleagues. This means I have a better understanding of their emerging needs and thus gain a true understanding of the reality of the impact of changes made to the teaching and learning have. Ultimately, this assists me in knowing how to respond to these."

This encouraged both researchers to reflect carefully on the potential barrier's leadership cultures can perpetuate, inadvertently or not, in terms of how middle leaders, can or cannot act strategically. We also noted how this very early reflection implied that senior

leaders were thus in control of how, or if, space was created for middle leaders in terms of being able to be situated on the "balcony". The evidence here suggested that a school's culture matters a lot, as it is formed by its past cultures, histories, values and beliefs. These required to be recognised and worked through to advance the current picture/status of the school. Further evidence from the reflective journal drew on previous literature and foundations of the role of senior leadership itself:

> "I wonder if my own leadership culture is a product of an absence of modelling and influencing [9] from senior leaders? Has this encouraged such a clash? Or on the other hand equally empowered me to be able to develop my own leadership 'identify' and thus a culture which resonates with this?"

During the discussion, the researchers noted that despite there being an absence of "modelling" and thus "influencing" in terms of culture from senior leaders, what they had provided was the support, which had enabled the first researcher to feel empowered to develop her own culture. Although this culture is now conflicting, it has enabled a firm understanding of her organization, in terms of the "dancefloor". This reverberated with the notion from Handy [24] that gaining a holistic understanding of the organization's community is a fundamental prerequisite of change management. Further questions were posed whether this clash is unavoidable. The first researcher's reflections finally stated that:

> "No doubt, new staff and leaders will develop their own vision, informed of such by their own critical reflections and experiences."

To sum up, in practice, there are multiple leadership styles deployed to address different practices in a school. The culture in a school, arguably, is formed and informed by the values, beliefs and vision of its context, locale and geography. Thus, these may influence leadership styles used to manage different cultural values of senior leaders and middle leaders. We next reflect on the evidence of middle leaders as change agents of curriculum reform.

5.2. Middle Leaders as Change Agents

When instigating curriculum change, the first researcher deployed Lewin's [30] model, thus beginning by unfreezing the current curriculum context, which was dated and needed revising and realigning with the other partner primary academies. As Lewin [30] depicted, the complexity of 'unfreezing' in practice can bring about catharsis within an organization. This was evident as recorded in the reflective journal:

> "There was an apparent feeling of uncertainty during the unfreezing process. My colleagues felt anxious about the investigations into their practice, something I know can be very personal."

The second researcher questioned whether she was acting strategically to gain a strategic oversight of her curriculum area. However, he pondered that in acting in this way of "doing to others" rather than collaborating with colleagues, the middle leader's culture had shifted towards what Handy [24] depicts as "power". To overcome this and salvage the personal culture previously identified, the first researcher quickly made time and space to listen to her colleagues, ensuring they could contribute to this process. It was reflected upon whether this demonstrated how, although the middle leader had touched upon being on the "balcony" in this initial phase, during this "catharsis" they were able to quickly adjust to the "dancefloor" when necessary, to prevent perpetuating this uncertainty. She noted in her journal:

> "I knew I had to act fast. I had lost sight of my own leadership culture, which was person-centred, as previously reflected on, and although it was important to gain a strategic oversight, from the "balcony", I did not want to risk this process shifting towards not being centred on the needs of my colleagues. Being a middle leader meant I could speak to my colleagues and support them in contributing to my understanding of this; ultimately, checking in with them. I moved to what I

believed was the "dancefloor" and it was here I was able to ensure their voices were listened to, becoming part of this process."

However, the second researcher probed further. He questioned whether a system could be devised, which valued the person-centred approach, but would also enable the middle leader to act strategically, gaining a more holistic oversight (as it was important to not neglect this notion). Reflecting critically, the first researcher developed an online platform, which was used to encourage people to be part of the process, contributing to the feedback and evidence gathering. As it was online, it enabled staff to remain anonymous. The impact was reflected upon below:

> "The online platform enabled me to see this change from the "balcony", whilst keeping my person-centred approach. I was able to give colleagues a voice and anonymity, planning to make my maths curriculum changes based on their emerging needs, informed by their contributions and personal reflections."

This platform acted as an initial springboard for the first researcher to act more strategically from the "balcony". This was evident due to how adaptive and flexible the middle leader was able to act instantly to support the individuals inside the school, ultimately returning to the "dancefloor" when required.

Initial investigations resulted in a new curriculum plan being devised to assist the implementation of new maths curriculum changes. This document included what changes and adaptations would be required, informed directly by the strategic insight and collaborative contributions from the findings provided by the online platform. The first researcher had produced a document depicting a visual representation for the curriculum change. It tailored carefully to the needs of the individuals, reverberating with her person-centred culture and consequences of contributions from her colleagues. Furthermore, to launch this new curriculum change, a staff meeting was facilitated. It presented staff with an opportunity to ask questions, remembering that although a leader can and will instigate change, the success is relied upon the community to sustain it [32], valuing the belief that followers are as important as the leader [27]. Following the staff meeting, in line with Lewin's [30] change management paradigm, the situation was refrozen.

However, the way in which this curriculum change was "frozen" afterwards was challenged by the second researcher as having ignored the circular notion, that Lewin [30] depicts change to be. He questioned the longevity and sustainability this curriculum change would have, affirming the reality of evidence from Cummings et al. [31] who previously criticised this model for being too simple. Both researchers reflected upon whether this had in addition created an absence of accountability, leaving a void underpinning the management of the change [20]. The direct implication of this was further evidenced in the reflective journal:

> "Freezing the change, from the "dancefloor", inhibited me in gaining a holistic oversight and seeing the reality of how the curriculum changes unfolded. Consequently, over the following weeks, teachers were able to become subconsciously selective in how they approached the new curriculum. Disparities were arising in the implementation of it. As the middle leader, I was there to support and encourage questioning for clarifications, so that we all felt as comfortable as possible with change, but I was unable to both see and have a full strategic understanding of the reality as it unfolded. It relied on colleagues sharing these personal experiences with me, and those experiences and misinterpretations, which were not shared, were unable to be addressed."

Considering this reflection, the second researcher supported the first researcher to make adaptations to Lewin's [30] model to ensure it included an ongoing evaluation and monitoring opportunity. This was designed to continue to be a process carried out with colleagues, shifting away from more traditional models of quality assurance and monitoring. Such an experience enabled both researchers to observe, in this context, middle leader's limitations in how, and if, they could adjust and act strategically, due to

being in close contact with the teaching environment [36], or the "dancefloor". The next section explores this notion of "dancefloor" to the "balcony".

5.3. The "Dancefloor" to the "Balcony"

The previous experience provided evidence exposing the reality of how the concept of the "dancefloor" restricted the middle leader's capacity to think and act strategically. This is in terms of how they can lead and develop their contexts, when circumstantially lacking the strategic overview that is available to senior leaders [29], who are habitually positioned on the "balcony" [25]. Despite having touched upon developing this ability to be situated strategically, through the development of online platform that had enabled this middle leader to move between the "dancefloor" and the "balcony", there had not been longevity in how this had enabled her to continue moving between positions. How to develop this system was reflected upon next in the reflective journal:

> "The online platform had provided an insight into the reality of the changes I had been making. It was built on colleagues' voices and kept my leadership culture person-centred. Although it had enabled me to briefly experience what it meant to act strategically, and be situated on the "balcony", it had been short lived. It had served its purpose during the initial phase of conducting my curriculum change. I want to now develop a structure that will enable me to continue making changes, collaboratively, that are informed by the needs of my teaching team, founded on their voices!"

The researchers collectively referred to theory from Boylan [29], reflecting upon how this resonated with the mastery "TRG" structure. Despite this structure often being deployed across different school contexts to assist both collaboration and the reflection of curriculum changes, often instigated by government policy, it was questioned whether this could be adapted, on a smaller scale, by the first research for her school. This would give her a chance to observe the reality of the impact of her school wide curriculum changes, in the same way the mastery "TRG" does on a nationwide scale.

Acting on this notion, the first researcher brought together a team of colleagues-who both demonstrated and shared a passion for maths, supported further by her senior leader. It was explained that this now 'internal' mastery "TRG" would work collectively to reflect upon the impact of the ongoing curriculum changes within the school. It would make space to develop further actions collectively, ensuring these served to assist these teachers, and their team's emerging needs. It was made clear that they were an integral part of enabling the first researcher to gain a strategic oversight into the impact of the curriculum change within the whole school community. The reflective journal evidenced that this was the beginning of what she described as the development of her capacity to gain both a holistic and strategic view of the curriculum context and thus school community, something Blaustein et al. [4] claim is often lacking in the ability of middle leaders:

> "The Teacher Research Group was my springboard to the "balcony". This group gave me the insight of what was happening on the ground and this structure created a space for me to react to this safely and strategically. At the same time, it enabled colleagues to continue to contribute, and where necessary I could move to the "dancefloor", to show empathy and offer advice from my own practice, as I remained firmly in the classroom throughout the process."

The second researcher argued that this *'internal'* mastery "TRG" crafted a new structure within the first researcher's own middle leadership position. He wondered whether this platform created a new layer of leadership that would ultimately give the first researcher a greater understanding of the holistic picture of their community and the ongoing curriculum changes in maths. Both researchers reflected upon whether this was the beginning of an innovative structure that could allow a middle leader, one with a curriculum responsibility, to move strategically and flexibly from the position of the "dancefloor" the "balcony" [6]. The researchers began to connect this system with the nuance trait. It was

observed, in action, how in practice the 'internal' mastery "TRG" structure could be at the heart of creating lasting change and one, which would enable the collective celebration of school wide successes, which would otherwise go unnoticed, in the absence of a platform to share them. This innovative leadership structure was the beginning of a system that was founded upon collaborative decision-making leadership approaches, fundamental to the personal leadership culture the first researcher identified with. It could be argued it pertains the potential to be at the heart of a middle leader's success in making sustainable curriculum changes. The discussion follows next.

6. Discussion

The leadership of curriculum change is complex and multi-dimensional. It encompasses cultural considerations and carefully crafted leadership systems or structures that involve empowering middle leaders to gain holistic and strategic oversights of their school. This study evidenced the reality that moving flexibly between the "dancefloor" and the "balcony" and thus being more strategic as a middle leader is not easily undertaken [4]. This study's reflections depicted that this is a continuous learning journey, full of adaptations, pointing to different styles of leadership. It is possible to suggest that middle leaders can learn, model and develop these in their own ways, as evidenced in this study. It explored the reality of how important it is that senior leaders not only create space for middle leaders to craft their own leadership cultures, values and styles but that there must also be some modelling of such behaviours, so these do not risk conflict [9]; there is a careful balance to be considered here.

It is questionable whether at the route of this problem lies within, ultimately unavoidable, differing leadership cultures, between middle and senior leaders, as this study found, a consequence of where their role is mostly situated. It is further recognised that to an extent you could argue, this study, and the first researcher, failed to recognise what fully encompasses culture [24]. This is defined by West-Burnham [18] as to how things are carried out and how (school) system's work. It is questionable whether she gave either of these full consideration, and simply focused more towards on just the school and her colleagues [24]. However, it is debatable whether middle leaders can ever fully have the capacity to make genuine decision regarding both how things are carried out or how school systems work. This refers to the belief that senior leadership will need to orchestrate and nurture the space for distributed leadership to occur, suggesting that it would be difficult to achieve, or even impossible, without the support of these leaders [3].

However, this study, despite being small-scale, provided evidence from systems such as the online platform and an 'internal' adapted model of the mastery "TRG" can act as vehicles, which enable effective strategic middle leadership. It could be questioned whether the researchers would have avoided meeting certain hurdles in this journey of curriculum change, had they implemented the 'internal' mastery "TRG" first, as this ultimately did create the springboard to the "balcony", and thus the strategic oversight the middle leader required. The 'internal' mastery "TRG" further enabled the middle leader to constantly support, encourage, check-in and guide colleagues [9]. It could be argued that this system is situated in the understanding that leadership is a process [37]; a notion synthesised by Silva [38] who argued leadership is an action, not a position.

Finally, despite some limitations, this study's adapted version of Lewin's [30] paradigm planned for sustainable change, through the belief that change is something that can be frozen or unfrozen. This kept it pertinent with the needs of the school it served, and thus echoed with the first researcher and middle leaders' person-centred culture. The researchers learned that change must be evolutionary. The next steps would be to continue to model the developed collaborative leadership approaches and practices, in hope that this would in the long term foster a genuine commitment from the school-wide community, rather than risk any future resistance or misinterpretations.

7. Conclusions

In conclusion, this empirical research reported on the unpredictable outcomes, which can arise when middle leaders instigate curriculum change [32]. It observed the reality that curriculum reform does not result in a sustainable change within the everyday practices of schools [27] and that a middle leader's position and ability to lead strategically, is both subjective, circumstantial, and contentious. Thus, we believe this study entices practitioners and leaders to challenge their preconception of leadership, whether that be senior or middle, as both a role and process in schools. It experimented with systems and structures that endeavoured to support middle leaders to act strategically, ultimately exploring the reality of how leaders' approaches and decisions can and will inhibit the practice in action [32].

This study evidenced that, having an adaptive-mindset and understanding the context [6] are both critical components of assisting successful change. Finally, this study explored the reality of Fullan's [20] notion that we [leaders] should continue to look below the surface, persistently reflecting on and revaluating decisions and actions. Although this is merely the beginning of leadership and change journey for the first researcher and middle leader, it trusted that it is the start of one founded upon working towards earning the nuance trait coined by Fullan [20]. The researchers demonstrated this through their ability to be persistently critical, reflective and adaptive alongside the deliberate attention to both the impact and importance of personal and school-wide leadership cultures. Ultimately, this study has formed the foundations of future leadership and change management journeys, consequence in how the first researcher will continue to seek ways to move flexibly from the "dancefloor" to the "balcony", sharing her experiences within not only her school but also further afield within her multi-academy trust. A benefit of being situated within this type of organisational structure.

So, what makes a difference for middle leaders to promote change in their curriculum within a primary school? Reflecting on the evidence from this study, the need to recognise that middle leaders require specialist preparation, time, and space contributed to this emerging global trend. This is because of the increasing complexity of schools and their communities, and because of growing evidence that effective school leadership enhances children's outcomes.

In- light of the UK government's recent announcement to continue fully funding the "National Professional Qualifications" in school leadership, it will be interesting to learn how other countries support the view that successful training and development of staff in all layers of the school system, requires system thinking and more than good-will to lead with conviction and passion. There must be a continuous debate at policy level to acknowledge what constitutes effective leadership that has impact for teaching and learning at national and local contexts.

Looking to the future, we suggest other influences, such as cultural, social and political perceptions may need to change to embrace emerging leadership patterns on leading change. It may be that the global community of educational leaders can share some understanding of what is at the heart of this endeavor. Defining the core task of educational leaders is problematic, often based upon unspoken values and visions of education and what this means in other societies. Whatever the differing goals, this study suggested that there is a requirement of all educational leaders to provide an environment within the parameters of the available resource in which middle leaders can grow both strategically and individually, in becoming better equipped to make both sustainable and lasting changes which impact children's learning within their school.

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