An Analysis of the Development of Middle Leaders in Chinese Secondary Schools: The Role of the Principal

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Abstract: Numerous studies conducted on educational leadership have generally emphasized the role of principal, whereas, research on middle leadership remains limited [1]. The purpose of this paper is to explore and investigate the development of middle leadership and seeks to fill in the gap by providing the analysis from a Chinese context. The author found that middle leaders are positioning at a challenging role, in which they are required to take charge of responsibilities of both a leader and a teacher, and in the meantime, they also need to negotiate between the senior leader, the colleagues. and subordinates. Furthermore, personal factors such as self-awareness and resilience are discovered to be pivotal for middle-leadership development. Apart from that, the principal plays a critical role in establishing collaborative school culture that facilitates the development of middle leaders based on the influences from the school's history, culture, and policies.

Keywords: Educational leadership; Middle leadership; Leader; Principal; Self-awareness; Resilience; School culture; Leading learning; Trust; Distributed leadership

1. Introduction

Educational leadership is long known for its significance being a critical factor in successful schooling [2]. MacBeath demonstrated that leadership in school is rather flexible and diversified, it may exist visibly in the hierarchical school system, or it could be difficult to perceive or identify due to it being a shared responsibility rather than being under an instructional authority [3]. For each form of the leadership, either implicit or explicit, their existence varies and is interdependent based on the levels of hierarchy of members of the school community engagement and system structure of the school. Different scholars have conducted various research and generated multiple empirical works regarding certain leadership models (i.e., instructional leadership). However, when most of the literatures emphasize on the role of principals. Therefore, middle leaders and middle leadership in schools are remaining in the dilemma with notable issues [1,4], in which a neglection of both theoretical and practical resources for middle leaders in schools is prominently displayed [2].

In many instances, the middle leaders are the ones that are that genuinely committed to the school's leadership team in terms of quality teaching and student learning. According to Thrope and Bennett-Powell, middle leaders are the well-recognized key persons to bring about improvements and changes to schools regarding their working responsibilities (i.e., raising students' academic achievement). They further

suggested two main strains that affects the role of middle leaders are as follows: firstly, the different expectations from different people of different departments; secondly, the hierarchical framework as well as the changing culture of the school [5]. Some scholars have argued that middle leadership is the manifestation of the distributed leadership as it allows middle leaders to make and implement important decisions, without the supervision and permission of the senior leaders, and it is by extension an alternative of teacher leadership [6]. Subsequently, a culture of whole-school coordination could be formed based on these sharing of decisions. However, Heng and Marsh claimed that middle leadership is conceptually narrower comparing to the teacher leadership since it put more emphasis on subject leadership and middle management by holding a formal leadership position, whereas, teacher leadership is rather focused on the broad capacities of teachers in leading the students [7].

In the context of China, similar to that of western schools, middle leaders are reckoned as the core bridge linking all aspects of school affairs. The nature of the position of middle leaders varies depending on the structure, size, and organizational arrangements of each school [2]. As demonstrated by Liu, middle leaders play an important role in aspects such as supervising the quality of teaching in class, driving the curriculum reforms and stimulating the development of TRGs (Teaching Research Group a.k.a. *jiaoyanzu*) [8]. Nevertheless, it has been argued that responsibilities of middle leaders are not fully democratic, instead, they are supervised by their senior leaders (i.e. the principal) in schools to a varying degree based on local contexts [9]. Hence, the aim of this paper is to enrich the academic investigations of secondary school middle leadership, typically in the context of China considering it as a representative country with profound histories and culture of East Asia. This paper addresses the following three questions:
(1) What is the role on middle leaders in Chinese secondary school?
(2) What are the issues and challenges face by middle leaders in Chinese school?
(3) What are the development needs of middle leaders in Chinese secondary school?

2. Literature review
2.1. The challenging role of middle leadership in schools
It is universally recognized that there are multiple leaders in schools and other educational institutions, and leadership is not confined to the principal alone, but is shared among other leaders to a varying degree. The role of middle-level leaders in a school for instance, are of vital importance as well as a challenge. It has been suggested that the work of middle leaders is highly dependent on the design of the role, their personal attitudes as well as capabilities, and the fact that different leaders possess distinctive perceptions and expectations towards their position based on the practical school community [10]. According to Cardon and Bassett [11], middle leaders as pedagogical leaders in secondary schools are performing a dichotomous role, which is managing and teaching. Apart from that, middle leaders are required to understand and be aware of current issues of the school that are determined by local authorities, government and senior leadership [12]. Some of their burden can be lifted when other agencies such as education welfare, social services, inspection teams and educational psychologists, that are related to the daily management get involved.

Branson et al. [13] used "sandwich" as a metaphor for the definition of middle leaders in schools, implying their challenging position between the senior management team and the subordinates. It has been suggested that middle leaders are forced to manage the increasing expectations and the everchanging demands of the educational systems. As quoted in Koh, Gurr and Drysdale: "…It appears now that many middle leaders face the inexorable challenge of 'working with the practical difficulties and pressures from below, and the higher aspirations and pressures from above'" [15].

As the saying goes, with great power comes great responsibility. The truth is, being asked to be a middle leader is not equivalent to acquiring super-powers, instead, if the candidate is novice and lack of experiences, it could be risky to be leading and be responsible for such a formalized learning program, such

as the encounter of injustice [15]. As a result, those middle leaders may suffer greatly due to pressure from administrators, academic colleagues, professional stakeholders, and students. Furthermore, challenges may come from maintaining their reputation, individual concerns, and the school itself [15].

Given the challenging circumstances middle leaders face, it is important to understand and discover what factors might act as stimulant to increase the effectiveness of their leadership. As claimed by Blandford, the ability of a middle leader to recognize his or her role at all times is the key to an effective middle leadership [12]. Considering the great number of ambiguities and obstacles in practical situations, it is essential for middle leaders to clearly identify the nature of their job. In this way, they are able to properly differentiate between each role as required, thus improving work efficiency to a certain extent. Moreover, Thrope and Bennett-Powell suggested that effective middle leaders are required to possess soft skills such as time management and the ability to organize their work according to priorities, which requires a great awareness of how skills and information on the functions within the school can better fit together [5]. Therefore, it is undeniable to say that in the environment of a school, the role of middle leader is complex but flexible, plentiful but challenging.

2.2. The role of leading learning from a middle leadership perspective

The concept of learning is perceived as an intended outcome of other aspects such as curriculum, teaching and pedagogy, and it could shallow, deep, or profound. Leading learning in schools encompasses not only the students' learning and academic results, but also the teachers' professional learning and development, which could not be achieved without middle-level leaders. According to Tan, Heng and Lim-Ratnam [1], the major job of the middle leader is to provide leadership in their department, which includes subject direction setting under different circumstances as well as planning, evaluating and implementing the pedagogical program of the school. Apart from that, middle leaders are also required to guarantee quality of the curriculum, in which encompasses the assessment method of students, ensuring the quality of the school-based examination papers, and are in charge of monitoring the students' performance [1]. Grootenboer, Edwards-Groves and Rönnerman [2] demonstrated that middle leaders are also teachers, who are essentially putting their focus on developing effective pedagogies in order to support and lead students in his or her classroom. In this case, leading students' learning has become a fundamental and core concern for the middle leaders. They further claimed that with these responsibilities, middle leaders would gradually gain more understanding of their expertise, and improve commitment and competence towards learning and teaching in school [2]. In this case, middle leaders are often responsible for leading the professional learning and developing of colleagues in schools. They possess the responsibility to assess the staff performance review in order to learn about their past accomplishments, to recognize and define the needs for learning and professional development, to plan goals for the future, as well as to offer potential learning opportunities [13].

Leading learning in a school involves influential actions and working with others in a supportive, greatly collegial environment, in which innovation and risk are co-exists. Fitzgerald and Gunter suggested that it is highly likely that student learning as well as student achievement is the core of educational leadership [16]. Although considerable research results indicate the indispensable role of the senior leaders and the principal in the learning and teaching in schools, the argument here states that leaders/teachers in the middle have a significant role in the process of learning. Fitzgerald and Gunterhave summarized five statements emphasizing on the premises of leading learning successfully: Firstly, a high level of trust accompanied with respect and autonomy is a strong base for teachers to lead learning in schools; secondly, external conditions such resources, time, and opportunities are of vital importance to establish good relationships and a professional learning community (PLC) for both leading teachers and learners; the third crucial element for a successful leadership is an ethically caring school culture, which recognizes and

cherishes the contribution of each teacher and students; Besides, a competing environment on academic achievements is highly likely to stimulate the development of leading learning as high expectations are placed on both students and teachers. Last but not least, teachers should be encouraged to take initiatives for engaging in innovative practices and not be afraid of taking risks, especially in their own classrooms and in leading their colleagues [16].

Middle leaders in schools are teachers, which are below the senior management team. They have certain management responsibility, which is managing school work and staffs. Senior leaders contribute to shaping the school culture, establishes school guidelines and policy, while the middle leaders are responsible for the implementation of different practical decisions at the middle layer of management [17]. It is undeniable that middle leaders, if in a conductive instructional culture, tends to personally give instructions to students, generating a direct impact towards their learning. Being so close to the classroom generates the greatest challenge for a middle leader: leading and managing teachers who are more directly influencing the learning of students [11]. Hence, in many instances, these middle leaders act as an agent to improve the development of a school by enhancing the quality of learning and teaching. As for the leader in the teachers' team, a middle leader is required to ensure that the teachers are encouraged and appraised, and the curriculum are delivered and developed, assessed, and evaluated [11].

However, although possessing the power of management, the role of a middle leader is critiqued on its leadership effectiveness owing to individual perceptions and recognitions. Wise discovered that middle leaders who clearly recognizes their monitoring role somehow fails to perform it in practice. This is because they are trying to maintain a good relationship with their colleagues by diminishing the potential threat from a teacher's perspective. Wise further stressed the importance of personal values of middle leaders in practical school work [18]. Considering the dual mission possessed by this role, it is very important for middle leaders to consider their teaching commitment within their leadership, and it is not as simple as managing personal time, it is about the compatibility of this leading role. Successful leadership and leading in learning are more likely to be achieved if a middle leader's beliefs and values can be transferred to his or her management practice. Nevertheless, if the leader adopts beliefs and values that are distinctive from those that are needed of a practitioner, problems will be generated. Subsequently, as both the manager and the leader, middle leaders are required to follow the orders from the senior leader team in view of the practical situations to meet the criteria of the school. Moreover, the way they judge the quality of learning and teaching is also worth evaluating.

2.3. The role of the principal in identifying the development needs of their middle leaders

Middle leadership in schools is reckoned as the relational leadership, and this important relationship should be rightly maintained not only between the middle leader and his or her colleagues, but also between middle leaders and their own leaders as well as co-middle leaders [13]. In this case, apart from a clear acknowledgment of establishing a collegial and cooperative teamwork in schools, it is more important for middle leaders to recognize the very essence of their role, which could only be realized with proper identification from the principal. Humphrey believed that principal, vice principal and teachers in schools should share a common understanding of distributed leadership, which is incorporated by four aspects: personal characteristics (typically the influential traits), leadership roles (both informal and formal), sense of belonging to the school, and support for leadership growth in individuals [19].

Monitoring is a managerial duty and a crucial factor of instructional leadership, which is one of the most effective leaderships utilized by the principal in a hierarchical school system [6]. In contrast, distributed leadership advocates for collaboration, in which teachers develop their expertise by working synergistically [20]. As Cardno and Bassett [11] demonstrated that when principals are unable or unwilling to provide instructions in certain situations, it is then the responsibility of middle leaders to become the instructional

leaders in their department. Being interdependent, the relationship between the principal and middle leaders is reciprocal and not contradictory. The work of middle leaders does not lessen the importance of the principals in improving their schools. Instead, middle leadership possesses a greater potential to impact students' academic achievement [21]. This is owing to the fact that the principal's scope of authority is limited. Although the principle is entitled to facilitate and supervise the pedagogical development, the principal is not likely to make every micro difference inside the classroom compared to the middle leaders. Therefore, the adoption of a properly distributed leadership in school can be mutually benefited to both the principal and middle leaders.

Another important factor that a principal needs to establish in school in order to facilitate the development of middle leadership is trustworthiness. Schools in the contemporary times are constantly pressured by policies, the economy, and the society [22]. According to Grootenboer, Edwards-Groves, and Rönnerman, relational trust is greatly regarded as a core element for pedagogical transformation, and it also helps create a sustainable commitment for goal achieving of a school [2]. Hence, in order to support middle leaders on their practical circumstances and potential obstacles, it is important for the principal to explore the communicative and collaborative aspects of leadership. Regarding the general hierarchical structure of a school, trust should not only be built between the principal and middle leaders, it is also important to be fostered with the subordinates. Ghamrawi argued that teachers are more likely to follow leaders who are able to demonstrate both fairness and honesty since they breed respect [23]. As human beings, teachers desire respect not only for reasons like their accomplishments, and they are more likely to trust the leader when they are respected by him or her. In this case, teachers are encouraged to voice out their problems and exchange opinions freely, which would motivate them to infuse different ideas for future progress [23]. Thus, principals should acknowledge the role of middle leaders in leading learning as well as in developing leadership among teachers. Also, the principal should be aware of the importance of trust by demonstrating good leadership among middle leaders such as having effective communication with the fellow teachers, for better development and improvement of the school.

2.4. Middle leadership and issues and challenges in Chinese schools

Issues regarding school middle leadership and middle leaders are popular and prominent worldwide, including China. Various researchers are maintaining their interest of investigation towards this type of leadership. However, the empirical evidences remain relatively limited, and whether the published work of knowledges on middle leadership in school are still valid for the contemporary circumstances owning to the fast-changing characteristic of a school [4]. Stevenson et al. demonstrated that the everchanging situation of education poses a challenge for school leaders, requiring them to frequently re-think about professional development that meets the needs of both the current and the future school community. Challenges gradually emerges from different educational pressures such as meeting professional accountability demands and launching educational reforms to implement new courses [24]. The question at present is not to raise the awareness of school leaders to be adaptive towards educational variations, it is to seek the best implementation of professional learning.

According to Hallinger and Walker, China in the new era is best known for its educational system, which is designed to promote teacher collaboration across different subjects [9]. Teaching research groups (TRGs or "Jiaoyanzu"), according to Zhang and Sun-Keung Pang [25], is a Chinese version of PLCs that is profoundly rooted in the local institutional, historical and cultural contexts. Such a typical research group consists of teachers and leaders of the same subject in a school. It has been claimed that a key factor to the success of TRGs, along with the successful leadership of a school, is a well maintenance of harmony, in which both formal and informal leaders work collectively to establish a positive human relationship [26]. However, in practical situations, it is very challenging to establish effective TRGs in Chinese schools owing

to a great number of obstacles at the organizational level, which prohibits the development of TRGs. These causes incompetent school leadership, for instance, the reluctance of senior leaders to share responsibilities and power; incomplete school structures (i.e. lack of opportunities to work together); and cultures that advocates individualism, conservatism and privacy [25]. In this case, principals, as the senior leader, should learn to value interpersonal relationships, which is the key to success, and to embody the concept of "productivity through harmony" as a belief of their schooling philosophy.

The challenging work of developing middle leadership in China is greatly related to the working performance of the principal, who should be aware of the pivotal role of middle leaders in determining a greater learning outcome for students, which is a direct result of a good teaching. In schools with an effective system, the role of middle leaders of a subject is clearly defined with relative rules. However, for some, the ambiguous definition of their position has often dispatched them to random appointments, which generally led them to improvise on emergent situations [27]. In this case, principals should implement the "distributed instructional leadership" to permit the authority of middle leaders, allow them to arrange their schedule as well as providing them a place to work since the principal has greater capability to sketch the school structure, thus enabling middle leaders to improve the effectiveness of the school system.

Secondary schools in China have also stressed the importance the responsibilities of middle leaders in leading learning. As demonstrated by Liu: "The curriculum reform is one of the crucial works for middle leaders as they are entitled to explore and discover novice pedagogy and teaching materials in order to fit both the culture and environment of the school. Given these educational conditions, students in their schools could be rightly cultivated in terms of learning capabilities, hence to reinforce the leadership implemented by middle leaders" [8]. Portin et al. claimed that in order to establish effective communicative relationship and to make their professional development activities productive, it is crucial for middle leaders to gain time, attention and trust of teachers in the classroom [28]. In this case, middle learning leaders are capable of building collective relationship with classroom teachers in order to better supervise the progress of learning. The structural idea of middle leadership has strengthened the distributed leadership within the transforming educational system to a certain extent, and have stressed the significance of the middle tier in generating a positive impact and change within different systems [29].

However, the cultural context of a school can shape a principal's interpretation and execution on instructional leadership by applying different strategies [25]. In this regard, the socio-cultural norms of collectivism and hierarchy is expected to make conversations between principal and teachers comfortable, in which the principal accept the interpretation of teachers towards their roles as middle leaders. Hallinger and Walker [9] pointed out another challenge that principals face in promoting middle leadership, that is the tension between traditional education values and the new educational standards, typically information and knowledge from overseas. For instance, the typical "exam-oriented" school culture in China and the individualized personal development can form two distinctive school ethos, in which both senior and middle leaders would be implementing different educational leaderships. Therefore, principal faces a persisting challenge to cultivate a suitable leadership mindset consisting of advanced knowledge while fitting into the practical school context.

3. Discussion

With the strong base of evidences provided by the academic literatures, it is crucial to observe and experience the real circumstances of middle leaders and their leaderships in the practical school contexts. Since there is limited evidence to be found on middle leadership in China; hence, my personal experience of working as a full-time teacher in Baoying Training School that is located in southern China after completing my undergraduate degree has provided me with a first-hand experience in exploring, observing, and investigating the role of middle leaders, the issues and challenges they might be facing, as well as their

potential needs for development. One of the biggest issues that was observed in Baoying Training School is that the passion and confidences of taking the role of middle leader is relatively low. This is owing to the reason that the position of middle leaders is generally not valued while the workload of this role is inequivalently high. Middle leaders in Baoying Training School were not so much at the inferior level as it was the subordinates, that their rights in the school is very constraint, while more works in which some exceeded their responsibility scope were added on them. As demonstrated in Cardno and Bassett's paper, middle leaders as both manager and leader in their subject department are not adequately treated as a pivotal role [11]. With a common goal of high students' academic achievement, middle leaders as teachers are striving for the first rank in their subject department, however, when they become managers, their workload increased dramatically compared to other teachers since they are required to share various tasks with the principal [30]. It has been agreed upon by the middle leaders that these management tasks have dominated their workload, and the heavy workload has taken most of the time for them to implement leadership. Hence, it is very important for middle leaders to recognize the significance and efficiency of prioritization after being given these intensive responsibilities in school. Therefore, they shall not ignore or bypass the essential qualities that contribute to a successful leadership [30].

According to Branson, Franken and Penney, becoming a middle leader, involves the shifting process in both their personal acknowledgment of middle leadership and how they became a middle leader [13]. Particularly, a novice middle leader is likely to expect mentoring and fruitful resources dedicated to their needs. However, middle leaders in this secondary school tend to perceive leadership in a negative direction. Some of them were not confident to their working performance since they have been receiving negative feedback from his or her colleagues and students. Apart from this, some ambitious middle leaders discovered the limited opportunities for a promotion in the future, thus became passive towards the job. Such a perspective and mental state is not caused by a single party but by multiple factors. For instance, emotions of middle leaders should be taken into account. O'Connor suggested that a teacher's working performance is dependent on personal desire and the degree of emotional investment. However, educational policy and teaching standards have largely neglected the caring nature of teachers [31]. In this regard, while taking the leading responsibilities in schools, middle leaders as teachers should also be aware and prepared with the resilience that is essential for this role. According to the middle leaders in this secondary school, classroom teaching is a relatively stressful work compared to other responsibilities included in their role. This is owing to the nature that the process of teaching inherently involves striving for improvement and thriving through changes [32]. Therefore, middle leaders are able to develop their resilience, which is stimulated and formed under the interaction between the individuals' internal assets and the external living environment in which growth occurs, as it fuels differences between people through positive emotions [33]. They argued that a good teacher is not simply machines filled with oil, instead, they are full of emotions and passionate, and who experiences creativity, pleasure, joy and challenges in their classes. As quoted in Steward's article: "…emotional resilience is the ability to sustain activity involving emotional connection without being overwhelmed. To sustain or cease activity requires energy. Energy alone is not sufficient: it must be purposefully directed, so a sense of urgency is required to make choices which sustain energy. It is difficult to sustain a sense of urgency without energy" [37]. Gu and Day further demonstrated that a great sense of self-efficacy is another significant factor that composes the resilience of middle leaders as subject teachers. They believe that teachers, are required to strengthen the belief in self-efficacy in order to rebound from adversities, which is to continue persevering in the midst of obstacles, and this will eventually result in them being more resilient [26]. Nevertheless, it has been critiqued that not every teacher or middle leader is capable of withholding such positive beliefs. If one perceives themselves as less valuable compared to others, it would be difficult for them to prioritize their personal needs, thus hindering the development of work efficiency or leadership [26]. Therefore, it is necessary to coach the principal, middle leaders and

teachers to collectively establish a school with a non-judgmental, professional, and promotes self-confidence environment in which more attention and energy can be put into the development of emotional resilience of middle leadership, thus driving the development of the whole school.

As discussed in the research literatures, relationship as an ethical tension is a crucial factor that a middle leader is required to establish and manage between his or her senior leaders, colleagues, and students. In Chinese secondary schools, relationships are greatly valued and reckoned to have profound influences in educational leadership and management. It is also a major challenge for educational leaders, both formal and informal, to establish a good relationship with their staff as a whole team to progress forwardly as the ultimate goal and vision of the school cannot be achieved through the efforts of a single person [33]. As middle leaders, they are entitled to foster and maintain sound external networks as well as relationships, and they are required to be effective public advocates in order to represent the school in different public occasions. In particular, such a capability is of vital importance in the era with education being the focus of many and is constantly been screening and critiquing by the public [33]. Eyal and Roth further claimed in their research that leadership that creates conditions that are supportive to teachers' teaching and students' learning can indirectly impact students' academic outcomes [34]. The maintenance of a good relationship will to a great extent helps the leader to support their subordinated in both personal and professional development, hence would promote teachers' sense of self-efficacy and competence. In this regard, the principal can assist middle leaders in designing their roles and responsibilities and help them in further understanding the educational field by offering middle leaders with an autonomy-supportive working environment [34]. Nevertheless, Chen, Chen and Huang [35] a toxic relationship that is centered on the benefits of few rather than the whole community could jeopardize the justice system of the school and bring negative influences to the leaders' teams and even the whole school. Therefore, the principal should remain objective while providing an autonomy that motivates middle leaders and teachers by minimizing exhaustion during their work.

Generally speaking, there are four barriers that are hampering the development of middle leaderships. These include unfavorable accountability policy, ineffective school leadership, insufficient time for collaborative work and lack of a collaborative culture [36]. Although many incentives are provided to schools to move towards a collaborative culture, the traditional hierarchical structure of schools are still remained dominant [30]. Therefore, principals should acknowledge that one of their main responsibilities as the senior leader is to keep teachers at a good mood and avoid hurting their self-esteem at any point [25]. If such a cultural norm is absent, there shall be a limited possibility for the school to achieve success.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, this research discusses the critical role of middle leadership in schools and its development with a major analysis in the context of China. Educational middle leaders are the ones who act as a bridge between classroom practices and the management of school affairs. They possess the responsibility to lead the improvement of their schools, while maintaining close connections to classrooms in which student learning occurs [2]. Among the numerous literature evidences on the role of middle leaders, one considerable issue that has been discovered and agreed upon is the problem of work overload. Middle leaders are pedagogical leaders in school since the middle leading is practically involves pedagogical practice and leadership, student learning in classrooms, as well as researching and evaluating outcomes, which can be summarized as pedagogical leadership [2]. Nevertheless, middle leaders are not limited to the classrooms and curriculum managing, they are also managers of departments of the school which results in dilemmas between leading people and leading learning [12]. This paper investigates the relationship between distributed leadership and middle leadership growth, and it has been discovered that by decentralizing the leaderships in school, middle leaders that teachers with different experiences of leadership practices from

three different schools all reckon distributed leadership as a positive and essential leadership [19,20]. Furthermore, the importance of trust as well as a clear and right self-awareness was stressed, which are two key factors in supporting development of middle leadership in the challenging school practice. Technical skills alone are not sufficient for the position of a middle leader. Instead, this role requires all-round abilities, that is to be resilient, adaptive towards school environment and relationships, as well as to accept one's personal feeling, both positive and negative [30].

Until the present, according to Cardno and Bassett, no national initiative related to middle level leadership development has been launched, and it is not likely to be in the near future [11]. In regards to this, with the existing issues of middle leadership, different schools resorted to take actions by themselves, that is to explore and develop relevant skills and knowledges that are pivotal for effective middle leadership in local educational contexts. However, middle leaders are still not properly recognized as a core character in the practical pedagogical leadership in which they have not received sufficient attention as well as respect in their subject department. As suggested by Branson, Franken and Penney, multi-dimensional relationships such as downward, horizontal and upward lays at the heart of middle leadership, which has challenged those leaders' ability to negotiate, navigate and maintain in different relationships [13].

It is notable that differences between regions in China can lead to a varying degree of development of middle leadership, in which the principal plays an influential role by providing different levels of support [25]. Not only does middle leaders deliver and implement management works from the top to the bottom in hierarchy, they are also in charge of the teaching and learning of both teachers and students and thus could eliminate barriers for the school and stimulate its development to a great extent. What can be observed distinctively in terms of the factors that facilitate effectively middle leadership is the rooted culture. In China, a representative of collectivist culture, middle leaders are encouraged to establish the personal trustworthiness, in which in accordance to the Confucianism of fairness in the relationships [8]. Lárusdóttir and O'Connor [30] also claimed that a supportive school culture is the key to assist the work of middle leaders. Since leadership does not necessarily involve outcomes or process that are positive or beneficial, therefore, when acknowledging the pressure work on a daily basis, it is important for middle leaders to self-reflect and self-challenge on the heavy workload they are given. In this regard, they are more likely to perform in the way that the educational system is valued.

Disclosure statement

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