Leaders of learning:

Middle leader-led Professional Learning Communities

in Hong Kong and Shenzhen, China

by

Anthony R. Adames

A Thesis Submitted to

The Education University of Hong Kong

in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirement for

the Degree of Doctor of Education

December 2019

Statement of Originality

I, Anthony R. Adames, hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis and the material presented here is my original work except those indicated in the acknowledgement. I further declare that I have followed the University's policies and regulations on Academic Honesty, Copyright and Plagiarism in writing the thesis and no material in this thesis has been submitted for a degree in this or other universities.

Abstract

This qualitative study examined the role that middle leaders and their professional learning communities (PLCs) play in focusing teachers' attention on student learning. The study presents an analysis of this phenomenon across multiple school types in Hong Kong and Shenzhen, China using case study methodology as a vehicle to uncover factors which support and inhibit the work of middle leader-led PLCs in varying school contexts.

This thesis demonstrates that middle leaders use a plethora of skills and exhibit myriad attributes to form and maintain their teacher teams. The nine critical attributes presented here: (a) shared values and vision; (b) collective responsibility; (c) reflective professional inquiry; (d) collaboration, (e) promotion of group, as well as individual, learning; (f) mutual trust, respect and support among members; (g) inclusive membership; (h) looking beyond the school for sources of learning and ideas and (i) shared leadership, when present, create an environment where robust structures can be formed. Such structures create a forum for teachers to collaborate on instructional initiatives, curriculum enactment, teacher empowerment and team building. These opportunities for professional dialogue were welcomed by middle leaders and teachers across the study.

The findings from the interviews with middle and senior leaders, as well as with members of their PLCs, revealed there were five aspects that impacted middle leaders effectiveness with their prospective teams, depending on their school context: (a) funds for professional development; (b) the competitive environment; (c) staff stability and longevity; (d) the leadership style of the principal and (e) middle leader authority and role recognition. The nexus between school type and these five aspects impact on the middle leaders' actions when working with their teacher teams. Middle leaders adapt their leadership to their situational contexts and customize strategies which cohere to the school's ethos, the resources available and societal challenges facing the school and its school type.

The implications of this study contribute to the knowledge base of middle leadership, PLCs in Hong Kong and Shenzhen and the interplay between the two in the context of three different school types: international, government-aided and DSS schools. For policy makers, school type did matter when it comes to access to professional development, staff longevity and stability and competitive environment. Targeted funding, whether emanating from the school or via direct government grants, needs to be considered to minimize the disadvantages felt in certain school types.

Another significant contribution is the identification of shared (informal) leadership opportunities within PLCs, mention of which has been lacking in the literature thus far. Middle leaders who encourage such leadership opportunities for their team members within their PLCs and across the school are seen, by their staff, as being more effective leaders and are able to focus their teachers' attention on student learning. The work of middle leaders and their teacher teams is critically important, and this study provides insight into middle leaders and their important role within PLCs.

Acknowledgements

"The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step (千里之行，始於足下)," and as Laozi scribed 2,600 years ago, my journey to this doctoral thesis began with a single step, a continent away in Australia. My parents taught me perhaps my most valuable lessons which have carried me to this very moment: persistence and a firm belief that things will get better. My father's dream of becoming a teacher himself became my twist of fate. His death after fighting cancer for more than 15 years gave me the will to fight and the persistence needed to see even the most difficult things through. Dad, thank you for teaching me this most valuable and lifesaving lesson. I have used it more than once.

My mother always wanted so much from us and always believed we could do better. I took an academic track, my sister a career and family and my twin brother wandered, seeking adventures, founding his own family and life. Always looking on the bright side, my mother encouraged me to learn more, study more and make up for anything I may have missed out on. Her fervent positiveness and desire to make even my best work better helped me finish this doctorate. At her funeral, I learned how much of a "telephone operator" she was: connecting family and friends with news of my exploits and that of my siblings and the immense pride she had in us. I have taken these traits as my own: cherish, celebrate and elevate those around you.

My twin brother, Mark and my sister, Sharon have always encouraged me and it is with their support in the past year that I made progress. They remind me of our parents' words and lessons, although they would have done better to heed a few of them themselves!

As I think of those who have shaped my career, six people come to mind: Lisl Matthews, my German Teacher at James Cook University is the first. Her diligence shaped me as a teacher, and her vast repertoire of knowledge beyond her subject inspired me with the rigour she subjected her students to became a model for my career. Ms. Elizabeth Wright and Mrs Hilary Grant were two rural French teachers I met as I built my first professional learning community in the early 1990s. Their unrelenting determination to welcome new teachers and to support them as role models of compassionate teaching sparked my interest in working closely with others. In Townsville, Australia, Carolyn "Bu" Townson and Kelly Atkinson taught me all I know about having a work ethic and being positive with colleagues. Their support of my many projects was inspiring at the beginning of my career and taught me to dream big. Finally, Colleen Lonzi, a friend of almost 30 years, taught me how to remain calm in the face of adversity, to always accept one's faults and encouraged my love of travelling and languages. Thank you to you all!

I wish to acknowledge the generous colleagues I have worked with at St. Margaret's Co-educational English Secondary & Primary School. You have always supported my many efforts to develop leadership and PLCs in the school. Mrs Tam gave me many opportunities to develop new programmes which are now recognised as important features of the school. The School Management Committee, led by Mr. Eddie Lei, Ms. Julia Chan and Mr. Cyrus Tin Htun sustained many of my projects over the 13 years I worked there and I am incredibly appreciative of their support.

The present study and this thesis would never have been possible without the great support and advice I have received at the Education University of Hong Kong. My supervisors, Dr. Darren Bryant and Professor Allan Walker have influenced me more than they would ever know. When I turned to them in 2011, upon becoming Vice Principal, seeking leadership guidance, I could never have imagined that a doctoral study would emerge. Dr. Bryant's practitioner background resonated with me and the excellent online master's programme I followed at the Education University left me wanting to know more. Before I knew it, I began this Ed.D journey and Dr. Bryant and Professor Walker continued to guide my research and learning, even when none of us knew if I would ever finish it. Their encouragement, wisdom and support helped me navigate many a conundrum and for that I will be eternally grateful.

Many thanks also must be expressed to Valerie Li and Perry Lee. My very patient "office mates" must have participated, willingly or unwillingly, in every difficulty I faced in this study with humour and great advice. My many battles with University authorities were often resolved through their advice and I remain eternally grateful to B1 and B2 for all their support.

I will never be able to fully express my appreciation and gratitude to Yeung Wing Pan (Ah Bun) for the incredible support he has given me over the past 13 years. In countless ways he has made the impossible possible and ensured that this and so many other things in my life could be achieved. At times, it was hard to know who the assistant was: he has initiated and supported so many things. I hope that you, Ah Bun will receive all of your own rewards in the future too.

To my "family in Hong Kong," let me share my enormous gratitude to you all. David and Bernadette have been like second parents to me. They read over all my transcripts, finding all my transcription errors and returned the participants' voices to the scripts. They took up from my parents in ensuring I continue despite difficulties, ensuring this thesis was finished. Thank you for "adopting me." Last, but certainly not least, to E.T.: for almost 15 years you have been my partner in crime. You have encouraged my costly pursuit of a doctorate and given

up countless hours of sleep as I worked strange hours to balance school leadership and doctoral studies. Most of all, you believed in me and sustained me when I thought I couldn't do it. Thank you for sharing this with me.

Tables of Contents

Statement of Originality i

Abstract ii

Acknowledgements v

Tables of Contents x

List of Abbreviations xvii

List of Figures xix

List of Tables xx

List of Appendices xxi

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION 1

1.1. Rationale 1

1.1.1. Contextual Rationale 1

1.1.2. General Rationale 2

1.1.3. Personal Rationale 5

1.2. Objectives and Research questions 6

1.2.1. Research Problem 6

1.2.2. Objectives 7

1.2.3. Research Questions 9

1.3. An Overview of Methodology 10

1.3.1. Methodology 10

1.4. Structure of the Thesis 10

1.5. Chapter Summary 11

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW & CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS 13

Overview 13

2.1. Theoretical Background for this Research Study 13

2.2. Leading Teacher Teams 14

2.2.1. What do we know about leading teams of professional teachers? 14

2.2.2. Research into Leading Teacher Teams 15

2.2.3. The relationship between the middle leadership of PLCs and student learning 16

2.2.4. What do we know about learning communities? 18

2.2.5. What do we know about PLCs? 19

2.3. Middle Leadership in PLCs 20

2.3.1. Who are middle leaders? 20

2.3.2. Definition of Middle Leaders 21

2.3.3. Middle Leaders versus Middle Managers 22

2.3.4. The role of Middle Leaders 23

2.3.5. Middle Leadership roles in PLCs 24

2.3.6. Importance of Middle Leaders 25

2.3.7. How do Middle Leader – led PLCs influence student learning outcomes through teaching and learning? 26

2.3.8. School Capacity Building and PLCs 27

2.3.9. External Agency and PLCs 27

2.4. Potential Areas for Middle Leadership attention/action 28

2.4.1. Teaching and Learning 28

2.4.2. School Capacity Building 31

2.4.3. External Influences 33

2.4.4. Lack of Preparation for aspiring Middle Leaders 35

2.5. Context of Middle Leadership 36

2.5.1. The Leader-plus Aspect 36

2.5.2. The Practice Aspect 37

2.5.3. The Situational Aspect: Contextual impact on Schools and their Middle Leaders 38

2.5.4. Distributed Leadership in Schools in Hong Kong and Shenzhen 40

2.5.5. Organisation of Middle Leadership in the Shenzhen and Hong Kong contexts . 42

2.5.6. Empirical research on the development of PLCs in Hong Kong & Shenzhen schools 43

2.5.7. Timeline of Middle Leader Research 45

2.6. Theoretical Problem 45

2.7. Chapter Summary 46

CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY 49

Overview 49

3.1. Experience and Professional Knowledge 49

3.2. Research Design and the Methods Used 50

3.2.1. Selection of Qualitative Multi-case Study Design 50

3.2.2. Research Objectives 55

3.2.3. Rationale for the Use of Multi-Case Studies 56

3.3. Research Design 57

3.3.1. Overview of the research design 57

3.3.2. The Selection of Case Study Schools through Purposive Sampling 57

3.3.3. School Types 60

3.3.4. Negotiating Access to each of the Research Sites 65

3.4. Data Collection Methods 65

3.4.1. Question design and the theoretical framework 65

3.4.2. Data Collection 68

3.4.3. Interviews 69

3.4.4. Focus Group Interviews 69

3.4.5. Textual Evidence 71

3.4.6. Data Analysis and representation 72

3.4.7. Analysis during data collection 73

3.4.8. Data reduction, data display and data verification 75

3.4.9. Data management ... 76

3.4.10. Ethical Considerations ... 77

3.5. Limitations ... 78

3.5.1. Limitations of a case study ... 78

3.5.2. Theoretical Limitations ... 79

3.5.3. Methodological Limitations ... 80

3.6. Chapter Summary ... 81

CHAPTER 4: Findings on School contextual factors & their impact on Middle Leader-led Teacher teams ... 82

Overview ... 82

4.1. The School Situational Context ... 84

4.1.1. China School (CS) ... 85

4.1.2. Hong Kong Island School (HKIS) ... 87

4.1.3. Hong Kong New Territories School (HKNTS) ... 89

4.2. School contextual factors and their impact on Middle Leader-led Teacher Teams ... 90

4.2.1. Factors which support or inhibit middle leaders' influence ... 90

4.2.2. Funds for professional development (PD) ... 91

4.2.3. Competitive environment ... 94

4.2.4. Staff stability and longevity ... 97

4.2.5. Role descriptions, authority and role recognition ... 98

4.3. Chapter Summary ... 101

CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS ON MIDDLE LEADERSHIP INFLUENCE ON PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES ... 104

Overview ... 104

5.1. Teaching & Learning ... 104

5.1.1. Mediating instructional Initiatives ... 105

5.1.2. Enabling vertical & horizontal curriculum articulation ... 110

5.1.3. Devising structures for curriculum enactment 114

5.1.4. Creating opportunities for professional dialogue 116

5.2. School capacity building 118

5.2.1. Building pedagogical coherence 119

5.2.2. Creating cross-curricular collaborative structures 121

5.2.3. Leading teacher professional development 122

5.3. External Influences 126

5.3.1. Mediating external standards & practices 126

5.3.2. Enabling access to quality external professional development 129

5.3.3. Leading external professional teams 130

5.4. Chapter Summary 132

CHAPTER 6: FINDINGS ON HOW MIDDLE LEADERS FOCUS TEACHERS' ATTENTION ON STUDENT LEARNING 134

Overview 134

6.1. Shared values and vision 135

6.1.1. Inclusive membership 137

6.1.2. Shared leadership 138

6.1.3. Collaboration focused on learning 142

6.1.4. Collective responsibility for pupils' learning 144

6.1.5. Reflective professional enquiry 146

6.1.6. Openness, networks and partnerships 148

6.2. Group, as well as individual, learning is promoted 149

6.3. Mutual trust, respect and support among members 151

6.4. Chapter Summary 153

CHAPTER 7: DISCUSSION, SUMMARY & IMPLICATIONS 154

Overview 154

7.1. What factors in each school type support or inhibit middle leaders' influence on their professional learning communities? 156

7.1.1. Funds for Professional Development 157

7.1.2. Competitive environment 159

7.1.3. Staff stability and longevity 161

7.1.4. Leadership Style of the Principal 162

7.1.5. Role descriptions, authority and role recognition 164

7.2. What is the influence of Middle Leaders on Professional Learning Communities? 167

7.2.1. Teaching and Learning within Middle Leader-led PLCs 167

7.2.1.1. Mediating instructional initiatives 167

7.2.1.2. Devising structures for curriculum enactment and alignment 169

7.2.2. Creating opportunities for professional dialogue 171

7.2.2.1. School capacity and pedagogical coherence building within Middle Leader-led PLCs 172

7.2.2.2. Leading Teacher PD to ensure school-wide pedagogical and curricular alignment 174

7.2.2.3. External Influence within Middle Leader-led PLCs 175

7.3. How do middle leaders focus teachers' attention on student learning? 177

7.3.1. Inclusivity and culture of sharing 178

7.3.1.1. Inclusive membership 178

7.3.1.2. Shared Leadership 179

7.3.1.3. Collaboration and collective responsibility for learning 180

7.3.1.4. Openness, networks and partnerships 181

7.3.1.5. Focus on Teams 182

7.3.1.6. Group, as well as individual, learning is promoted 183

7.3.1.7. Mutual trust, respect and support among members 184

7.3.1.8. School type and Middle Leadership-led professional learning communities 184

7.3.1.9. Implications of the development of Middle Leadership-led professional learning communities..... 188

References..... 204

Appendices..... 215

List of Abbreviations

CDI	Curriculum Development Institute (Hong Kong)
CIS	Council of International Schools
CMI	Chinese Medium of Instruction
COP	Community of Practice
CR	Comprehensive Review
CS	China School
DP	Diploma Programme
DSE	Diploma of Secondary Education
DSS	Direct Subsidy Scheme
EDB	Education Bureau
EMI	English Medium of Instruction
ESR	Extensive School Review
GLL	Grade-level Leader
HKAHSS	Hong Kong Association of the Heads of Secondary Schools
HKASS	Hong Kong Aided Secondary School
HKDSE	Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education
HKEAA	Hong Kong Examination and Assessment Authority
HKIS	Hong Kong Island School
HKNTS	Hong Kong New Territories School
HKSAR	Hong Kong Special Administrative Region
HoD	Head of Department
IBO	International Baccalaureate Organization
KLA	Key Learning Area
ML	Middle Leader

MYP	Middle Years' Programme
NET	Native English-speaking Teacher
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
P	Principal
PC	Programme Coordinator
PLC	Professional Learning Community
P-I-E	Planning, Implementation and Evaluation
PYP	Primary Years' Programme
PTA	Parent-Teacher Association
SDL	Student-directed learning
SEZ	Special Economic Zone
SL	Senior Leaders
SLT	Senior Leadership Team
SMC	School Management Committee
T	Teacher
VP	Vice-principal
WASC	Western Association of Schools and Colleges

List of Figures

Figure 1: Convergence of Evidence

Figure 2: Framework A

Figure 3: Framework B

List of Tables

Table 1	Change in school population in school types in Hong Kong and China
Table 2	The alignment of the research questions
Table 3	Three Case Study Schools' Criteria
Table 4	Case Study Informants
Table 5	Sample 2x5 Display of Data
Table 6	Sample transcription data for table 3.X Display of data
Table 7	Memo on using a code for "Shared Leadership"
Table 8	Data matrix used for coding
Table 9	Findings from this research study in three chapters for each question
Table 10	The method and criteria for selection of the three schools in this study
Table 11	Factors which shape, support and inhibit middle leadership
Table 12	Middle Leader contribution to building pedagogical coherence
Table 13	Funds and examples of PD by school

List of Appendices

Appendix I Ethical Approval

Appendix II Consent (for School)

Appendix III Consent (for participants)

Appendix IV Interview Questions for Principals

Appendix V Interview Questions for Coordinators

Appendix VI Interview Questions for SACs and MLs

Appendix VII Interview Questions for Teacher Focus Groups

Appendix VIII Codebook

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1. Rationale

1.1.1. Contextual Rationale

On 1 July, 1997 at the stroke of midnight, Charles, the Prince of Wales, representing the British Crown, sailed out of Victoria Harbour as the British Colony of Hong Kong returned to Chinese sovereignty thus ending 155 years of British rule over the territory. Although British governance ended that day, the impact on Hong Kong's education system remains far reaching and its unique history and blending of cultures remain fascinating to onlookers. Meanwhile, across the border, significant reform had already been undertaken in the three Special Economic Zones (SEZ) set up by the Central Government in Guangdong Province. Such efforts were undertaken in the late 1970s and early 1980s in anticipation of Hong Kong and Macau, the two colonies bordering Shenzhen SEZ and Zhuhai SEZ respectively, returning to Chinese sovereignty within the following two decades of each SEZ's birth.

These SEZs were tasked with trying out new economic, social and educational policies while assisting the Chinese economy and its people to engage with the world by working closely with the people and economic resources of Hong Kong. The Shenzhen SEZ, bordering the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) and consisting of just 493km^2 would, within 30 years of its creation begin to rival its neighbour in terms of economic, social and

educational development. Despite this rivalry, Hong Kong and Mainland China continue to seek closer ties and the opportunity to learn from each other, particularly in the field of education, through exchanges and transfer of knowledge and practices. Such changes have evolved as a result of various local and global forces (Cheng & Walker, 2008). It therefore seems appropriate that this study considers varying practices between Hong Kong and Shenzhen in the field of education. It does so by looking at middle leadership-led professional learning communities (PLCs) in three Government-controlled schools in Hong Kong and Shenzhen. In this way, given Hong Kong's return to China over two decades ago, such a comparative study portends the future collaboration between the two currently distinct entities.

1.1.2. General Rationale

As two of the most advanced regions of China and among its richest, the Hong Kong SAR and Shenzhen have placed considerable resources into developing schools of varying types which are funded partially or entirely by their respective governments, with parents funding the remainder in the form of school fees and charges. In the 19th Century, the British Colonial Government of Hong Kong opened a very limited number of schools for the colony, encouraging churches and other interested parties to establish schools and granting land and subsidies for such a purpose. There was little long-term planning for universal education

provision in Hong Kong, despite free and compulsory education being offered in the United Kingdom from the 1880s onwards. Despite this, and the ensuing chaos of the early 1960s under Peter Donohue, Director of Education (1961-1964), the Hong Kong government began to reorganize primary and secondary education in the 1960s (Sweeting, 2007).

In 1965, the Government's immediate aim was to establish universal primary education (eventually achieved in 1971); a parallel aim was that such expansion should be through the government-aided school sector wherever possible, with a further goal of 15-20% of students being permitted to continue in subsidized junior secondary school. The percentage achieved reached 50% in 1970 and 100% in 1978 (Education Department, 1981). Senior secondary education became free in 2009. Thus, with a rapid increase in the provision of education, schools were granted enormous autonomy and significant variation in school management emerged as a result of the School Management Initiative (SMI), introduced in 1991 (Sweeting, 2007).

Such rapid provision of education in Hong Kong followed the economic principles of the colonial government and those of the successor Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government (HKSARG): 90% of school places are now government-funded and *laissez-faire* supervision of educational provision by government and government-aided schools are

managed by more than 500 sponsoring bodies from wide ranging organizations within society, such as churches, community organizations and other charities (Kwan, 2008). With such strong government funding, fully self-funded private schools have proved very unpopular with parents.

The third education commission report recommended the establishment of Direct Subsidy Scheme (DSS) schools to be the successor to bought-place private schools in order to provide a strong private school sector with high standards (Kwan, 2008); thus, the DSS was launched in 1991 with further revisions to entice more schools to join in 2001/2002. With the increase in school subsidies and support to these new DSS schools in the form of free choices over curriculum, medium of instruction, student selection and teachers' provident fund provisions, there are now 71 DSS schools out of 1093 local primary and secondary schools in Hong Kong (Education Bureau, 2019).

Similarly, in the past 10 years, the governments in Shenzhen have spent vast sums of their revenue on social services, particularly education. Municipal governments have set up multiple school types offering a wide range of specialisms and curricula. Concurrently, forms of leadership have been allowed to vary and norms of collegiality have been transformed (Leithwood et al., 2006, 2010).

Against this backdrop of non-stop economic and social transformation across Hong Kong and Shenzhen, the role of middle leaders and their teacher teams coupled with their impact on students' phenomenal achievement standards is only now starting to attract the attention of researchers both regionally and globally (Hairon, 2012; Kruse & Johnson, 2017; Stoll et al., 2006). Schools of all financial and management types have developed and amongst such diversity, a plethora of questions on leadership efficacy and school type arises.

1.1.3. Personal Rationale

The present study on the influence of middle leadership-led PLCs in focusing teachers' attention on student learning is a personal one. After my leadership of a unique professional learning community in a Hong Kong primary and secondary school for more than a decade, I observed that people would often attribute our students' success to the funding type of our school. As we were (at the time) the only school of its kind in the Hong Kong public education system (co-educational English primary and secondary school sharing a single campus), it was impossible to conclusively determine whether or not school type indeed play a role in middle leader efficacy and consequently, our students' success. This in turn led me to initiate this study to further investigate the impact school type has on middle leader

efficacy in leading their teacher teams and middle leaders' ability to focus teachers' attention on student learning.

1.2. Objectives and Research questions

1.2.1. Research Problem

This study examines the role middle leaders play in professional learning communities (PLCs) in three Schools in Hong Kong and Shenzhen, one DSS school and one aided-school in Hong Kong and one International School in the Shenzhen, China. It examines the roles these middle leaders play and the influence they have in their respective schools. Also investigated is the professional support and assistance these middle leaders provide their subordinates as well as how they are able to focus their organizations' staff onto the achievement of students and their learning outcomes.

Middle leaders play an important role in school improvement and change (Bryant, 2019; Dinham, 2007; Hairon et al., 2015, Harris, 2003; Leithwood, 2016; Spillane et al., 2008). As such, research that focuses on their leadership work with teachers which is directed at improving student learning outcomes, is necessary and important. Empirical studies show that middle leaders' work with their teachers is little understood and their developmental needs poorly catered for (de Nobile 2018; Fleming 2014).

Early research into PLCs and the subsequent impact PLCs have on improved student learning has shown a positive impact on student learning outcomes (Berry, Johnson, & Montgomery, 2005; Bolam et al., 2005; Hairon et al., 2012; Hairon et al.; 2014; Hollins, McIntyre, DeBose, Hollins, & Towner, 2004; Louis & Marks, 1998; Phillips, 2003; Strahan, 2003; Supovitz & Christman, 2003). Furthermore, the link between middle leaders and their impact on organizational change and improvement in student learning has also been demonstrated in several studies (Bennett et al., 2007; Bryant, 2019; Crane & De Nobile, 2014; Fullan, 2001; Hord, 2004; Stoll et. al, 2006; Strahan et. al, 2001; Wells & Feun, 2012;). Yet, despite the research undertaken in these two areas, very little is known about the role of middle leadership in the functioning of these PLCs or the way in which middle leaders are able to create a situational context in which the promotion of improved student learning becomes "the way we do things around here" (Hairon, 2014).

1.2.2. Objectives

Given the convergence of middle leadership and PLCs and the context of the schools in which they operate, the objectives of this study are:

1. To identify ways that middle leaders develop PLCs through practices such as "inclusiveness, shared values, collective responsibility for learning, collaboration

focused on learning and a sense of trust, respect and support" among others (Bolam, 2005, p. 5;

2. To examine how middle leader-led PLCs contribute to and /or inhibit teachers' ability to focus on student learning in their respective KLAs;
3. To assess how middle leaders facilitate a school-wide culture that emphasises student learning through their connections with other middle leaders in the school and elsewhere;
4. To develop propositions about middle leadership's influence on PLCs and subsequent levels of student learning in different school types.

The study seeks to qualify the perceptions of influence that middle leaders have on Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) and how, through PLCs, middle leaders are able to focus teachers' attention on student learning. This study also further seeks to investigate the impact that different school types have on creating an environment for middle leader-led PLCs to operate in, and how PLCs are applied in these contexts.

1.2.3. Research Questions

The objective of this study investigates:

The implications school type has on how middle leaders lead PLCs and the impact of their leadership.

In order to respond to this, the present study investigates three key questions:

1. *What factors in each school type support or inhibit middle leaders' influence on PLCs*?
2. *What is the influence of middle leaders on PLCs?*
3. *How do middle leaders focus teachers' attention on student learning?*

This study investigates the experiences of teachers at three schools in Hong Kong and Shenzhen. Through multiple data collection strategies over a three-month period, this study sought to encapsulate the workings of middle leaders and PLCs in publicly funded direct subsidy, government-aided and international schools and propose ways in which to move nascent PLCs forward in Hong Kong and Shenzhen. Although each funding type has its own inherent benefits and restrictions, particularly in the fields of student admission, capacity to raise additional funds to fund school operations, staffing and management autonomy and curriculum choices, the common thread between these three school types in this context is government funding and hence government oversight.

1.3. An Overview of Methodology

1.3.1. Methodology

The methodology underpinning the research in this study is qualitative by nature. Following Yin's definition of a case being an "in-depth inquiry," each school became the "case" and the work of middle leader-led PLCs within it is investigated, with the convergence of evidence being achieved through multiple data collection methods beginning with document reviews and subsequent initial analysis and then semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. This data collection process aimed to elicit and verify answers to the four research questions from the participants' perspective (Yin, 2014). By collecting data from three schools, the study provides a more complete understanding than a single case study. Two frameworks, which are introduced in Chapter 2 direct the data collection and data analysis.

1.4. Structure of the Thesis

There are a total of seven chapters. In this chapter, I have outlined the purpose of the study and how it was pursued. In Chapter 2, I provide a literature review on middle leadership enactment, followed by one on PLCs to support the study's conceptual framework. Next, I review the nascent literature on middle leader-led PLCs, followed by an overview of the literature on school types in Hong Kong and Shenzhen. Chapter 3 provides a detailed

justification for the use of qualitative research design and data analysis. Chapters 4, 5 and 6 present the study's findings. Finally, Chapter 7 discusses the cases while explaining the significance of the research, its limitations and detailing directions for further investigations.

1.5. Chapter Summary

This chapter has introduced the rationale of this study. It has briefly presented the historical context with certain policy innovations provided to promote contextual understanding including my personal interest in the research topic and why I hope this study will make a significant contribution to the field of research in middle leadership-led PLCs.

The objectives of the study together with the research questions are also presented here alongside an overview of the methodology, which is further presented in chapter 3. The structure of the thesis is also provided for clarity.

As stated in the literature review (chapter 2), empirical research on the development of professional learning communities in Hong Kong schools (and particularly in Hong Kong secondary schools) and the advanced economic areas in Shenzhen is extremely limited. Thus far, the only published studies of any significance, have been undertaken in primary schools in Hong Kong (Pang et al., 2016). Given the significant cultural and educational system differences in Hong Kong, Shenzhen and those in Anglo-American contexts more widely

researched, more research into the characteristics and features of PLCs in Hong Kong and Shenzhen is warranted. Pang et al.'s (2016) qualitative study described the nascent nature of PLCs in five primary schools in Hong Kong and they outlined the lack of policy direction for schools, which is in considerable contrast to Singapore (Hairon & Dimmock, 2012). Furthermore, until this study was undertaken, few studies had investigated how these "PLCs" function, and no research in the region had indicated the role of middle leadership in PLCs outside of primary schools in Hong Kong.

The frameworks used in this study, emphasising leadership enactment for teaching and learning, and building school capacity, whilst also taking into consideration each school's emic perspectives, bring invaluable insights to policy writers and school governors and provides a unique overview of a possible way forward for the region and also for its neighbour across the border in Shenzhen.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW & CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS

Overview

This chapter reviews the research literature on middle leadership and PLCs for the purpose of outlining the theoretical background and justifying the thesis' analytical framework. From such a perspective, I examine the theoretical background for the study which requires an overview of the literature on leading teacher teams, the relationship between PLCs and student learning and the nascent research into middle leader-led PLCs. The chapter then further critiques the literature on the interplay between middle leaders and the PLCs they lead and their impact on learning and teaching, school capacity building and external agency and influence. Later in the chapter, I review several dimensions of middle leadership including middle leaders' impact on PLCs which is subsequently related back to the literature. These relationships further build on the concept of school type in Hong Kong and Shenzhen and the impact this has on middle leaders' work.

2.1. Theoretical Background for this Research Study

This study is an examination of the influence that middle leaders have on the activities and performance of PLCs in one DSS School (DSS) and one Aided-School (HKASS), both in Hong Kong, and an International School in Shenzhen. The research for this study, which took

place in Hong Kong and Shenzhen, entailed an investigation of the role that varying degrees of school autonomy play in middle leader-led professional learning communities. Furthermore, for the purpose of this study, middle leaders are defined as those formal leaders who hold responsible posts, such as IB programme coordinators, heads of department or year level or programme leaders; these middle leaders are usually answerable to a vice or deputy principal or to the principal. As such, they should appear in documents associated with an organizational hierarchy, such as a school organizational chart (Irvine & Brundett, 2017).

2.2. Leading Teacher Teams

2.2.1. What do we know about leading teams of professional teachers?

PLCs provide both benefits and challenges to middle leaders. When well conceptualised and implemented, they provide an organized, professional structure for collaborative action involving professional dialogue, the development of authentic action plans for pedagogical interventions and the building of school capacity to support sustainable change (Hairon, 2012; Kruse & Johnson, 2017; Stoll et al., 2006). Therefore, it has been argued that PLCs can lead to improved student learning (Kruse & Johnson, 2017). In an inclusive sense, PLCs may be defined as "professional[s] coming together in a group – a community – to learn" (Hord, 2008, p. 10). This definition informs the direction of this study.

2.2.2. Research into Leading Teacher Teams

Although teacher leadership has been a focus of research for more than three decades, the link between the role teacher leaders play in focusing the attention of their respective PLCs on improved student learning has been neglected (Hairon et al., 2015; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). The function that middle leaders exercise in enabling collaborative dialogue, and in influencing and providing direction to principals, colleagues and stakeholders has been constrained by various conceptual frameworks (Hairon, 2015; Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001; Mujis & Harris, 2003) York-Barr and Duke's framework (2004) consolidated concepts about how teacher leaders, including middle leaders, lead their teachers into seven components: (1) characteristics of teacher leaders; (2) type of leadership work engaged in teacher leaders; (3) conditions that support the work of teacher leaders; (4) means by which teachers lead; (5) targets of their leadership influence; (6) intermediary outcomes of changes in teaching and learning practices; and (7) student learning. Each component is considered essential in gauging the importance of teacher leadership.

Naturally, the nature of this leadership has fallen under the microscope. Middle leaders lead teachers, whether as individuals or as teams, in order to contribute to school improvement (Dinham, 2007; Hairon et al., 2015, Harris, 2003; Leithwood, 2016; Spillane et al., 2008) and

within that, to improve student achievement (Leithwood, 2016). Whilst teacher leaders may lack positional authority (Bryant, 2019), middle leaders are able to influence and focus teachers' efforts towards developing enhanced student learning outcomes by establishing high norms of collegiality and a close rapport between themselves and teachers (Day et al., 2008; Lieberman & Mace, 2009; York-Barr & Duke, 2004) combined with a designated authority which permits them to mediate both school and government policies and dictates with their members.

2.2.3. The relationship between the middle leadership of PLCs and student learning

The most effective middle leader-led PLCs are those that extend their influence and their learning beyond their own school communities (Busher & Harris, 2000; Dinham, 2007; Gunther, 2001) and who seek, through established routines and tools, to promote success. Gurr and Drysdale (2013) described the successful practices of middle leaders and their PLCs as having eight characteristics: (1) a focus on students and their learning; (2) a high-level of interpersonal skills, and being generally liked and trusted; (3) a willingness to promote their departments and maintain good external relations with the school; (4) the ability to influence department planning and organization while developing common purpose, collaboration and

a sense of team within their department; (5) the ability to foster teacher learning, (6) the ability to develop a culture of shared responsibility and trust; (7) a clear vision with high expectations of themselves and others; and (8) the ability to develop a culture of success.

It is through the collective work of their PLCs, that middle leaders are able to best focus their members' efforts on improving student learning. DuFour et al. (2008) argued that the most effective way to improve student learning outcomes was to (1) establish a benchmark of where students are through the gathering of information on students' current levels of achievement; (2) engage teachers to develop strategies to respond to students' weaknesses and ensure that these focus on student learning; (3) ensure such instructional strategies and materials are then implemented and evaluated in order to view the impact of these strategies over time; and (4) maintain teachers' commitment to a cycle of continuous and ongoing improvement. Hattie (2009) reviewed more than 800 research papers on strategies and practices which had positive impacts on student achievement and was able to affirm DuFour's contentions. Indeed, almost from the outset of the seminal work on PLCs by DuFour and Eaker (1998) entitled "PLCs at Work - Best Practices for Enhancing Student Achievement," studies have been able to link the work of PLCs and improved student learning (Bolam et. al. 2005; Louis & Marks, 1998; Strahan, 2003; Supovitz & Christman, 2003). Yet, despite our current understandings about PLCs and their impact on student

learning, we know very little about the role that teacher leaders of each professional learning community play in this success.

2.2.4. What do we know about learning communities?

There is no universally agreed definition of a "learning community," a "community of practice" or of a "professional learning community" (Hairon et al., 2015). Nevertheless, there has been much discussion on the characteristics of these terms appearing in the literature over the years (Bolam et al., 2005; Hairon et al., 2014; Hord, 1997; Stoll et al., 2006). What researchers agree on is that in order for these communities to function, a dramatic shift in professional orientation and a commitment to working with each other, without hierarchy or ignoring the status that comes with positional titles, is required, and often this is the biggest obstacle preventing the successful implementation of such PLCs (Hairon et al., 2006; Harris, 2003; Wood, 2011). Such opportunities for authentic leadership amongst peers, which transcend a leader-follower relationship, are (professionally) growth oriented (Avolio et al. 2009). These communities are the "basic building blocks of a social learning system… that grow out of a convergent interplay of competence and experience that involves mutual engagement" (Wenger, 2000). What remains clear is that less effort needs to be paid on a name, i.e., the PLC, and more on what a PLC does, and for the purposes of this study, who creates the conditions for this to take place. DuFour (2004) cautions that the term

"(professional) learning community" has been so overused that it is in danger of losing its meaning. We must therefore return meaning to its name.

2.2.5. What do we know about PLCs?

PLCs are powerful tools which bring professionals together to improve practice and to enhance student learning (Dufour et al, 2006; Kruze et al, 1994). They involve collaborative teams, tasked with collectively inquiring into best practices and current realities in context. Dufour (2004) argues that the three core principles in every effective PLC are: the focus on ensuring students learn, the presence of a culture of collaboration and the use of data and information to inform staff of the situation and any progress made. Stoll et al., (2006) states that a PLC could be characterised by containing the following eight elements: (1) shared values and vision; (2) collective responsibility for pupils' learning; (3) reflective professional enquiry (4) collaboration focused on learning; (5) group as well as individual professional learning; (6) openness, networks and partnerships; (7) inclusive membership; (8) mutual trust, respect and support. Research over the past 20 years beginning with Lee & Smith (1996) has found that "in schools where teachers took collective responsibility for students' failure or success, and (subsequently) acted, achievement gains were significantly higher." It is through this sense of collective responsibility that learning takes place, rather than individually in a cultural practice, and this leads to modelling, collaborative consensus, and

developing a sense of community and belonging (Wenger, 1998). Therefore, to arrive at such powerful collective learning, leadership at all levels needs to be committed and unified under an agreed vision. Gronn (2003) recognised that neither one single leader nor a small group of senior staff can ensure the reciprocity of action necessary for an effective community of practice to operate. Crowther et. al (2002) argued that it is through this multi-faceted leadership approach, with pedagogic leadership working alongside middle and administrative leadership that relationships develop within a school. Effective leadership in PLCs occurs when administration leaders delegate authority, develop collaborative decision-making processes and step back from being the central problem-solvers (Louis et. al, 1996 p. 193).

2.3. Middle Leadership in PLCs

2.3.1. Who are middle leaders?

Defining middle leaders has pre-occupied researchers for as long as this group has been under scrutiny (Bryant, 2019; Gurr & Drysdale, 2013; Harris, 2009; Kemp & Nathan, 1989). Although the terms “middle leader,” “middle manager” and “teacher leader” have been used interchangeably within the profession and in certain research, such a mélange of terms has not been helpful. In fact, as posited by De Nobile (2018), there has been a movement away from middle manager to middle leader over the past two decades. The traditional roles undertaken by these individuals were to simply administer programmes, manage resources

and people and design timetables. However, now the roles involve activities aligned with enhancing student learning through (co-)developing curriculum planning, managing assessment and instructional strategies in collaboration with other teachers, identifying, designing and implementing professional development activities which build high-level professional capacity within a culture of shared responsibility, mutual trust and high norms of collegiality (Bennett et al. 2007; Bryant, 2019; Gurr & Drysdale, 2013; Harris, 2009; Harris and Jones 2017; Irvine & Bundrett 2016; Leithwood et al. 2007; York-Barr & Duke 2004).

2.3.2. Definition of Middle Leaders

For this study, which is focused on three schools in Hong Kong and Shenzhen, middle leaders have been defined as those leaders who have formal and significant roles and responsibilities for specific areas of their respective schools. They had job titles such as “head of key learning area,” “head of year,” “subject coordinator,” “IB coordinator,” “year-level coordinator” or “curriculum coordinator.” These titles excluded the role of deputy principal or assistant principal as these roles have been identified more with the role of supervision and often their responsibilities and teacher teams focus less on teaching practice.

2.3.3. Middle Leaders versus Middle Managers

As this study investigates the role middle leaders play in focusing teacher attention on student learning, it is important that the middle leaders studied engage in significant collegial learning and teaching activities. Leithwood (2016) highlighted the different impact middle leaders who evaluate and supervise teachers had on student learning as opposed to those who provide support and instructional guidance to their colleagues. As cited in Gurr (2018 p. 2), there is growing evidence to suggest middle leaders have the potential to significantly impact student learning "even more so than the influence of principals if they work directly with teachers to improve teaching and learning practices."

Bryant (2019) argues that middle leaders engage increasingly in leadership activities at both the organizational as well as the system levels. Although under the control of middle leaders, many managerial activities such as budgeting, routine reporting, organising and staffing, controlling and problem solving, transmitting messages and serving as a conduit for information (Kotter, 1990; Levicki, 2001) take place, his study found that middle leaders led their teams in finding innovative solutions to curricular problems, while initiating changes which meet school goals and build school capacity. These three functions are important and their impact on student learning, although not a focus of this study, could be considerable. Therefore, this study will focus on middle leaders working with their PLCs and the teaching

and learning activities they engage with them. This is because it is widely observed that middle leadership requires teacher teams to engage in teaching and learning activities as their core focus (Bryant, 2019; De Nobile, 2018; Gurr, 2018; Gurr & Drysdale, 2013; Irvine & Brundrett, 2017). Consequentially, middle leaders can play a decisive role in creating innovative learning ideas for students through their distinct influence on teachers' practice (Harris & Jones, 2017).

2.3.4. The role of Middle Leaders

To sum up, aspiring middle leaders need to be able to play several vital roles (York-Barr & Duke, 2004). They need to be supra-practitioners, outstanding teacher practitioners who consistently perform beyond the typical routine. They should be visionaries with a clear outlook: consistently positive, able to see the big picture without missing the small details. They should be classroom experts, able to share their vast and varied experiences with novices as well as the more experienced (Angelle, 2007). Recent studies in New Zealand have provided strong evidence of the high-impact that middle leaders have on student achievement (Highfield 2012; Leithwood, 2016). As middle leaders are able to uphold a school's values and organizational culture (Kwan, 2010) and ensure that vertical and horizontal curriculum alignment is enacted (Hallinger, 2012), the need and importance of research in this area becomes more compelling as very little has been undertaken until

recently (Bush, 2009; Hadfield, 2007; Hallinger, 2012; Kwan & Walker, 2010; Turner & Sykes, 2007). Therefore, instructional leadership by middle leaders has the potential to yield considerable positive outcomes for schools (Leithwood, 2016) (including those in Hong Kong and Shenzhen).

2.3.5. Middle Leadership roles in PLCs

In short, middle leaders, practitioners themselves, are sufficiently close to the classroom and are able to become the conduits of the agreed vision moving freely between the senior leadership and the general teaching population. Bolam et. al (2005) underscore the crucial role heads of department play in ensuring school-wide collective responsibility for student learning. It is through meetings chaired by heads of department that the shared work is discussed, analysed and built upon with leaders identifying team members to work on cross-curricular integration of student learning practices. However, poor middle leadership has the potential to impede this important coordination of diverse members of staff.

In order for PLCs to be even more effective, they need to be diverse not only in terms of their disciplinary expertise, but also the level of education, experience, tenure and even gender of its members (Brouwer et al., 2011). There is thus a need for more shared leadership by diverse middle leaders, to ensure not a single person, but rather collaborative voices, reflect

on mutually dependent tasks (Scribner et. al., 2007). Brouwer et al. (2011) sees this as an area for future research. It is important to understand how (middle) leaders develop within their schools through bonding social capital, and in turn how this encourages organisational learning which influences teaching and learning (Stoll and Seashore, 2007). Yet, inherently missing in the eight elements is the concept of distributed or shared leadership. This construct of PLCs and teacher leadership is symbiotic and quite possibly a necessary requirement for a successful professional learning community to operate (Bergman et al., 2012; Wang et al., 2014; Wells and Feun, 2013).

2.3.6. Importance of Middle Leaders

The literature is clear on the importance of formal middle leaders in schools. These teacher leaders are often seen as being highly skilled in their areas of responsibility, often with significant experience, and are required to blend these skills with the administrative demands of leading a department or programme (York-Barr & Duke, 2004). They are seen as vital links in the communication pathways between the senior leadership of the school and the general teaching staff, passing vital information as well as the school's vision and mission from the top down. They also provide information and observations from the "coal face," directly observed or passed on by practitioners, and pass it up to the senior leadership structure for consideration, particularly when policy is to be developed. Thus, recognition of

middle leaders' contribution to school improvement is growing (Ganon-Shilin and Schechter, 2017). However, there are few studies specifically investigating the impact these middle leaders have on PLCs within varying secondary school contexts (Hairon et al., 2017). The present study seeks to fill this gap.

2.3.7. How do Middle Leader – led PLCs influence student learning outcomes through teaching and learning?

The primary focus of a PLC is to cultivate a shared sense of purpose and focus on student learning and achievement (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Lauer & Dean, 2004; Song, 2017; Stoll et al., 2006) through shared decision making, collaborative activity and de-privatised practice in a supportive, trusted and mutually respectful environment. Harris and Jones (2010) (as cited in Wells & Feun, 2012) reported that teachers, when simply working collaboratively, will not ensure improved student achievement and progress in school. Instead, middle leaders need to ensure that their PLCs focus, at their core, on improving student learning, utilize data to inform decision-making, de-privatize practices and conversations and ensure student learning is tracked and shared by colleagues (Fullan, 2001; Stoll et al., 2006; Strahan et al, 2001; Wells & Feun, 2012). When these conditions are ensured, the schools where such PLCs are present are indeed the ones who see academic results improving more quickly than those schools which do not (Hord, 2004).

2.3.8. School Capacity Building and PLCs

Professional capacity building across the school and even beyond may serve as one of the most effective products of PLCs. By creating overarching curricular goals that require PLC members to work interdependently, these interdisciplinary PLCs need strong teamwork and a common purpose to achieve these goals (DuFour, 2006, p. 92). The need to seek continuous improvement is the hallmark of an effective professional learning community (Stoll et al., 2006). Teachers in these communities work continuously on improving practice and focus not only on teaching, but learning as well. They demonstrate their commitment to student learning and a strong belief that innovation to improve instruction needs to serve all students. These teacher teams understand and confront the ill-informed belief that effective teaching is simply the transmission of knowledge and that, inherent in the learning of that knowledge, some students will simply not succeed (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006). When this basic myth is silenced, the real work of improving student learning may begin. As Vescio et al. (2008, p. 82) posit, "at its core, the concept of a PLC rests on the premise of improving student learning by improving teaching practice."

2.3.9. External Agency and PLCs

Well constituted PLCs, which use external agency to deepen collective teacher learning, also enable teachers to acquire fresh knowledge and skills. "Close-knit teacher groups within

subject groups can create learning barriers" (Hjertø et al., 2014, p. 786). Yet capitalising on the mutual trust present in effective PLCs, external agents can provide these tightly bonded groups with fresh knowledge and external perspectives, thus significantly accelerating their learning cycle and repertoire of skills to deal with problems of practice and student underperformance (Hansen, 1999; Hjertø et al., 2014). With both an internal- and external-looking orientation, PLCs can provide for greater social bonding and commitment to school goals ensuring extra effort towards student improvement, achievement and progress (Hjertø et al., 2014). Therefore, not only is it important for close knit teacher groups within subjects to exhibit mutual trust, respect and support among members, but it is equally essential for leadership teams and teachers to create an atmosphere of trust, respect and support (Hilliard, 2012).

2.4. Potential Areas for Middle Leadership attention/action

2.4.1. Teaching and Learning

Most middle leaders, and the teachers they lead, believe that their primary focus of effort should be in teaching and learning (White, 2000). In Hong Kong and most definitely in China, teachers are viewed as more than just subject experts, although for many, their pre-occupation is with matters related to their area of expertise. Peng et al. (2014) argue that physical attributes, skills, knowledge, feelings and emotions as well as underlying values and

cognitive abilities are all attributes that teachers bring into their workplace as extensions of their personalities.

Viewing middle leaders work in leading teacher teams in Hong Kong and China is quite challenging due to the situational context, which cannot be easily compared with research emanating from the United States or the United Kingdom due to the inherent cultural nature of the schools and the communities which surround them and, as cited in Dimmock & Walker (2005), this difference in cultural norms is felt particularly acutely in Asia (Hallinger, 2004) and in Hong Kong and China. Often hybrids in leadership style develop as western pedagogic and organisational values, coupled with western-origin reforms are imposed on Chinese societal contexts (Walker, 2007).

York-Barr and Duke (2004), Mujis and Harris (2003) and Harris (2005) have all attempted to come up with conceptual frameworks for teacher leadership. Their frameworks allowed the under-researched area of teacher leadership to gain more empirical support and for teacher leadership research to be seen as a discipline. Hairon et al. (2015) identified five overlapping themes from the literature which identify the roles middle leaders play with their teacher teams: (1) influence in leading others, (2) leading with others, (3) leading collegial relations, (4) leading teacher learning and (5) leading for teaching and learning. These five overlapping

themes resonate in Hord (2008)'s idea that a professional learning community is the coming together of teachers in a group or community to learn. However, Hairon et al. (2017) claimed that "theorization of teacher leadership in PLCs has been neglected" (p. 79).

It is the primary task of middle leaders to encourage teachers to learn from one another and through this action improve their teaching and achieve improved student learning outcomes (Hairon et al., 2015). Thus, the primary focus of a PLC is to cultivate a shared sense of purpose and focus on student learning and achievement (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Lauer & Dean, 2004; Song, 2017; Stoll et al., 2006) through shared decision making, collaborative activity and de-privatised practice in a supportive, trusted and mutually respectful environment. Therefore, middle leaders need to ensure that these conditions are present by using tools, routines and practices which provide time, resources and vision to the team. The use of the action research cycle of reflection, planning, acting, observing and critically reflecting (Hairon et. al, 2015) within a scheduled time period and with a subject team is an example of what a middle leader can initiate in order to support and sustain enhanced teaching and improved student learning outcomes. Middle leaders have been shown to contribute to exceptional educational outcomes through their focus on students and their learning (Dinham, 2007). His study reported that the middle leaders were enabled by the following key factors in the achievement of exceptional student outcomes:

- leadership of their teacher teams to focus on improving teacher practices;
- personal qualities and relationships;
- professional capacity and strategy;
- promotion and advocacy and external relations;
- department planning and organisation;
- common purpose;
- collaboration and team building; teacher learning;
- responsibility and trust as well as vision; and expectations and a culture of success.

In this way, teachers need to recognize that the model of education is no longer one of the single-teacher school house. Middle leaders provide the essential human structure necessary to cultivate a shared sense of purpose and focus on student learning and achievement through the collective efforts of teachers across the school and often across systems (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Lauer & Dean, 2004; Song, 2017; Stoll et al., 2006).

2.4.2. School Capacity Building

Building school capacity for improvement in teaching practices and ensuring curricular coherence across the school are key tasks performed by middle leaders (Hallinger, 2011).

Their roles exert influence horizontally and vertically within and beyond their areas of responsibility and schools. Middle leaders can release potential through collaboration and team building and by sourcing new ideas and approaches which are best practiced from outside of their departments and schools (Bryant, 2019; Dinham, 2007). Effective middle leaders tend to be active in school politics and facilitate networks across the school and beyond its gates. Those that do not involve themselves in whole-school matters often create tensions for themselves and their members (Javadi et al., 2017) Interestingly, Javadi et al. (2017) highlight that often (shortsighted) principals limit their exposure to external influences because such contact may have undesirable risks to their schools. Bryant (2018, p. 4) posits that middle leaders are potentially able to align their own departments' aims with that of the school through strategies such as providing clarity on school policies and providing impetus to colleagues to support school interests and strategic goals in department work.

Fullan (2001, p. 32) asserts "when teachers are fully supported, many take ownership for success beyond their immediate classrooms (and departments) – they work towards improving school organizations as a whole." Middle leaders not only guide change and curriculum development within their own departments, but also engage in organizational change, direction setting and capacity building. White's study (2000) showed that curriculum, learning and instruction are the key domains of middle leaders; their influence is required to

enable a context where learning can take place. Gurr & Drysdale (2013) insist that whilst middle leaders need to be responsible for leading improvement in teaching and learning, they should also be part of a "professional learning community that unifies all in trying to improve the school" (p. 63). As middle leaders lead teachers, whether as individuals or as teams, in contributing to school-wide improvement (Dinham, 2007; Hairon et al., 2015; Harris, 2003; Leithwood, 2016; Spillane et al., 2008), they also change the school culture and reposition it towards success.

2.4.3. External Influences

For schools to improve, they may need to seek expertise and resources from outside the organisation. Fullan (1993) argued that a school's vitality can be measured by its willingness to seek help from outside and that organizations that claim to be self-sufficient are going nowhere. Even before Fullan, Huberman and Miles (1984) posited that external support for any improvement effort is critical if change is to happen. For middle leaders and their schools to build, support, sustain and extend the work of their teacher teams, they need external support, networks and other external partnerships (Stoll et al., 2006). Gurr, Drysdale and Mulford's (2006) model for successful principal leadership in Australia cited the following external influences: the social and economic landscape; the policies and programmes of external organisations; and the community expectations and support.

Successful school leadership, and in this sense, principal leadership, is context sensitive (Ylimaki and Jacobson, 2011) but, as argued by Gurr (2015), it is not contextually driven. Each context and each leader may be unique and may need to take note of their situational context, but ultimately leadership strategies which seek to engage external agencies and make use of external policy within the social and economic landscape are more effective than those that do not. Likewise, the same can be argued about middle leadership. As cited in De Nobile (2018), whilst middle leaders understand the challenges and pitfalls of their contexts, successful ones are able to have an impact on school culture by creating an environment where participation in decision-making and risk taking are present (Mujis and Harris, 2006), and also where trust and collaboration as well as norms of collegiality abound (Danielson, 2007; Silins and Mulford, 2004).

Middle leaders also engage in activities beyond their contexts, in order to bring fresh perspectives to their practice. Dinham (2007, p. 71) underscores this commitment when he describes the promotion, advocacy and external relations strategies undertaken by successful middle leaders in his study. “They participate in and contribute to professional development and in-service across the school and with professional associations and other bodies outside the school.” The irony is that there is a general lack of visibility for successful middle leaders to operate outside of their schools: as Dinham (2002) stated, they are in some respects,

"Hidden treasures," unrecognised and not utilised out of their schools for the valuable skill sets and knowledge that they may have.

2.4.4. Lack of Preparation for aspiring Middle Leaders

Although York-Barr and Duke (2004) identified the significant role these middle leaders can play in school improvement initiatives which ultimately have a positive impact on student achievement, preparation for these middle leaders for the most part is woefully inadequate. In Hong Kong, like many jurisdictions around the world, much effort in recent years has been put into principal leadership preparation and professional development (Ng, 2013; Walker and Ko, 2011). There is a recognition that middle leaders play an important role in school improvement and reform, and in Hong Kong, professional development efforts to prepare them for these roles began in 2006 (Ng & Chan, 2014). Recent literature reaffirms the necessity for needs-based professional development for aspiring and in-service middle leaders and it should be systemic (de Nobile 2018; Fleming, 2014) as is the case with aspiring and in-service principals.

In Hong Kong and China, there are leadership development programmes for middle leaders (Ng and Chan, 2014), but those that exist are often run by external bodies such as universities, supported and funded by the Education Bureau. This is contrary to the trends in

the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, Singapore and elsewhere where more rigorous and formal leadership development programmes are present (Bryant, 2019; Hopkins & Spillane, 2015). Such development programmes not only provide middle leaders with advanced skills, but also allow them to establish networks beyond their school contexts, which researchers such as Stoll et al. (2006) believe are imperative to ensure deep, collective learning takes place at all levels of organisations and systems (Bryant, 2019; Dinham, 2007; Hairon et al., 2015, Harris, 2003; Leithwood, 2016; Spillane et al., 2008).

2.5. Context of Middle Leadership

2.5.1. The Leader-plus Aspect

The role of leadership in developing student learning should not be understated. Yet, too often, the focus of it is fixated on people in formal leadership roles rather than the actions of leaders (Spillane, 2006). Spillane (2006) defines leadership "as a relationship of social influence" (p. 10) and therefore, according to Spillane, we should not view the leaders, but their actions of influence. Distributed leadership, he argues, isn't merely delegated leadership: delegated leadership is not a leadership action of social influence. Instead, leadership practice and functions perform this perspective of distributed leadership called leader-plus. Bryant (2019) describes it as "ad-hoc leadership activities," performed within the routines and practices of schools. It may involve a literacy teacher running a curriculum

planning meeting, ensuring through the use of tools and routines, that their teachers remain focused on improving student learning and achievement.

Leader-plus leaders are informal leaders and can be present anywhere in the organisation. They can be teachers, students, administrative staff or even parents (Spillane et al., 2008). Spillane et al. (2008) found in his study of mathematics and literacy teachers in Chicago schools that the vast majority of advice-seeking by teachers implementing reforms came from fellow teachers who indeed were the informal leaders of these initiatives. Therefore, as these teacher teams interacted with each other, Spillane & Coldren (2011, p. 34) argue that "leaders will emerge over time through practice taking responsibility for different aspects of leadership and management work." They suggest that whilst some of these informal leaders may have been envisioned as part of a larger distributed plan, often it is through sharing of vision and beliefs, knowledge and practices that they are able to come together.

2.5.2. The Practice Aspect

Spillane and Coldren's distributed leadership framework (2011) is based on the premise that leadership may be exercised by formal and informal leaders; however, the measure of leadership is not the role, but the practice or actions of the leader: "A distributed perspective on leadership is concerned with leadership practice, not just with roles and who fills them or

even with organizational routines and who performs them" (p.35). They argue the need to look at the interactions between leaders and followers and the engaged practices. Bryant (2019) describes these as the collaborative or collective distribution of leadership, where the leadership tasks occur in a sequential order so that a routine may be accomplished. Spillane (2006) describe these routines in the context of a five-week assessment routine in a school, where a cycle involves multiple actors leading various elements of the seven interdependent step process. Informal teachers leading various elements of this process with input from formal leaders, such as the literacy coordinator or the Principal, is an example of the practice aspect as evidence of both formal and informal leadership with a distributed leadership perspective (Spillane, 2006).

2.5.3. The Situational Aspect: Contextual impact on Schools and their Middle Leaders

The situation aspect, according to Spillane and Coldren, (2011, p. 40), goes beyond the place where "we do our work, or the school environment in which our practice of leading and managing takes place," but rather covers a plethora of characteristics including its stakeholders, tools and routines used in the daily operations of the school and the cultural, political and policy environments in which these leadership practices take place. It is therefore necessary to clarify the unique situational aspect that this study took place in.

The growth of international and DSS schools in Hong Kong and China reflects a growing trend of governments to take a more hands-off approach towards educational provision and a passing of responsibility to individual schools and their composite communities to bridge ever-increasing funding gaps (Chan & Tan, 2008). Comparatively, fewer students (73.9%) in 2016 attended aided secondary schools in Hong Kong than they did in 2006 (78.9%). This in comparison with DSS schools over the same period (2006: 8.7 % and 2016: 13.4%) (see table 1 below):

Table 1

Change in student population in school types in Hong Kong & China

School Type / Territory	2005/2006	2015/2016
International Schools in China *	48	162
Direct-subsidy Scheme (DSS) Secondary Schools in Hong Kong #	55	61
Aided Secondary Schools in Hong Kong #	375	360
Total Student Population in Hong Kong #	480,775	352,609

Note. Adapted from International schools and schooling in Asia (Section introduction). In K.J. Kennedy & J.C.K. Lee. *Routledge Handbook on Schools and Schooling in Asia* [pp. 257-260]. London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

Census data from Hong Kong Monthly Digest of Statistics September 2016 **Census and Statistics Department, Hong Kong Special Administrative Region**

https://www.statistics.gov.hk/pub/B10100022016MM09B0100.pdf

2.5.4. Distributed Leadership in Schools in Hong Kong and Shenzhen

It is not surprising to note that models of distributed leadership across school type can differ remarkably. In Hong Kong Aided Secondary Schools (HKASS), there are many variants in the posts available for middle leaders: whilst most schools have Heads of Department or 'Panel Chairs" for each of the Key Learning Areas (KLAs), additional non-curricula posts are also available for Coordinators or Heads of Discipline, Extra-Curricular Activities and Guidance and Counselling, to name a few. In addition to the prestige and additional salary for these posts, additional work with little or no extra time or salary is part of the role for teachers without middle leader designation.

In DSS schools, the ability to pay more teachers with higher salaries to perform leadership, managerial and administrative work means that quite often there are substantially more middle leaders in DSS Schools than in the aided and government school sectors (Zhou, Wong, & Li, 2015), where salaries are controlled by government funding formulas with little or no additional external funding to support administrative variants unlike in DSS (Chan & Tan, 2008), International and private schools in Hong Kong and elsewhere. Further, it is noteworthy that very little research has been published on the efficacy of middle leadership in DSS schools in Hong Kong.

Significant criticism has long been associated with DSS schools in Hong Kong since their inception in 1991. Despite much effort by the Department of Education to promote this new school type, the acceptance by schools and the general population was decidedly frosty. By 1997, only 13 schools (Chan & Tan, 2008) had changed their status to DSS and so it was only in 1999, after offers to reduce government regulations for schools that switched to the DSS model that the number of schools actually began to significantly increase. Yet, with the promise of more autonomy for schools, recent, limited research seems to indicate that student performance in DSS schools has not increased as much as the government had speculated in 2000 with the granting of more flexibility, innovation and choice to these new schools (Zhou, Wong, & Li, 2015). Instead, DSS schools have been accused of "cream skimming," i.e., choosing the best and highest socio-economic status students without significantly improving educational outcomes for students from lower class families (Zhou, Wong, & Li, 2015).

International schools have the most flexibility in their manpower structures and more resources for the recruitment, deployment and training of middle leaders and for the maintenance of a middle leader structure. The ethos of the International Baccalaureate encourages distributed leadership and having teachers work collectively rather than as individuals (IBO, 2014).

2.5.5. Organisation of Middle Leadership in the Shenzhen and Hong Kong contexts

In Hong Kong, unlike in many school systems globally, staff are organised in subject department or panels, not only in secondary schools, but in primary schools as well. Having a devolved education system funded by the state, schools work autonomously, often needing to internally solve critical problems of practice. As principals are often bogged down with administrative and financial tasks, Heads of Department, as middle leaders, become the important pedagogical leaders of schools, working with specialised teaching staff.

As leadership in an organisation often requires multiple people in both formal and informal roles, who distribute their leadership to others through various tools, routines and contexts (Spillane, 2006), this study will investigate how middle leaders use various leadership strategies to focus teachers' attention on student learning either directly or through collegial empowering and focusing activities within the PLCs. Adapting the conceptual framework from Bryant (2019), this research project sought to look at the factors which allow for effective middle leader-led PLCs to be enacted through the lenses of formal and informal distributed leadership, practice and contextually-rooted routines, tools and situations. Infrastructure that supports teacher professional learning can have an impact; however, such infrastructure should focus interactions on instructional matters (Shirrel et al., 2019). Middle

leadership may play an important role in ensuring teachers focus on student learning and ensuring teacher learning within their teacher teams. Thus, the design of these professional learning community structures must include distributed leadership structures and a variety of leadership positions (Spillane & Shirrel, 2016).

2.5.6. Empirical research on the development of PLCs in Hong Kong & Shenzhen schools

Empirical research on the development of PLCs in Hong Kong schools (and particularly in Hong Kong secondary schools) and the advanced economic areas in Shenzhen is extremely limited. Thus far, the only studies of any significance, have been undertaken in primary schools in Hong Kong (Pang et al., 2016) with small-scale studies on teacher beliefs (Tam, 2015a) and teacher change (Tam, 2015b) being examples of nascent research into PLCs in Hong Kong. Given the significant cultural and educational system differences between Hong Kong and Shenzhen and those more widely researched in Anglo-American contexts, it is clear that more research into the characteristics and features of PLCs in Hong Kong and Shenzhen is warranted (Hairon et al., 2017). Pang et al.'s (2016) qualitative study described the nascent nature of PLCs in five primary schools while outlining the lack of policy direction for schools in Hong Kong in strong contrast to Singapore (Hairon & Dimmock, 2012). Since 2000, when the concept of PLCs initially appeared in a consultation document

by the advisory committee on school-based management (ACTEQ, p.1), little policy development has been observed. In 2009, the Advisory Committee on Teacher Education & Qualifications (ACTEQ) advised all schools in Hong Kong to implement practices which would develop a collaborative approach to teacher professional learning. Despite this passive approach, the mandated evaluation processes of External School Reviews (school inspections by Education Department staff) and quality assurance have ensured that these reflective approaches have been adopted to a certain degree in most Hong Kong public schools (Pang et al., 2016). However, few, if any studies have explored how these "PLCs function" and no research has been identified indicating the role of middle leadership in these PLCs outside of research undertaken in early childhood (kindergarten) and primary education in Hong Kong (Walker & Ko, 2011).

Despite the OECD consistently citing Hong Kong's school system as one of the highest performing education systems in the world (OECD 2010, 2014), the overwhelming drive to further improve continues. Thus, pressure on the public sector school system is growing. If Hong Kong's public-sector schools are to significantly improve student learning across all schools, and not only those catering to the socio-economic elite, then they must utilize their uniqueness and flexibility to leverage improvements in learning and teaching. It is their

strength in middle leadership structures and acquiring additional funding sources which could allow them to even outperform international schools.

2.5.7. Timeline of Middle Leader Research

The body of research into the potential impact of middle leaders on their school's improvement activities has grown steadily over the past 35 years (Bennett et al. 2007; Bryant, 2019; Day et al. 2008; Gurr & Drysdale 2013; Harris and Jones 2017; Leithwood et al. 2007; York-Barr & Duke 2004). Yet, unlike research into principal leadership, a coherent theory base which informs the role middle leaders play still evades researchers (de Nobile 2018). Despite this, in an era of frenetic educational reforms with significant decentralization and increased accountability and responsibility for principals in administrative, financial and legal domains, a significant number of leadership tasks have been passed down from overworked senior leaders to middle leaders (Bennett et al. 2007; Bryant 2018; de Nobile 2018; Gurr & Drysdale 2013; Irvine and Bundrett, 2016).

2.6. Theoretical Problem

Although research into PLCs and their impact on improved student learning has shown a correlation between schools' use of PLCs and student achievement (Berry, Johnson, & Montgomery, 2005; Bolam et al., 2005; Hairon et al., 2014; Hollins, McIntyre, DeBose,

Hollins, & Towner, 2004; Louis & Marks, 1998; Phillips, 2003; Strahan, 2003; Supovitz & Christman, 2003), very little has been mentioned about the role of middle leadership in the functioning of these PLCs or the way in which middle leaders are able to create a situational context in which the promotion of improved student learning outcomes becomes 'the way we do things around here'. Specifically, the tools, routines and practices that middle leaders put into place, have received very little research attention.

Do middle leaders only influence teaching and learning? Do they and their teams impact school-wide capacity building and the landscape beyond the school walls? A comprehensive framework is required to not only look at the functioning of middle leader-led PLCs and their impact on school-wide and external policy documents and practices, but to see how their leadership impacts a school's core business: improving student learning outcomes.

2.7. Chapter Summary

The literature on the importance of middle leadership in achieving improved student learning has grown over the past 35 years; meanwhile, the literature on the PLCs role in improving student learning has been conflicted. Early research on PLCs showed a positive impact on student learning, but recent studies have shown either neutral or negative relationships. This

is in part due to the nature of the measurement instruments used, which have relied on quantitative methods employing large samples without any in-depth, thick descriptions.

Further qualitative studies on PLCs have focused on areas other than who is leading them and the influence of their leadership (Hairon et. al, 2017). Furthermore, few studies have been conducted in Asia (Hairon & Tam, 2017) and there has been limited research on professional learning communities (and middle leadership) at international schools in China.

It should be acknowledged that there is a significant body of research on professional learning communities, their attributes and methods of functioning in Mainland China (Qiao, Yu & Zhang, 2018), their contributions to instructional innovation and improvement (Sargent, 2015) and the role school contexts play in professional learning communities in Mainland China (Wang et al., 2017) but little reference to the role middle leaders play in their operations although they highlight the difference between Chinese professional learning communities and those found in western contexts.

Research into middle leadership has gained traction (Bryant, 2019; Dinham, 2007; Hairon et al., 2015, Harris, 2003; Leithwood, 2016) and our understanding of PLCs has developed over

the past decade (Bolam et al. 2006; Hairon et al. 2013, Hairon et al. 2017, Stoll et al., 2006). Gurr and Drysdale (2013) among others have highlighted the importance of context (Spillane, 2006; Spillane & Coldren, 2011). Like the enormous body of principal leadership research, the interplay between middle leadership, PLCs and school type needs to be explored and a framework for future research developed.

By better understanding the role middle leaders play in improving student learning outcomes through their facilitation and leadership of PLCs, and looking at it through the lenses of different school types, practice and professional leadership development opportunities can be influenced. Therefore, this study may contribute to a renewed focus on teacher collaboration and professional learning within a distributed leadership perspective.

CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY

Overview

This chapter sets out the methodology used for this study and outlines how it was enacted. The three parts of this chapter are set out as follows:

1. The selection of and justification for a qualitative multi-site case study approach.
2. The research design as well as procedures for data collection, ethical considerations and efforts made to deepen rapport between the data collector and the participants of the case study.
3. The design and steps taken in the data analysis.

3.1. Experience and Professional Knowledge

As the principal investigator, my experience and professional knowledge of the Hong Kong and Chinese context has played a pivotal role in my framing of the research and in the research design and methods selected for this case study. I have worked as a teacher, a middle leader and senior leader in these contexts for the past 18 years. I have worked in schools, created and participated in professional learning communities and lead teacher teams in both aided and direct subsidy scheme schools in Hong Kong. Furthermore, I am IB diploma trained as an Administrator / Head of School and also as an IB coordinator (a middle leader

role in many IB schools). My 27 years of overall teaching experience, my knowledge and understanding of the various situational and cultural contexts as well as my knowledge of both Chinese and English has helped me to underpin my research with my professional knowledge and experience. As such, I have incorporated my personal observations and analysis in the data collection as many researchers do. Harrison et al. (2017) describes the need for the researcher to interact with the participants and the researcher, in order to generate data. Such a high level of connection is necessary and the researcher should be immersed in the field. My experience and professional knowledge allowed me to do so and to delve deeply into each of the three contexts which is evident in my data collection and further analysis which takes note of different cultures and contexts (Swanborn, 2010).

3.2. Research Design and the Methods Used

3.2.1. Selection of Qualitative Multi-case Study Design

Qualitative researchers are primarily interested in understanding a phenomenon in a distinct context including all the factors that interact in between. Case study research requires that the phenomenon studied be from the perspective of the participant, i.e., the emic perspective, which relies on meaning derived by participants (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011 p. 221). The study site is often complex and research must be undertaken in its natural environment (Merriam, 2009). Thus, the context is just as important as the participants and it requires the

researcher to consider a vast range of factors together, as a whole, and can be distinguished from other research methodologies that may only investigate individual factors separately. This local *boundedness* of the study means that the context is considered and allows for understanding latent and underlying factors (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2019).

Yin (1994) describes the scope of a case study as being " an empirical study within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and the context are not clearly evident" (p. 13). Therefore, in order to fully appreciate the blurred lines between various factors that come together to create a phenomenon, a method is needed that allows for such a focus. In this study, such blurred boundaries are evident as leadership can be exercised by multiple leaders, such as middle leaders, curriculum heads and senior teachers and in organisational structures, both formal and informal (Spillane, 2010; Spillane & Orlina, 2005). Spillane and Coldren (2011, p. 34) argue that when teacher teams interact with each other, "leaders will emerge over time through practice taking responsibility for different aspects of leadership and management work." It is within the context of their practice that informal leaders emerge through their sharing of vision and beliefs, knowledge and practices when they are able to come together with their colleagues.

From an emic perspective, qualitative research can be described as having at least the following four characteristics:

- The understanding of the phenomenon, for example, the leadership practice or the situational context, should always be reported from the research participant's perspective and not from that of the researcher;
- Data collection is primarily mediated through the researcher who is also responsible for its analysis; thus, the responsiveness of the researcher to the context, their understanding and adaptability of the situation and ability to process data is imperative;
- The researcher must go to the site of the phenomenon and observe it in its natural setting.
- The researcher must employ inductive research strategies which build assumptions, concepts and hypotheses rather than test existing theories (Merriam, 1998 pp. 6-7).

Qualitative research requires flexibility and for the researcher to be responsive to the changing conditions within the context of the study. Therefore, the researcher needs to spend sufficient time within the natural setting of the study in order to gauge the contextual factors and be in close contact with the study participants (Merriam, 2009).

Qualitative research also often requires sample selection characteristics: often non-random, purposeful sampling is a hallmark of a qualitative study (Creswell, 2013). As the data collected and the analysis derived is often elaborate and detailed, the size of the sample is often small in order to allow for depth of description. Yin (1994) suggests for the "how" and "why" questions, case study methodology provides distinct advantages. Multi-case sampling adds confidence to findings because it allows for the cross-comparison of results (Miles et al., 2019) and, specific to this study, an enhanced understanding of factors can help explain the impact of leadership on student learning.

The four characteristics above align with the research objectives of my project and it is for this reason that I have applied a qualitative research methodology in this study which permitted me to research in depth, the factors which highlight middle leaders and their work with professional learning communities. Therefore, the main objectives of this study are to align to the case study approach as follows:

- To understand the influence middle leaders have on PLCs focusing on student learning ("How" they influence);
- To understand the factors that support or inhibit middle leaders' influence on PLCs focus on student learning in three distinct school types: Hong Kong DSS Schools,

Hong Kong Aided Secondary Schools and International Schools offering the IB in Shenzhen PLCs ("How" they support or inhibit).

The study requires an in-depth look at how middle leaders are able to focus teachers' attention onto improving student learning and the various thoughts, perspectives, actions and beliefs associated with this. In order to deeply understand this phenomenon, in-depth, on-site observation was required. Middle leaders and teachers needed to be probed, and their real-life experiences and stories and work discussed, analysed and studied. The setting or situation in which all of this takes place needed to be analysed and the thoughts, perspectives, actions and beliefs associated with this needed to be taken into consideration in the natural setting in which they occurred (Spillane & Coldren, 2011).

As Stake (1995) explains, there are three principal differences between qualitative and quantitative methodology:

"… (1) the distinction between explanation and understanding as the purpose of inquiry; (2) the distinction between personal and impersonal role of the researcher, and (3) a distinction between knowledge discovered and knowledge constructed."

As stated previously, the line of enquiry sought to uncover the influence that middle leaders have in PLCs and consequently the impact these teachers' have on student learning. Bromley (1986, p. 78) claimed the case study method allows researchers to "get as close to the subject of interest as they possibly can, partly by means of direct observation in natural settings, partly by their access to subjective factors (thoughts, feelings, and desires)". Thus, through such access, the researcher may see the process through monitoring (implementation) or through its causal effects (Merriam, 1998). The researcher can therefore better understand the process of influence and assess whether any contextual characteristics effect the efficacy of such measures.

3.2.2. Research Objectives

The study aimed to explain the perceptions of influence that middle leaders have on PLCs and how, through the PLC, middle leaders are able to focus teachers' attention on student learning. This study also further sought to describe the impact that schools under three government funding types, DSS, Aided and International, have on creating an environment for middle leader-led PLCs to operate in and how PLCs perform in this context.

3.2.3. Rationale for the Use of Multi-Case Studies

The selection of the case study method was due to the nature of the phenomena being studied. As Merriam (1998, pp. 29-31) explains, “a case study can be defined by its special features of being particularistic, descriptive and heuristic.” As this study is problem specific, identifying how a particular group of people confront issues pertaining to student achievement, case study methodology is appropriate. The data collected is a “rich,” descriptive narrative of the influence middle leaders have over PLCs and their focus on student learning. It is holistic and lifelike, describing events and actions as they took place in the natural setting of the school.

The use of case studies provides more contextualised and concrete findings and develops a deeper interpretation based on observations made in natural settings (Stakes, 1995). Multi-case study designs generate findings that are considered more credible when, according to Yin (2003), results can be compared across cases. Other perspectives contend that comparative case studies allow the researcher to identify the impact of different social and physical contexts (Swanborn, 2010). This allows a richer narrative to be told about a phenomenon across multiple settings so that when specific contextual circumstances link relevant events or phenomena and demonstrate a set of essential characteristics across a set of case studies, theories can be developed (Ellen, 1984).

3.3. Research Design

3.3.1. Overview of the research design

The research design informs the data collection, analysis and reporting and focuses the researcher's attention on to the line of enquiry. Table 2 below shows the alignment of the research questions outlined in the introduction with the sequence of the objectives, research design, the methods used, and the conceptual underpinnings as elaborated in the remainder of the chapter:

Table 2

The alignment of the research questions

Research Questions	Methods	Sources of Underpinnings
What is the influence of Middle leaders on PLCs	Interviews of Senior Leaders, Middle leaders and teachers. School documents review	Literature review and document analysis results
How do Middle leaders focus teachers' attention on student learning?	Interviews of Middle leaders and teachers. School documents review.	Literature review and document analysis results. Scaffolding of empirical findings with the literature review
What factors in each school type support or inhibit Middle leaders' influence on Professional Learning Communities?	Interviews of Middle leaders and teachers. School documents review	Literature review and document analysis results. Scaffolding of empirical findings with the literature review

3.3.2. The Selection of Case Study Schools through Purposive Sampling

Three schools made up the sample for data collection. Purposive and criteria-based sampling employs the selection of participants, sites and practice units based upon specific criteria which allows for detailed exploration and understanding of central themes and phenomena that the researcher wishes to investigate (Mason, 2007; Patton, 2002; Ritchie & Lewis, 2009).

Within purposive sampling, the use of maximum variation sampling strategies (Patton, 2002) allows the researcher to select and include phenomena that vary widely from each other (Merriam, 1998; Richie & Lewis, 2009), and also allows the researcher to "document diverse variations and identify important common patterns" (Miles et al., 2019 p. 33). The aim of such a strategy was to identify central themes across a variety of cases and to understand them from different perspectives (Creswell, 2013), such as the instructional leadership exhibited by middle leaders in schools in Shenzhen and Hong Kong, teaching two different curricula with different sources of financial support and structure.

3.3.2.1. Selection Criteria

The selection criteria informing the purposive sampling approach consisted of three inclusion criteria:

Engaged MLs

Criterion one required that the schools involved in the study demonstrate a distributed leadership model in which middle leaders are involved in innovative practice, examples of which would be related to learning and teaching, student support, curriculum alignment and integration, use of pedagogical innovations, such as student-centred learning or the use of information technology, etc.

Geographic Location

Criterion two required that the school be located in Shenzhen or Hong Kong.

Governance Variation

Criterion three required that the school be the recipient of government funding but should also be one among the following:

(a) An international school;

(b) An Aided-secondary school;

(c) A Direct-Subsidy Scheme school.

Curricular Variation

Criterion four required that the schools have diverse curricular offerings i.e. the school should not offer identical curricular offerings as the other schools in the study:

(a) An International School offering the three programmes of the International Baccalaureate and be authorized to run the Primary Years' Programme (PYP), Middle Years' Programme (MYP) & Diploma Programme (DP)

(b) an Aided Secondary School teaching local curriculum up to Secondary 6 and

(c) a Direct-Subsidy Scheme (DSS) Secondary School teaching local curriculum up to Secondary 6 and with curriculum offerings or innovations beyond the Aided-school sector requirements such as specialised language, cultural or creative arts programme(s).

3.3.3. School Types

The three schools selected for the study represent three distinctive school types. Whilst each school has a distributed leadership model with middle leaders in formal positions, each school's curriculum, financial model and demographical information are quite distinct.

Table 3

Three Case Study Schools' Criteria

School Type	**Funding Type**	**Curriculum**	**SES Status**	**Degree of School financial Autonomy**	**Level of Prestige**	**School Sponsoring Body**	**Academic Achievement**
China School	International School	International Baccalaureate	High	High	High	Government	High
Hong Kong New Territories School	Aided-Secondary School	HKDSE	Medium to Low	Low	Low to Medium	Non-Profit Making	Low to Medium
Hong Kong Island School	DSS Secondary School	HKDSE + CIE	High to Medium	Medium	Medium to High	Non-Profit Making	Medium to High

The selection of the three different school types within two systems allowed the issue of the impact of school systems on middle leaders to be explored across systems with important findings t shared with policy makers. Therefore, middle leadership across three levels: teaching and learning within the single school context capacity building within the single school context; and leading beyond the school, allowed me to investigate and evaluate how

middle leaders are impacted by internal and external factors and how they may also influence them.

The three factors that Hairon et al. (2014) described as influencing PLCs and MLs in the Singaporean context are equally applicable in Hong Kong and Shenzhen due to similar cultural, historical, societal and economic factors. They include: a "command and control" hierarchical structure, with the influence of Confucian social philosophy; an ever-increasing workload on teachers and administrators (as reform-minded Hong Kong and Shenzhen engage in wave after wave of educational reform); and a lack of understanding on the ways PLCs work.

Nevertheless, through purposeful sampling to identify three extreme cases, each reflected differently on the entire education system, and by applying a framework that purposefully looked at both internal and external factors, and that also supported or inhibited middle leadership and middle leader-led PLCs, this study analyses the interview data, separating sources of influence into separate units of analysis.

3.3.3.1. School samples

School one is a Government-run international school in Shenzhen using English as the medium of instruction (MOI). The school is an IB continuum school offering all three programs: PYP, MYP and DP. The school has a distributed leadership model with middle leaders having formal role descriptions. The school's selection of middle leaders, i.e., subject heads and grade leads, is innovative and unusual.

School two is an aided secondary school in Hong Kong offering the local curriculum leading to the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (HKDSE). The principal is an enthusiastic leader who states strong beliefs in distributed leadership practices. The school's performance in the HKDSE examinations had improved (at the time when the study was conducted) and the school has engaged in significant capacity building of leadership potential. The school has attempted to offset certain funding constraints under the Code of Aid by joining external programmes funded by external agencies to support its ambitious middle leader development plans.

School three is a DSS secondary school in Hong Kong's urban area. The school has a distributed leadership model and a wide and varied curriculum. Middle leaders are heavily involved in the decision-making process of the school and the school uses its own additional

income under the DSS to attract and develop its middle leader talent. The school is linked to a feeder primary school under the same sponsoring body and is seeking to collaborate much more with it to ensure better curriculum articulation.

3.3.3.2 Participant sampling

Purposive sampling informed the selection of participants. As stated in the research objectives, schools with a defined middle leadership structure were selected for participation. Within each school context, the presence of at least three middle leader-led PLCs were sought. To place the unit of analysis on middle leadership, rather than curriculum specifics, the inclusion of a variety of different curriculum areas was sought in the participant identification process. Therefore, ideally, each site would have had three PLCs led by three middle leaders + one Principal overseeing its functions. Realistically, within this multiple case study, it was anticipated that 12 interviews (three sites with each site having three middle leaders and 1 principal available for interviews) would finally be conducted.

In the end, at least seven interviews were held in each school. In the International School, the IB coordinators were also interviewed as the middle leaders with other curriculum heads and horizontal leaders also being accessed as well. In the DSS school and the Aided School, the three Key Learning Areas of English, Maths and Chinese had the largest number of teachers

in this school, so the rationale for selecting the three middle leaders from these curriculum areas was the ideal. However, in order to understand the widest variation in subject application of middle leader-led professional learning communities, opportunistic sampling was applied. This allowed for a wide range of curriculum areas to be studied and compared. A table of the participants and a description of their role in each school is included:

Table 4

Case Study Informants

China School Code	**School & Designation Code**	**Role**
CS – SL1	China School - Senior Leader	Administrator
CS – SL2	China School - Senior Leader	Administrator
CS – SL3	China School - Senior Leader	Administrator
CS – ML 1	China School - Middle Leader	IB Coordinator
CS – ML 2	China School - Middle Leader	IB Coordinator
CS – ML 3	China School - Middle Leader	Subject Leader
CS – ML 4	China School - Middle Leader	Subject Leader
CS – ML 5	China School - Middle Leader	Subject Leader
CS – ML 6	China School - Middle Leader	Subject Leader
CS – ML 7	China School - Middle Leader	Subject Leader
CS – ML 8	China School - Middle Leader	Subject Leader
CS – ML 9	China School - Middle Leader	Grade Level Leader
CS – ML 10	China School - Middle Leader	Grade Level Leader
CS – ML 11	China School - Middle Leader	Grade Level Leader
CS – ML 12	China School - Middle Leader	Grade Level Leader
CS – ML 13	China School - Middle Leader	Grade Level Leader
CS – ML 14	China School - Middle Leader	Grade Level Leader
CS – ML 15	China School - Middle Leader	Grade Level Leader
CS – T 1	China School - Teacher	Primary Teacher
CS – T 2	China School - Teacher	Primary Teacher
CS – T 3	China School - Teacher	Primary Teacher
CS – T 4	China School - Teacher	Primary Teacher
CS – T5	China School - Teacher	Primary Teacher
CS – T6	China School - Teacher	Primary Teacher
Hong Kong New Territories School Code	**School & Designation Code**	**Role**
HKNTS – SL 1	Hong Kong New Territories School - Senior Leader	Administrator
HKNTS – SL 2	Hong Kong New Territories School - Senior Leader	Administrator
HKNTS – SL 3	Hong Kong New Territories School - Senior Leader	Administrator
HKNTS – ML 1	Hong Kong New Territories School - Middle Leader 1	Subject Leader
HKNTS – ML 2	Hong Kong New Territories School -Middle Leader 2	Subject Leader
HKNTS – ML 3	Hong Kong New Territories School - Middle Leader 3	Subject Leader
HKNTS – ML 4	Hong Kong New Territories School - Middle Leader 4	Subject Leader
HKNTS – ML 5	Hong Kong New Territories School - Middle Leader 5	Subject Leader
HKNTS – ML 6	Hong Kong New Territories School - Middle Leader 6	Subject Leader
HKNTS – T 1	Hong Kong New Territories School – Teacher 1	Secondary Teacher
HKNTS – T 2	Hong Kong New Territories School – Teacher 2	Secondary Teacher
HKNTS – T 3	Hong Kong New Territories School – Teacher 3	Secondary Teacher
Hong Kong Island School Code	**School & Designation Code**	**Role**
HKIS – SL 1	Hong Kong Island School - Senior Leader	Administrator

HKIS – SL 2	Hong Kong Island School - Senior Leader	Administrator
HKIS – ML 1	Hong Kong Island School - Middle Leader 1	Subject Leader
HKIS – ML 2	Hong Kong Island School - Middle Leader 2	Subject Leader
HKIS – ML 3	Hong Kong Island School - Middle Leader 3	Subject Leader
HKIS – ML 4	Hong Kong Island School - Middle Leader 4	Subject Leader
HKIS – T 1	Hong Kong Island School – Teacher 1	Secondary Teacher
HKIS – T 2	Hong Kong Island School – Teacher 2	Secondary Teacher
HKIS – T 3	Hong Kong Island School – Teacher 3	Secondary Teacher

3.3.4. Negotiating Access to each of the Research Sites

Schooling in both Hong Kong and Shenzhen is extremely competitive and in Hong Kong, public sector schools face closure if they are unable to attract a minimum number of students. Because of this competitive environment, gaining research access, especially for a qualitative study, and in particular case study research, is often achieved through a "gatekeeper" (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 1998; Yin, 1994); as I had already been assisting with the collection of data for research projects on middle leadership focusing on distributed leadership, access to these schools for my research was made easier. Through this access, I was able to meet the research participants first-hand.

3.4. Data Collection Methods

3.4.1. Question design and the theoretical framework

As highlighted earlier, this study sought to qualify the perceptions of influence that middle leaders have on PLCs and how, through PLCs, middle leaders are able to focus teachers' attention on student learning.

As the data collection involved contextual observations, followed by a document review and then semi-structured interviews, this interview process aimed to elicit answers to the four research questions from the participants' perspective. It is recognised that these responses allowed for the co-construction of knowledge, which allowed for both clarification and understanding of MLs and their PLCs from the participants' perspective (see Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). However, combined with the observation phase and the review of school documents, information attained in the interviews was used to shed light on factors that the middle leaders and their teachers deemed important to the efficient functioning of PLCs and their work to focus teachers' attention on student learning.

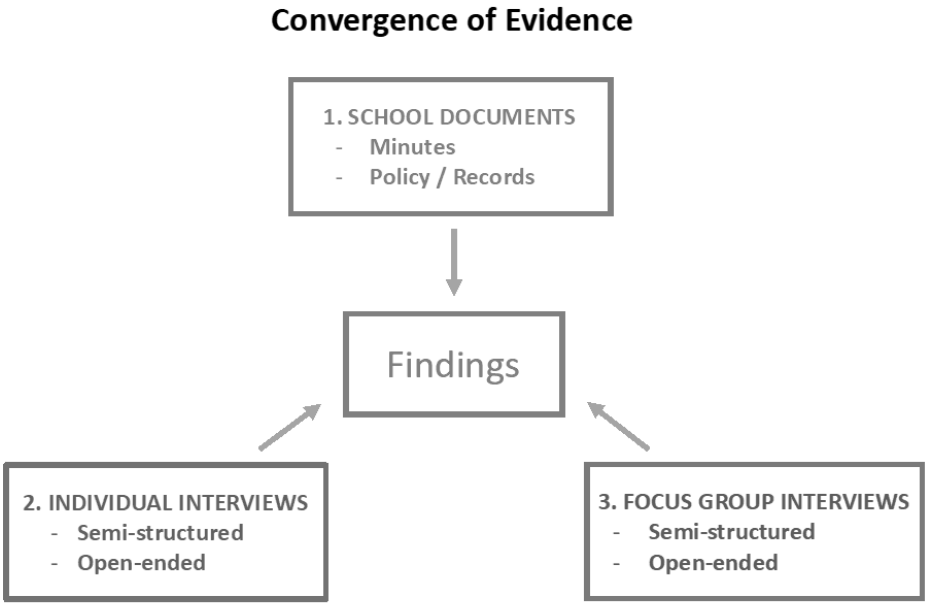

Figure 1: Convergence of Evidence

The interview questions and sub-questions were structured in such way to allow me to delve into issues regarding the settings of the schools (see Weiss, 1994). The Convergence of

Evidence (Figure 1) shows how different methods were used as a way to nullify and capitalize on the limitations and strengths respectively to arrive at a single conclusion (Maxwell, 2013, pp. 102-3). Interview questions and sub-questions were posed in the present tense to elicit generalized accounts, while questions and sub-questions asked in the past tense were meant to elicit lived memories and concrete descriptions of an event (Weiss, 1994). Asking participants to take the investigator through an event also allowed for a "rich" descriptive narrative to be given.

The analysis of the school documents as well as the design and delivery of the interview questions were designed around an initial framework informed from the literature review.

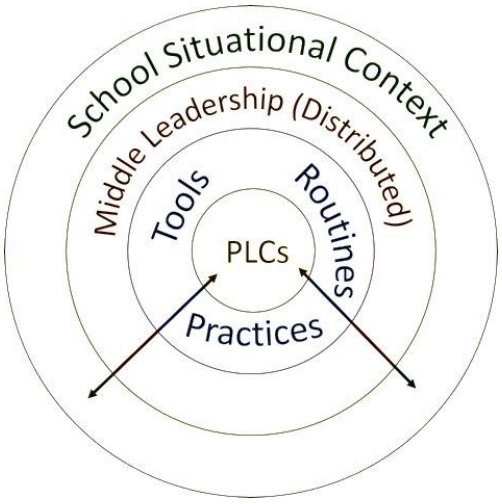

Figure 2: Framework A

The framework sought to look at PLCs as the centre and focus of both the study and of leadership action. Middle leaders use a plethora of tools, routines and practices in their work

with their teacher teams (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Lauer & Dean, 2004; Song & Choi, 2017; Stoll et al., 2006), although their situational context was viewed as influencing their work and their influence over their teacher teams (see Bryant, 2019; De Nobile, 2018; Gurr, 2018; Gurr & Drysdale, 2013; Irvine & Brundrett, 2017). Thus, the framework allowed me to focus on middle leaders' work with their PLCs. Middle leaders generally required their teacher teams to engage in teaching and learning activities as their core focus (see Bryant, 2019; De Nobile, 2018; Gurr, 2018; Gurr & Drysdale, 2013; Irvine & Brundrett, 2017).It is through providing such a focus that middle leaders play a decisive role in creating an environment of learning for students through their distinct influence on teachers' practice (Harris & Jones, 2017).

3.4.2. Data Collection

The data collection, as described in the section 3.4.1 on Question Design and Theoretical Framework, was conducted at each site in three phases, namely in the first phase as a review of school documents and artefacts, in the second phase by interviews with middle leaders and the principal and in the third phase by group interviews with the members of different professional learning communities. Due to time constraints and access to participants, this was done sequentially on the same day.

3.4.3. Interviews

The one-on-one or small group interviews with middle leaders were conceived to better understand the beliefs held for their leadership. Open-ended, semi-structured questions are used in order to try to allow the participant to best explain their journey into middle leadership and also to understand how their middle leadership was exercised in their work with PLCs. Each open question contained a protocol identifying likely sources of the information to ensure that the research questions were being answered. It was essential that the study should try to identify how middle leader actions were conceived and what their intentions were. The research question looking at how middle leaders focus teacher attention on student learning not only needed to look at their actions, but also the key concepts behind these choices. Their views on structural issues inside each school type and their school's perceived support and blocking of their efforts to influence PLCs were also essential for this study. Therefore, the middle leaders' and principal's perceptions on all these issues were very important. How these perceptions match policy documents and observations provided for rich commentary.

3.4.4. Focus Group Interviews

The aim of the focus group interviews was to create a conducive environment where members of the PLC would be able to express personal and conflicting viewpoints on the

topics under study. The aim of the focus groups was not to come to a single consensus or viewpoint, but rather to elicit different views (Kvalle & Brinkmann, 2009). The group interviews of the membership of several PLCs, led by the three middle leaders interviewed one-on-one, enabled me to gauge the middle leader's impact and influence on and implications for the PLC and its actions from the perspective of the teachers. I observed whether or not middle leaders were able to focus teachers' attention on student learning and reported how their leadership, and to what degree, if any, could influence the workings of a PLC and the practices of teachers as a consequence. Therefore, it was imperative to not only examine the actions of middle leaders, but also the impact their actions had on those they lead.

A focus group interview was conditioned upon being given access. The focus groups were made up of a mix of experienced teachers and new teachers in the school who were not formal leaders. Although initially, homogeneous groups were to be selected based on longevity in the school, as there was a risk that familiarity with each other's situation may result in them failing to articulate their experiences fully (Ritchie & Lewis, 2009), this proved difficult to arrange. The researcher was acutely aware of this and ensured depth and breadth was achieved from all participants through supplementary questioning. Focus groups were confined to three to four members, although one contained six, to allow individual

participants to express themselves more comprehensively and to facilitate transcription (and translation) of texts. As access was always a concern, schools were asked to select focus group participants based on the sampling criteria below:

(a) all participants must be members of a middle leader-led PLC and should be either:

(b) a teacher in their first year at the school or

(c) an experienced teacher who is also not a formal leader.

Focus group interviews are ideal because rather than have a collection of interviews directed through the researcher, they generate the researcher's data by interacting with each other and are able to provide perspectives and lived experiences through spontaneous and synergetic conversations (Hinch & Lewis, 2003; Kvalle & Brinkmann, 2009). The focus group interviews, therefore, took place after the in-depth one-on-one interviews so as to allow more insights from those individual perspectives to be grouped and further discussed, which allowed for a richer narrative albeit more chaotic (see Kvalle & Brinkmann, 2009).

3.4.5. Textual Evidence

Each school was asked to provide several documents to better understand the context such as school organisational charts, staff handbooks and meeting agendas and meetings where available.

3.4.6. Data Analysis and representation

The data analysis began with observations recorded on memos. Memos were used to provide important information about the context and thus provide a "different perspective from the interviews" (Maxwell, 2013, p. 9) and allowed the interview data to be anchored into each site's context.

The data was then placed in a table to allow for comparison between each sub-context and the action / observation. Referring to Stakes (1995), as data is collected from each site, they are initially placed into a 2x5 table to enable more obvious comparison.

Sample 2x5 Display of Data

Table 5

Sample 2x3 Display of Data

Theme	Response	China School (Respondents = 24)	Hong Kong New Territories School (Respondents = 12)	Hong Kong Island School Respondents = (9)
Shared Values & Vision	Referred to	21	10	8
	Not referred to	3	2	1

Table 6

Sample transcription data for table 3.4 Display of data

CS - SL1: So when I had the chance to interact with my teachers more, I always say to them everyone is a leader. You don't have to be in leadership in order to become a leader, so we try to create a culture. If you have a great idea, you can come to share and we try to work out a plan. [SVV]

CS - ML1: At the beginning of the year, we were told this year, every grade level must have either fully detailed unit of inquiry plan for each transdisciplinary unit, updated with all of the resources on ManageBac. And then you must have one language, one math, standalone planner for the year. [SVV]

CS - ML2: Okay.

***CS – ML1*:** And that was shared with us in the beginning, and then shared with our team in the beginning. [SVV]

CS – T2: Well we are always, since CS – SL2 been here, we see it all around the school - all the time, choice and voice - I mean it's all about the students, that's all about the teachers giving a voice because I think they do listen to us and I feel comfortable going ahead. I need to talk to them, but everything, even in their planning meetings it's always coming back when we are discussing central ideas or anything, how it's going to work for the kids. So, I feel that they are always the centre. [SVV]

3.4.7. Analysis during data collection

During the second phase, as documents were collected, notes were written into the margins and then memos were created to form initial codes (Creswell, 2013). Data were then further placed into categories and themes and data coding were reviewed with a series of memos linked to the data collected *in situ.* During the third phase, semi-structured interviews were

fully transcribed and, like the school documents, were read, codes attached, and themes, categories and other notes written in the margins. Categorical aggregation was utilised to establish themes and patterns (Creswell, 2013). Thus, memos and categorizing strategies were initially used and were combined with narrative analysis, thus utilizing three main methods to sort, categorize and analyse the data (Maxwell, 2013).

Table 7

Memo on using a code for "Shared Leadership"

I have just completed my last day of interviews and this was indeed a most revealing day. As I worked my way down the participants list, an important theme emerged. So far, with the 33 people I have interview previously, nobody highlighted the negative impact of leadership not being shared on PLCs but in this school, almost from the outset, this has become apparent. The principal explained in detail how he shares leadership with the vice principals and the key learning area heads of department. As I interviewed them, one or two stood out as people who did not believe that any members of their teacher teams had the capacity to undertake leadership activities and these staff needed "strong leadership". When I came to the teachers, their judgement on the impact of their middle leader was scathing: "Although I am a Form coordinator, the two panel heads will make the decisions. I am merely a facilitator. I can't make any decisions. We set the examination paper, the panel heads will review its quality." I now understand the importance of shared leadership within a PLC. From my own professional experience, I have always taken for granted the importance of ensuring that leadership is distributed and that leaders are developed. This has always been my practice and my "normal". But hearing the despair from seemingly capable teachers that they are not able to contribute to improving teaching and learning to me is surprising. I will add "shared leadership" to my coding in addition to the eight other characteristics that I will use based on Stoll et al., (2006) and see if I can support my initial views.

3.4.8. Data reduction, data display and data verification

Once the memos, field notes and transcripts were coded and categorical aggregation performed, patterns and themes were identified. Memos were written to not only capture analytical thinking about the data, but also to "facilitate such thinking, stimulating analytical insight" (Maxwell, 2013 p. 105). The data was displayed using matrices. As such, data which did not contribute to demonstrating how teachers' focus on student learning is enhanced was excluded (Miles et al., 2019, p. 117). A draft of the matrix was given to participants to review and comment upon. Thereby, participants were able to see how their responses and contributions were analysed with data excerpts attached (Miles et al., 2019, p. 140).

Table 8

Data matrix used for coding

Question 1: Which factors in each school type support or inhibit Middle Leaders' influence on Professional Learning Communities?			
Theme / Codes	*China School*	*Hong Kong New Territories School*	*Hong Kong Island School*
Funds for professional development	L+, SA, EI, T+L, CfL, ONP, RPE, GILP, SCB	L+, SA, EI, T+L, CfL, ONP, RPE, GILP	L+, SA, EI, T+L, CfL, ONP, RPE, GILP, SCB
Competitive environment	SA, EI, T+L, ONP	SA, EI, T+L, ONP	SA, EI, T+L, ONP
Staff stability & longevity	SA, EI, SCB, T+L	SA, EI, SCB, T+L	SA, EI, SCB, T+L
Role descriptions, authority and role recognition	SA, L+, PA, SL, SVV, IM, MTRS, PA	SA, PA, SL, SVV, IM, MTRS, PA	SA, L+, PA, SL, SVV, IM, MTRS, PA

Codes

L+	Leader Plus Aspect	**EI**	External Influence
PA	Practice Aspect	**SCB**	School Capacity Building
SA	Situational Aspect	**T+L**	Teaching & Learning

CfL	Collaboration focused on learning	**ONP**	Openness, networks and partnerships
CRPL	Collective responsibility for pupil's learning	**RPE**	Reflective professional enquiry
IM	Inclusive membership	**SL**	Shared leadership
MTRS	Mutual trust, respect & support	**SVV**	Shared values & vision
GILP	Group, as well as individual learning is promoted		

The data coding was undertaken by me and the codebook is attached as appendix VIII. It should be noted that I gained some experience in coding interviews based on my research for two projects: (a) Understanding Middle Leadership in Hong Kong Secondary Schools and (b) A Distributed Perspective on Middle Leadership in International Baccalaureate Continuum Schools in Northeast Asia . This further allowed me to learn and apply to my own research, member checking and presentation of research findings to research participants as the practitioner in me feels such return on research participation is invaluable.

3.4.9. Data management

In order to protect the anonymity of the informants and the schools being studied, multiple strategies were applied to ensure the data were stored and analysed properly. As the data were collected, they were coded in order to best protect the identity of the informants and to also provide swift categorization. Informants names and that of their schools were altered to further maintain anonymity.

3.4.10. Ethical Considerations

Research undertaken in this study was done according to the Education University of Hong Kong's Guidelines on Ethics in Research (May 2016). All schools, participants and data were collected with these stakeholders' confidentiality well maintained. Following the University's Guidelines on Researcher Responsibility to Participants, all participants were fully and accurately briefed on the aims and the consequences of the research as well as being notified of any publication. They were further advised of the procedures to be used in the study. Participants could choose to partake voluntarily and without any coercion. Those participants who joined were also given the right to withdraw without penalty at any stage of the study. Their signatures, as well as that of the researchers agreeing to the above were obtained. The data were stored securely under lock and key, and coded to ensure anonymity and will be stored for five years by the Education University of Hong Kong. Such a Consent-to-Participate form also meets the international standard for research with Human Subjects (Creswell, 2013).

Part of the data set was derived from two concurrent research projects which had already received ethical consent. The research methods employed in this study fell within the scope of the approved projects. The research data were collected and analysed from different

theoretical perspectives to address the unique research aims and questions of each project. The two projects for which I personally collected data are as follows:

- Understanding Middle Leadership in Hong Kong Secondary Schools
- A Distributed Perspective on Middle Leadership in International Baccalaureate Continuum Schools in Northeast Asia

3.5. Limitations

3.5.1. Limitations of a case study

One limitation of this study is the small number of participants from which data was drawn. However, as qualitative research often requires particular sample selection characteristics, such as non-random, purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2013), the data collected and the analysis derived was elaborate and detailed, therefore requiring the size of the sample to be small in order to allow for depth of description. Multi-case sampling also adds confidence to findings because it allows for the cross-comparison of results (Miles et al., 2019) and, specific to this study, an enhanced understanding of factors which explain the impact of leadership on student achievement was also required.

3.5.2. Theoretical Limitations

This study sought to identify exemplars of leadership traits presented and their impact on PLCs in the three schools concerned. It did not seek to generalize outside the three school studied which may disappoint those with a more quantitative orientation. Leader-plus elements within different situations and practices were analysed, compared and contrasted. Within this framework, certain hypotheses inevitably have been presented based on these three contexts which have contributed knowledge in the field and have provided a springboard for more extensive research into the field.

Contrary evidence has been provided throughout the thesis to highlight varying perspectives on the same phenomena and to highlight the difficulties often faced by middle leaders and their teams. The multi-political views form an important element of this multi-case research project which push the boundaries of what defines professional learning communities and goes beyond the current literature to suggest a new theoretical understanding of the routines, practices and tools present in professional learning communities in the three schools studied.

Every effort was made to ensure a representative sample was obtained, although the data collected comes from a limited number of middle leaders in a single Hong Kong DSS Secondary Schools, a Hong Kong Aided-School and an international school in Shenzhen.

Nevertheless, the findings demonstrate significant findings which extend the current understanding of the role leadership plays in effective professional learning communities. Based on a document review and then semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, this interview process aimed to elicit answers to the four research questions from the participants' perspective. It is recognised that these responses may have allowed the co-construction of knowledge, of clarification and understanding of MLs and their PLCs from the participants' perspective (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

3.5.3. Methodological Limitations

The data collected was highly dependent on the detail, depth and at times, the honesty of the respondents with regard to the real situation as they perceived it. The participants' sense of collegiality, personal relationships and concerns about anonymity may have impacted on the reliability of the data collected. It was therefore extremely important that respondents' concerns expressed during the data collection were addressed. Some data collection was collected from a Chinese-medium of instruction school in Chinese with the help of a Chinese research assistant. Sentiments, experiences and other data may have been lost in translation. The researcher, with his limited Chinese, was present for all interviews and focus groups and also sought to obtain first impressions from the interviewer after each interview, but nevertheless, some nuances may have been lost.

3.6. Chapter Summary

This chapter has detailed the multiple case study research method applied in this study. Following an extensive review of the relevant literature on middle leaders and professional learning communities, a review of school documents related to middle leader-led PLCs was undertaken, with an analysis of these roles conducted. Semi-structured individual and focus group interviews concluded the data collection. The research methods applied in this study were designed and conducted with full adherence to ethical, reliability and validity concerns. The next chapter presents the findings in relation to the first research question on school contextual factors and their impact on middle leader-led teacher teams.

CHAPTER 4: Findings on School contextual factors & their impact on Middle Leader-led Teacher teams

Overview

The presentation of the findings is organised to build the readers' understanding of the situational context, followed by the work of middle leaders and their middle leader-led PLCs and finally the organisational infrastructure conditions needed to enhance student learning. I then develop a conceptual framework by taking the specific contextual circumstances and linking them to relevant events or phenomena while demonstrating a set of essential characteristics across the set of case studies (see Ellen, 1984). In terms of organization, the findings from this research study are presented across three chapters, with each chapter providing an in-depth look at the research findings for each question as outlined in the table below:

Table 9

Findings from this research study in three chapters for each question

Chapter	Research Questions	Purpose of chapter
CHAPTER 4: Findings on school contextual factors & their impact on middle leader-led teacher teams	*What factors in each school type support or inhibit middle leaders' influence on professional learning communities?*	To introduce the contexts of each school, its type and how these impact the work of middle leaders and their teams. Issues presented are often out of the middle leaders control.
CHAPTER 5: Findings on middle leadership influence on professional learning communities	*What is the influence of middle leaders on professional learning communities*	To present the areas in which middle leaders can influence their professional learning communities.
CHAPTER 6: Findings on how middle leaders focus teachers' attention on student learning	*How do middle leaders focus teachers' attention on student learning?*	To present the attitudes, beliefs, tools, routines and practices middle leaders use with their professional learning communities.

This chapter presents the findings from the documentary analysis and the interviews held with the senior and middle leadership and the PLC members in three schools in Hong Kong and Shenzhen. Its purpose is to demonstrate the impact that each school's situational context has on the work of middle leaders with their PLCs and respond to the research question on factors that support and inhibit middle leaders' influence on their professional learning communities.

In order to set the scene for these findings, this chapter begins by presenting the situational context of each school. It then looks at the four major factors where school type influenced middle leaders work: funds for professional development; competitive environment; staff stability and longevity; and role descriptions, authority and recognition.

The overall picture of each school came from several sources. To understand the leadership structure in each school, documents collected from the three schools included the schools' designed role and position descriptions, outlining the principal roles and responsibilities of middle leaders. Where provided, organisational structures were also examined, in order to better understand the key functions and roles of each middle leader. Documents such as mission and vision statements and staff handbooks were also analysed in order to provide a

better understanding of the situational context in which middle leadership was exercised with PLCs within the school.

This chapter also presents the results from the semi-structured interviews conducted with eight senior leaders and 25 middle leaders and 12 teachers across the three schools. During the interviews, middle leaders were asked a series of questions which focused on their work with their teacher teams. The interviews were structured to investigate the impact of their school context, the tools, routines and practices they and their teacher teams used and the use of formal and informal leadership in establishing and operating effective PLCs. The use of PLCs is viewed as a catalyst for best practice in each of the three schools, thus the characteristics of each school's PLCs was explored.

4.1. The School Situational Context

Table 10

The method and criteria for selection of the three schools in this study

	China School (CS)	**Hong Kong Island School (HKIS)**	**Hong Kong New Territories School (HKNTS)**
School Location	Shenzhen, China	Hong Kong Island, H.K.	New Territories, H.K.
School Funding Type	Government-owned International School with very high school fees	Registered charity receiving government funding per student plus moderate school fees. All teachers' salaries are paid by the school from funds	Registered Charity receiving funding according to the government's Code of Aid with limited additional funds from

		received from the government and collected in school fees.	donations. All teachers' salaries paid by government funds plus from donations received.
School Curriculum	International Baccalaureate Primary Years Programme (PYP); Middle Years Programme (MYP) & Diploma Programme (DP)	Hong Kong local curriculum with the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (HKDSE) examinations.	Hong Kong local curriculum with the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (HKDSE) examinations.
Leadership & Team Structures	Distributed leadership structure with a Senior leadership Team, formal and informal middle leaders and teacher Teams / committees.	Distributed leadership structure with a Senior leadership team, formal and informal middle leaders and teacher teams / committees.	Distributed leadership structure with a Senior leadership team, formal and informal middle leaders and teacher teams / committees.
Middle Leaders: their roles and remuneration	Formal leadership roles with job descriptions and either higher base salary or stipend. Vertical and horizontal formal leaders all with additional salary incentives. Informal leadership opportunities to lead projects.	Formal Leadership roles with job descriptions and higher salary award. Senior leader reports plans to expand formal middle leader roles. Multiple levels of middle leaders with some paid an incentive rather than a higher base salary. Informal leadership opportunities to lead projects.	Formal Leadership roles with job descriptions and some additional salary. Senior leader reports limited funds to expand formal middle leader roles. Limited opportunities to move to higher salary award. No middle leader incentive payments. Informal leadership opportunities to lead projects.

4.1.1. China School (CS)

China School is a three-programme International Baccalaureate Organization (IBO) World School located in Shenzhen. It offers the IBO's Primary Years Programme (PYP) for years K-5, Middle Years Programme (MYP) for years 6 - 10 and the Diploma Programme (DP) for years 11 - 12. Since its creation by the regional government less than 10 years ago as a division of a highly successful local school, China School has enjoyed rapid expansion, progressing from its beginning as a primary school through to adding a middle school

division and finally a senior high school division. With its rapid growth has come the need to achieve various programme certifications and authorizations at a pace which has seen such endeavours being completed almost annually.

The school leadership, as well as the faculty in general, has experienced considerable turnover and as such, the Head of School has placed great emphasis on developing leadership within the school and providing opportunities for aspiring leaders to lead initiatives. In recent years, the school has placed significant effort on developing teacher teams in the domain of learning and teaching. These teacher teams have been tasked over the past few years to assist in the development of the documentation necessary to comply with various programme certification and authorization requirements. As one PYP teacher described it, it was "just that we need to have this documentation done;" [CS - T2] with another adding "it is also about establishing the school as a proper IB school, as a world class international school" [CS – T4].

The school remains unique in its context: it is the only international school in the region owned and governed by the regional government, operated as a division of a local school and very culturally and ethnically homogeneous with more than 90% of students being culturally

and linguistically Chinese albeit holders of foreign passports or permanent residents of Hong Kong, Macau or Taiwan [CS – SL1].

The school has faced, and continues to face, many challenges related to its situational context, staff and student composition, and authorization / certification regime; thus, it had attempted to leverage its middle leaders' skills to focus teachers' attention on seeking solutions to these challenges whilst ensuring that students learn effectively.

4.1.2. Hong Kong Island School (HKIS)

Hong Kong Island School is a DSS secondary school, located on Hong Kong Island. In Hong Kong, DSS schools were introduced in 1991 to further diversify the local education system and enhance parental choice. The school is an English Medium of Instruction school (EMI) which promotes a global education and positions itself to provide students with the language and cultural skills they need to compete in an increasingly globalised market. The school's management committee is described on its website as being "made up of several eminent educators from various local universities [with] consultants work[ing] in partnership with the school leadership to plan, implement and evaluate a number of initiatives." As a DSS school, school fees are charged and the school uses this additional income to diversify the curriculum offerings, employ more teachers (than would otherwise be employed in government-aided

schools), reduce student-teacher ratios and offer enhanced learning environments. Such income also allows for more leadership positions to be offered (than would be allowed under the Government's Code of Aid to government-aided schools), at the discretion of the school's management, to ensure the implementation of programmes with a focus on student development.

Hong Kong Island School has a highly developed middle leadership structure with the use of substantive (salary) rankings to distinguish their roles. These roles have formal job descriptions and may be filled through external recruitment. Another formal level of middle leadership, "coordinators," are in place as part of the school's succession planning. These middle leaders do not receive a substantive middle leader salary according to the government's Master Pay Scale (MPS), but instead are paid an incentive of USD$400 per month. These roles are considered a springboard to substantive ranks with higher base salaries.

Like China School, Hong Kong Island School suffers from high staff turnover and thus frequent changes within the middle and senior leadership. However, both schools have faced this challenge by creating leadership capacity within the school and robust planning for succession. A senior leader stated that recommendations had been sent to the School

Management Committee (SMC) to create additional formal middle leadership positions and that this was currently being implemented. The senior leader went on to say that she hoped it would stabilise school operations when middle leaders left for other schools. The fluidity of middle leaders and general staff movements in these schools contrasts with the third school in this study, Hong Kong New Territories School.

4.1.3. Hong Kong New Territories School (HKNTS)

Hong Kong New Territories School has a long history of providing quality education for students in Hong Kong and has witnessed great changes over its near half century of operations. The school is an "aided" or subsidized school, supported by the government through the Code of Aid. This code requires schools to follow the practices present in government schools, even though these aided schools are managed and operated by diverse bodies such as religious bodies, professional guilds, and charities, etc.

The school was led by a very entrepreneurial principal who sought significant external assistance, particularly financial support from local corporations, to support programmes that would not have been possible, had extra financial resources not been available. As a result of this, the school has been able to employ 45% more teachers than would have been possible if only government funds had been used. School finances, according to senior leaders, were of

significant concern and directly impacted the recruitment of middle leaders. A senior leader reported: “We have frozen the placement at senior level to recruit more teachers. It cannot exceed the government requirement because we cannot find the funding for additional placement[s]” [SL 2].

The school is also unique in this study due to the stability of the teaching faculty and their years of experience. Almost 70% of the teaching staff had 10 or more years of experience. As the school’s funding type restricts the possibility of increasing the number of substantive middle leadership positions, each middle leader is responsible for multiple programmes and curriculum / pastoral areas. Therefore, mentorship plays a very important role in developing leadership capacity, and in return, mentorship is used by middle leaders as a tool to support teachers.

4.2. School contextual factors and their impact on Middle Leader-led Teacher Teams

4.2.1. Factors which support or inhibit middle leaders’ influence

Across all three schools, during my many interviews with teachers, middle leaders and senior leaders, school type was often cited as an explanation for a particular support or constraint to middle leadership. Table 2.1 summarizes the factors that shape, support and constrain middle leadership in PLCs in the three schools:

Table 11

Factors which shape, support and inhibit middle leadership

	Factors that shape, support, and inhibit effective Middle Leadership in Professional Learning Communities		
	The Leader-Plus Aspect	**The Practice Aspect**	**The Situation Aspect**
L1 Teaching & Learning **L2 School Capacity** **L3 External influences**	The identification of leadership roles and responsibilities and the interactions of middle leaders with senior leaders, other middle leaders, informal leaders and teachers (within ML-led PLCs) around the three levels of leadership.	The identification of how leadership is distributed across the three levels of leadership, the specific types of leadership distributions that are adopted and what middle leaders actually do as actors within those distributions and their contributions within ML-led PLCs.	The tools, routines and contextual factors that shape the ways that middle leaders enact their leadership across the three levels and within ML-led PLCs.

4.2.2. Funds for professional development (PD)

Funds for professional development were available in all three schools although the funding levels were very different according to each school's funding type (see Table 13 Funds for PD p. 151). Nevertheless, high quality professional development was available to all three schools. In China School, a wealthy international school with very high student fees, professional development funding was a major attraction for staff members at all ranks in the structure. A senior leader at China School described her impressions of the school's PD culture:

> It was the professional development that drew me here. They did a good job on the website with the teachers who got PD in New Zealand, also with the PD policy. I think I was one of

> the first people to be interviewed for this job, so you were waiting until the closing day [to see if you got the job. [CS - SL2]

Professional development is not only seen as an incentive for recruitment, but also a way to encourage middle leaders to engage in new practices and to bring them back to the team for deliberation. China School has several different professional development funds to assist with these initiatives.

> If you're passionate and are you interested in doing this [a particular new initiative], [then] we would recommend for people in this role [middle leaders] to have different PD budgets in different categories, like, there are ones they have to pay using their own personal PD budget, and there are ones about division wise [primary or secondary school section] or even school wise. [CS - ML 2]

This excerpt indicates that every teacher is given a personal PD budget. Then each division (primary, junior high and senior high) has additional PD budgets for division-targeted development. Finally, there is a third school-wide fund to support school-wide initiatives. Middle leaders described attending writing workshops in New York, reading workshops in New Zealand, IB curriculum meetings in Holland as well as a plethora of IB organised PD across the globe and across the region.

> Before school started, I attended a three-day PD, then two months later, I was invited to The Hague to do the PYP review. I was told it was a good opportunity for me for my own career development, so I got to go there again. Then in November, I attended the IB regional workshop as the IB field representative." [CS – ML1]

The opportunity for so many staff to go to such high-quality professional development events is indeed a major plus for middle leaders at this school. Participants at China School spoke very positively about the support for improved instructional practice.

Whilst not at the same scale or cost, professional development in Hong Kong public sector schools provide substantial opportunities for teacher team development and for middle leaders to experience high quality professional development at more modest costs as indicated here by a middle leader at HKNTS:

> Through the Secondary School Principal Council, we have a collaboration platform for the Chinese language in the local region. I am the leader of this collaboration platform. I am leading the discussion between five schools." [HKNTS - ML4]

Nevertheless, despite the entrepreneurial efforts of Hong Kong New Territories School to gather additional non-government funds, time and cost significantly impacted middle leaders' professional development opportunities. A senior leader at HKNTS explains the situation: "I don't think we have zero MLs who go outside school [for professional development], maybe we have 20 to 30 per cent of them. I hope they go out for a seminar at least once a year" [HKNTS – SL2].

At Hong Kong Island School, a DSS school with additional income in the form of student fees, there are more funds available to meet middle leader professional development needs.

This allows middle leaders to work with their teacher teams to fill knowledge and pedagogical gaps with a focus on improving student learning. A middle leader at Hong Kong Island School worked with his teachers to improve their teaching for students preparing for on the IELTS, an English proficiency test, to provide students with another pathway to university entry:

> This year at least, I managed to get the funding for IELTS training for all the teachers. We squeezed one professional development day away from the rest of the school. So we had people from British Council come in and ideally we would have two days but I could only get one day. So teachers will have to spend two extra afternoons after school to finish the whole training. We did get to do our own thing [as a teacher team] and the school provided the money for the training. [HKIS-ML1]

The data shows that the constraints of time and finances weigh heavily on the minds of middle leaders in certain school types more than others. This has an impact on their teacher team members who may then have less access to support and new ideas for overcoming problems of practice.

4.2.3. Competitive environment

With the international school sector in Shenzhen growing rapidly, the demand for school places is exceeding supply with new international schools arriving in the market yearly. In Hong Kong, on the other hand, with an ageing population and a low fertility rate, the need to close schools has begun creating stress and anxiety for the entire local school sector. As parents in Hong Kong have the right to a free education for their children, but not the right to

select the aided or government school of their choice, they increasingly seek to enrol their children into schools which offer discretionary places or which do not participate in the central allocation of school places. This creates significant pressure on all schools; many middle leaders cited the need to participate in the process of filling their school's places with the best students available. A middle leader at the government aided HKNTS describes the situation:

> In the DSS School and the International School, they have the autonomy to recruit the kind of students [they want] and their parents focus more on their academic result and school activities. But for our school, we focus a lot on the school activities. Of course, it depends on the students' abilities. [HKNTS-ML1]

As such, the pressure on middle leaders and their teacher teams in each school is different with the burnout rate at DSS schools judged as being higher by middle leaders in both Hong Kong schools:

> I think because first of all, DSS schools have a comparatively higher turnover rate [of staff]. So the teachers here are greener and I think of course, even though there are many fresh teachers here, we do also have some teachers actually who are experienced here. It is because DSS schools are more fast paced, more dynamic I think, and that's very different for new teachers as well. So… I think our teachers here probably experience fatigue frequently. [HKIS-ML3]

The principal reason cited by middle leaders at HKNTS for teachers wanting to join DSS schools, despite the increased workload, was remuneration and career progression. Aided schools in Hong Kong have very tight budgetary measures for human resources and are

financially restricted to promote teaching staff to senior ranks without external funds. Combined with the perceived differences in student abilities between many aided and DSS schools, exemplary middle leaders can shift to DSS schools from Aided schools easily. A middle leader at HKNTS clarifies the phenomenon: “I know some DSS schools will give extra points according to the additional work. Some schools will only allow teachers to achieve salary point 27 if they pick up administration work” [HKNTS-ML3].

However, because HKNTS was able to gain additional funding from a local corporation, they were able to offer six additional classes of students and employ 40+ extra teachers to further reduce the student-teacher ratio. By freezing promotion to senior levels, the school was also able to remain competitive in the surrounding school environment:

> Actually, the number of teachers is somehow similar to the DSS schools and that's why we can take good care of students. I mean we have 100 staff to take care of 700 students: a very good ratio. In fact, if you ask me about the difference in terms of manpower, I cannot say there is one because it is like running the DSS school here because we have sufficient [additional] funding. [HKNTS-SL1]

It is apparent that each of the three schools needed to understand its prevailing market and remain competitive within its budgetary constraints. Middle leaders often receive the brunt of criticism from disgruntled team members who question decisions made by senior leaders. This can challenge the effectiveness of team operations; thus, the middle leader needs to be understanding and compassionate when dealing with such sensitive matters, while also

reminding teachers of the advantages of their school type: “As teachers in DSS schools worry about their staff contract extensions, the teachers cannot refuse a request from the principal. In an aided school, we have a higher level of autonomy” [HKNTS – ML4].

4.2.4. Staff stability and longevity

Across all three schools, staffing stability and longevity were critical issues confronting middle leaders. At China School, measures had been taken to pay bonuses to teachers upon contract renewal, which is also the case at Hong Kong Island School. Both schools have access to additional funds which make such payments possible. On the other hand, Hong Kong New Territories School, with a much tighter budget, prioritises student-teacher ratios over salary incentives:

> We have frozen the placement at the senior level, to recruit more teachers. This is the challenge of being in an Aided School. The headcount is one of the restrictions. It cannot exceed the government requirement because we cannot find the funding for the additional placements. The challenge for the MLs is the turnover rate. In recent years, if the market is healthy or the colleagues want a better salary, they will leave. [HKNTS-SL3]

Nevertheless, the staffing stability in aided schools is generally stronger than in International and DSS schools due to their use of limited-time contracts. The lack of financial security drives teachers to leave the DSS sector to seek permanency in the aided or government school sector:

> We are also aware [of the impact] of DSS school contract terms and the need to compete with aided schools who give people the impression that employment is long term and very permanent. After serving in the school for five to six years, they want to start their family and therefore want a more stable job. So working in DSS schools gives people the kind of impression that they are always on the move, always changing schools and the contract time is not that long. [HKIS-SL1]

As such, DSS schools need to build succession planning into their leadership structure to arrest the organisational shocks from frequent departures of middle and senior leaders. Likewise, at China School, with an average tenure of just four years, succession planning and explicit informal leadership development is very much part of the school culture.

> A lot of them are not leaders, but they are kind of in charge of certain projects. That's the way we try to build leadership capacity. So we have a number of PD funds that we offer them to everyone in school and then there is a personal budget for their PD. On top of that, I purposely set aside a special PD budget every year to train those superstars in certain areas. [CS-SL1]

Through investing in leadership development, providing structures and opportunities to exercise leadership, each case has overcome its inherent difficulties to develop middle leaders and their teams within their financial and situational context. Nevertheless, middle leaders cited great satisfaction in the work that they were able to achieve within their roles.

4.2.5. Role descriptions, authority and role recognition

For middle leaders, a common thread across all three schools was their autonomy and authority to undertake their roles as they saw fit. Many saw this as the ability to lead with

support and guidance only coming from the principal. A middle leader at Hong Kong New Territories School explains:

> The school provides much autonomy for us. In terms of curriculum planning, assessment design and activities, the school is quite supportive. The Principal gives his trust in our professional judgement on teaching and curriculum development. I have been rarely refused by the Principal. He allows us to try [new initiatives] and provides his opinion. If there is any problem, he will support us to make things better. I think the school has given us a considerable degree of autonomy. [HKNTS-ML4]

Such respect for subject head authority and expertise gives the middle leader confidence to engage their team in reflective professional enquiry and to focus their energy on improving student learning:

> In an aided school, we have a higher level of autonomy. Teachers in DSS school or private school worry about the extension of their staff contract. They will follow instructions. The benefit of working in the aided school is that we can do what we like to do. The Principal asks us to do something for STEM. We could select our preferred STEM activities. There are options for STEM. [HKNTS-ML6]

At China School, due to the constant change in staff at all levels of the organisation, structures have been put into place to ensure quality leadership of the teacher teams. The emphasis on facilitating leadership development reflects its legacy and its sister campuses:

> So that's the beauty of developing people. Some of the good local schools, they grow their people. So, China School Group has actually contributed more than 10 principals locally. [CS – SL1]

The school invests heavily in professional development and structures that support collegiality, team building and in-service leadership development. One senior leader related how teacher expertise is developed by design:

> We always encourage them to pilot in their grade level, in their team, to find out. Then if it really worked well, we can share. They have an "experts-within" program. So, they do 'experts within' and that allows them to share their ideas. [CS – SL1]

This indicates a culture of encouraging pedagogical research and leadership development supported from the top, and a strategy to identify and develop teacher expertise. At both China School and Hong Kong Island school, the school leadership can determine the number of middle leadership roles and their scope. Each school pays middle leaders a stipend and they are given a detailed job description when they apply. Both schools require a written application which outlines an action plan (based on the respective school's development documents) for consideration of appointment [HKIS-SL1; CS-SL1]. Both schools have also moved away from appointing middle leaders to only lead the academic programme. There is an increasing emphasis on whole-child development and this is reflected in the leadership structures:

> The population of senior teachers also grew because in the past we only had the KLA heads. It's all so academic oriented. So now we have also senior teachers taking care of the student development side. It has now become more balanced in this sense. [HKIS-SL1]

Middle leaders play a critical role in a diverse number of areas of school operations. They lead their teacher teams in both academic and non-academic areas with a constant focus on

enhancing student outcomes. Depending on their situational context, middle leaders have varying access to support and resources, but engage in numerous strategies to provide the right environment for their teams to thrive.

4.3. Chapter Summary

This chapter has provided a detailed reckoning of the ideas, opinions and points of view provided by teachers, middle and senior leaders obtained during the interviews conducted in their respective schools. An overview of the situational context of China School, Hong Island School and Hong Kong New Territories School has been presented, clarifying each school context, its location and school type.

The dilemmas and challenges faced by middle leaders, whilst developing and leading their teachers have been examined and their successes and unique methods in handling situations have been discussed. Conditions for middle leader-led teacher teams to thrive have been revealed and supported by the interview data. Four factors, influenced by school type, were shown in the data to impact middle leaders' work with their teacher teams: funds for professional development; competitive environment; staff stability and longevity; and role descriptions, authority and recognition. From the three cases presented, funds for professional

development and access to professional development varied substantially between the three schools. This impacted school culture and their views towards teacher learning.

A competitive environment to attract students and teachers was also cited to varying degrees across the three school types. Teachers and administrators recognised the intense pressure DSS schools face to recruit students and quality staff, although the two other school types equally faced certain challenges in this regard. Directly related to mobility, staff stability and longevity was identified as the third challenge impacted by school type. International schools have understood this challenge for a while and have adapted specific strategies to cope with its effect.

On the other hand, in Hong Kong's local school sector, this challenge has only just begun to emerge and DSS schools have acutely felt the pressure of this phenomenon. Accordingly, the data revealed a renewed effort to enhance in-house leadership development to cater for the inevitable organisational shocks associated with frequent staff changes.

Fourthly and finally, role descriptions, authority and role recognition were a noteworthy factor impacting middle leader-led PLCs. School types which could allow for a wide distribution and development of leadership with very clear statements for role descriptions,

authority and role recognition were viewed by participants as being more ideal than those that did not.

The next chapter discusses these findings with regard to the influence middle leaders exude over their teacher teams while providing further insights into the important role middle leaders play in focusing teachers' attention onto student learning.

CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS ON MIDDLE LEADERSHIP INFLUENCE ON PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Overview

This chapter focuses on the influence middle leaders have on their PLC. Based on the semi-structured individual and focus group interviews, this chapter discusses in the three domains of: (a) teaching and learning; (b) school capacity building; and (c) external influence, how middle leaders' pivotal knowledge, skills, practices, tools and routines enable them to influence the actions of their teacher teams. As discussed in Chapter 4, each school, and each middle leader, needs to overcome restrictions within their situational contexts, and to take advantage of the support offered to them and their teacher teams. An exceptional middle leader is able to navigate such a landscape and can thrive with such knowledge. Therefore, the findings presented in this chapter highlight exactly what these middle leaders do and how their actions influence their PLCs.

5.1. Teaching & Learning

Middle leaders in the three schools play unique roles in the leadership structure of their respective schools. As their title suggests, middle leaders in this study described their pivotal role between the senior leadership of the school and the teachers that they lead. They often participate in decision making at the highest levels. At China School, a senior leader

recounted how one middle leader refuted another teacher's comment that the school was "top-down," by saying "I am a team leader and we discussed that [issue] in team meetings… [so] we were part of the process [of decision-making]" [CS - SL2]. Teachers in these schools believed that middle leaders have an advantage over many of their superiors as their role requires them to take part in leadership activities whilst simultaneously finding themselves in the classroom, so they can understand multiple perspectives. As one teacher at HKNTS stated: "…if we face difficulties at work, the middle leader who understands our hurdles can express our concerns to the top" [HKNTS – T2]. It is for this reason that middle leaders in this study identified themselves as "teacher leaders" who were also classroom practitioners. Their leadership roles revolved around teaching and learning, and it was in these domains that they felt that they had the most expertise.

5.1.1. Mediating instructional Initiatives

The process of implementing external curriculum standards into each school's instructional programmes is one of the important duties taken up by middle leaders. At China School, the primary focus for instruction was ensuring that the curriculum and its delivery met the International Baccalaureate Organization's published standards and practices. This was imperative as the school was seeking authorization for one of its programmes and was also preparing re-authorization for another.

> These are things that the school does have to accomplish and we have goals set from the IB and we have an action plan that the IB has told us we need to work on: these things need to be done before they come for our visit, and CIS WASC also said the same thing, there are some things that must be accomplished. [CS – ML11]

At China School, middle leaders were able to use this external pressure to provide space in the work environment to focus teachers' work on the planning, implementation and evaluation (PIE) cycle, critical for improving instructional practices and for developing new instructional initiatives based on internal and external feedback. One middle leader described it as "looking at IBO standards and practices all the time when we're creating the language policy or the maths policy" [CS - ML2]. Another referred to being recommended by the WASC (Western Association of Schools & Colleges) accreditation team to "improve in this area" and needing to "just get on with it" [CS – ML6].

At Hong Kong Island School, preparation for an external school review, which is part of the accountability measures in place by the Education Bureau that all DSS schools must submit to, further created opportunities for middle leaders to mediate external requirements for their teacher teams.

> Because of the CR, comprehensive review, this [planning format] is the requirement from the government education bill. Therefore, this is a five-year plan. After the CR then we have three -year plans onwards. [HKIS – ML4]

A focus on long-term planning, based on evidence, to introduce and improve upon (new) instructional imperatives were given legitimacy by the local Education Bureau (EDB) requirements.

> Those strategies, such as self-regulated learning, come up for discussion with the department heads following comments from my coordinators and teachers. The middle leaders always come up with ideas, and then we would discuss whether it can be implemented in the following year. Sometimes some plans may need to be implemented in different stages, therefore this implementation depends on the size of the new initiatives. The implementation of self-regulated learning is being separated into several parts – for example checking answers and answer-uploading are relatively easy ones. It would take two years before we use a peer studies approach - for example, flipped classroom. It all takes time and careful planning. [HKIS – ML4]

Heads of Department discuss instructional issues with their teacher teams and then discuss implementation with other middle leaders, seeking support from their own PLC before returning to their individual teacher teams.

At China School, when the IB disseminates new policies or curricular standards, the middle leader, in this case the Programme Coordinator (PC), ensures that the impact of the new information or practices is communicated, and works with teachers to embed them into the instructional programme. The excerpt below suggests that the middle leadership provided teachers with a focus on new curricular initiatives and these collective efforts were bearing fruit.

> We've got our weekly meetings and [PC2] is open to listening to ideas.... She has taught in different countries besides China, so she is able to bring a lot of expertise and experience to the table. So, even though we only see her a couple of times a week, she is always there when we need her. [CS – T3]

> We take some time to look at the feedback and reflection from each unit and we talk as a team and we decide what worked, what didn't work, and what we need to change for the next year and [CS - ML2] is there for the whole process. But she also has a bunch of [IB and school] documentation, and she brings the documents that we need to look at and she keeps just reminding us to look at each central idea and how to excel at that. [CS- T2]

At China School, teachers link the structures and processes through which the PCs enact leadership and mediate IB-related curriculum initiatives and recognise the focus it provides to the teacher team. Thus, the team can identify the middle leaders' influence and impact on teamwork and collegiality ensuring the curriculum design process is evidence-based.

At HKNTS, middle leaders guide their teacher teams not only in implementing external standards, but also the application of new pedagogy. One teacher described his middle leader as someone who "encourages us to initiate new ideas for teaching maths. Is it feasible to use iPads in class? How can we improve its utilisation?" [HKNTS-T2].

Likewise, at HKIS, middle leaders use their own experience to assist novices within their teacher teams:

> If he wants you to do something, he'll immediately have a way how you could do it. He's not just a 'do this' but he'll say "this is how you could do it." This is how I've done it – this is my experience. [HKIS – T2]

As I witnessed in all three schools, middle leaders set the tone by carefully supervising and facilitating the design process. They engage their teachers in meaningful discussions, centred on a pedagogical or curricular innovation, and proceed through the stages of planning, design and implementation with a subsequent review, and modification phases being enacted within their purview. These middle leaders work both independently and collaboratively with their peers to carry out initiatives. Each school had numerous examples of this, such as literacy across the curriculum (China School) and student regulated learning (Hong Kong Island and Hong Kong New Territories schools), which were enacted through their teacher teams to improve shortcomings in the delivery of the curriculum.

Mediating instructional initiatives and demands was a key component of middle leaders' work observed in all three schools. Irrespective of school type, both internal and external demands relating to instructional planning and delivery were key activities and responsibilities for middle leaders.

5.1.2. Enabling vertical & horizontal curriculum articulation

Schools recognise the pivotal role that middle leaders play in aligning curriculum and ensuring student learning is robust and consistent. With the ever-increasing complexity of knowledge and skills which must be covered in a multitude of learning areas and often taught in isolation and by different teachers, middle leaders increasingly use and develop structures and practices that support curriculum enactment both vertically and horizontally. At China School, PC1 explained the process of curriculum alignment and coherence-making within the elementary school and across to the secondary school by utilising imported curriculum standards:

> We mapped what was used … to see if it aligned with the [proposed standards]. We asked for [teachers'] recommendations and we collected all the data and the information and realised that the [proposed standards were] a good fit for our school and we aligned that with the MYP and DP. We did exactly same with language. And that was last year. This year we looked at the science curriculum and so we have also invited teachers and PCs, both primary and secondary, and also the science lead to collaborate on this. [CS – ML2]

This excerpt notes the participation of PCs (programme level and pre-K to 12 articulation) and subject leads (i.e., vertical articulation) in a collaborative enterprise that includes teachers. This enables teachers to not only focus on their own class within a grade, but to do so across the grade to ensure the sequences of work match what has already been learned and prepare students for future learning through the careful blending of skills and content building.

In each of the three schools, senior leaders rely on middle leaders to coordinate instructional planning with teachers. Participants from HKNTS, HKIS and CS stated that the ability for each of their schools to have sufficient middle leaders with a focus on particular grades or subject areas is highly dependent on the resources available to the school. In China School, whose funding model allows for both horizontal and vertical curriculum leaders, the task was clearly outlined. Its middle leaders convene planning meetings where subject leaders, Grade Level Leaders (GLLs) and PCs, together, devise the structure for curriculum, programme development and school capacity building. A middle leader elaborated on her role in this work:

> Meeting with all the grade levels to do their collaborative planning, and help run the meetings, working very closely with the other coordinator, looking at the vertical and horizontal elements of the planning. I also meet with the language lead. The two PYP coordinators balance the workloads… so, now I'm looking after all the grade levels and she is looking at specialists. [CS - ML2]

Such structure whereby PCs work with GLLs and subject leaders, who in turn work with respective teacher teams, aims to achieve curriculum alignment. In doing so, they hope that student learning will not only be consolidated from that which has already been taught, but also that it may be broadened with each "subject" consolidating the content and skills being introduced in others.

At Hong Kong Island school, middle leaders led initiatives to focus teachers on collective planning. They lead by example and share materials and strategies across grade levels. HKIS-T1 summed this up: “our ML really does lead by example: he shares with us authentic materials, shares the way he teaches and introduces topics and things like that to the panel.” During initial member checking, the external advice I provided to the school after the data was collected for this study was that such horizontal articulation be extended across subjects. This matches the same observations made during data collection for this study: “What is lacking in our school is inter-departmental collaboration” [HKIS-SL1]. Similarly, whilst Hong Kong New Territories School engages the entire school body in pedagogical initiatives, such as student-directed learning, there is very little coordination across subjects for horizontal articulation of the curriculum. This school is a lower band school in Hong Kong, meaning that the students it recruits tend to be comparatively low academic achievers among their city-wide cohort, creating challenges in curriculum design and implementation. One teacher commented:

> …on curriculum design, the colleague in the form meeting expressed that the curriculum and the textbook were not handy for students. The students couldn't catch up with the pace of the instructional plan, but the middle leader was forcing the teachers to follow the instructional plan regardless. At the end of the year, that colleague was told that there was no contract extension. [HKNTS -T3]

As demonstrated here, several respondents from this school opined that middle leaders who do not engage their staff in the planning, implementation and evaluation [P.I.E.] decision-

making processes, but rather impose their own opinions and strategies without discussion or opportunities for buy-in, undermine trust, mutual respect and collegiality and have a negative impact on student and staff morale:

> We have another colleague who was a NET teacher who wanted to develop the 'medium' students rather than just focusing on the elite students. However, despite a lot of effort, the 'medium' students were still not doing so well. Finally, that colleague was terminated. The rationale was that the colleague was not following the requirement of the panel head as the panel head only wants to develop top students. [HKNTS-T1]

Such firm leadership goes beyond providing structure, resources, materials and direction to the teacher team. Instead, without developing norms of collegiality and mutual support, a culture of fear may unintentionally develop. The dismissal of a colleague seems not to have been an isolated occurrence. It is equally noteworthy that the findings not only identified practices which positively impacted teachers and subsequently students, but also on some which clearly missed the mark:

> The panel head decides the classes. They choose the best classes every year, and they only teach 3 classes. Our timetable is totally different. When they are talking about their teaching style and their teaching material, they are talking about their elite students. For the normal teachers, we discuss the ideas among ourselves, because it would be more useful. [HKNTS - T1]

Whilst efforts to promote horizontal and vertical articulation are seen as important, teachers at HKNTS believed that middle leaders need to ensure that catering to the learning needs of students are paramount. These teachers thought that empathy and associated actions for diversity in teaching and learning allow effective middle leaders to not only focus teachers

attention on student learning, but also create an environment where teacher teams are able to collectively work on vertical and horizontal curriculum articulation to ensure enhanced student learning outcomes. “The characteristics of teachers varies between teachers. Discussions allow us to share teaching strategies. We have discussions because we are good peers. The middle leader rarely commands us” [HKNTS - T3].

5.1.3. Devising structures for curriculum enactment

Teachers across the three schools agreed that their middle leaders are most effective when they scaffold curriculum enactment to give their teacher teams directions and focus, with resources and strategies needed to deliver a good instructional programme. At Hong Kong Island school, such an effective middle leader is described by one of his team members:

> He does give us clear directions in terms of what the school is trying to achieve and focus for improvement in terms of our own teaching and also that of the students. So he oversees the design and the implementation of the curriculum and also monitors the quality of teacher performance. He makes sure the folder checking and lesson observations he does is advice-rich and also to delegate within department informal leadership work according to our overall workload and our strengths as well, which he always takes into account. [HKIS – T1]

This member of a teacher team identified strategies which reflect individual diversity and approaches to learning and teaching. This middle leader articulated his vision clearly, providing appropriate directions, resources and strategies and a safe environment for

discussions, experimentation and alternative points of view. Routines and tools are also provided to ensure quality instruction.

Meetings with middle leaders are viewed by the PC as opportunities to discuss the curriculum, the instructional programme and to gain insights and feedback from their teacher teams to ensure that their teachers focus remains firmly on student learning. Such meetings are viewed by their colleagues as allowing the middle leader to provide input into teachers' work whilst providing time for resource sharing, discussions about pedagogy and to allow the dissemination of feedback about the instructional programme. With templates, meeting agendas and curriculum standards in-hand, novices and the experienced alike are able to share in an environment of de-privatised practice. "He oversees the design and implementation of the curriculum… a focus for improvement in terms of our own teaching and also the students" [HKIS-T3]. Teacher authenticity and originality is celebrated whilst school goals and instructional targets are discussed and met: "He gives us clear directions on what the school is trying to achieve" [HKIS-T3].

In both China School and Hong Kong Island school, lessons are allocated weekly for collaborative planning and discussions about pedagogy. A middle leader at China School outlines her role:

> An average week with my teachers: meeting with all the grade levels to do their collaborative planning, and help run the meetings, whilst working very closely with the other co-ordinator, looking at the vertical and horizontal elements of the planning. I also meet with the language lead [as language is the school focus]. [CS – ML2]

Across each school, in the eyes of their teams, the reference to "helping run the meetings" above also demonstrates another hallmark of an effective middle leader: shared leadership. Thus, these structures, created for curriculum enactment, allow for another important element in effective middle leader-led professional learning communities: a space for professional dialogue.

5.1.4. Creating opportunities for professional dialogue

Regular meetings are built into teachers' timetables to provide time for collaboration and professional dialogue (China School, Hong Kong Island School), whilst regular whole school staff and department meetings prevailed in both Hong Kong schools. Teachers cited the importance of informal communication as a vehicle for professional capacity building during which middle leaders and teachers exchange ideas, develop strategies and evaluate practices.

> We also have weekly meetings and then if, we need to informally pop in and discuss. We kind of built our scope and sequence a couple of years ago. So we work in our year levels from that. And then …we pop into each other's rooms to talk about the projects, if we have any challenges or sharing ideas. [CS - ML 4]

Notably, the starting point for the informal interactions among subject leaders and teachers is the discussions seeded during formal meetings. The relationship between formal and informal

interaction is elaborated by a grade-level leader: "Firstly, there was an expert in that subject who can bring some personal experience to develop the collegiality of that subject" [CS – ML9].

Teachers related that such interactions developed their professional learning and professional bonds. Yet, such collaboration was not always apparent. Not all middle leaders in the three schools facilitated professional dialogue and this can strain relationships and impede sharing. One teacher at Hong Kong New Territories School, when asked about how much autonomy teachers were given on curriculum design, replied: "We have no say in curriculum design. We don't have discussion on it" [HKNTS - T1]. Pressed on the impact of the situation, the teacher continued: "We must speak to the panel head first. It is a must because if you do not inform them, then you will be in trouble. We will be blamed" [HKNTS - T1].

By contrast, at HKIS, the practices of another middle leader were discussed. One teacher clearly described the process of guidance being given which provided catalyst for the team to focus on during material planning and preparation:

> She [middle leader] will tell us very clearly the details of every unit that is supposed to be covered, and we then talk together. We will design different materials or we will come up with different ideas because we don't use a textbook, so it's very important that she will give us guidelines and tell us what we are supposed to achieve by the end of every unit, so that we'll come up with ideas of like how we want to teach a certain unit [HKIS - T3].

Such a culture positively impacted the quality of curriculum delivery to students with this teacher appreciating guidance, but being permitted to contribute her ideas was also important. These two episodes reveal how middle leaders can either motivate or discourage teachers through their leadership styles.

5.2. School capacity building

In the three schools, the primary goal of middle leadership in managing a a teacher team was to cultivate a shared sense of purpose with a focus on student learning and achievement (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Song & Choi, 2017; Stoll et al., 2006) through shared decision making, collaborative activities and de-privatised practice in a supportive, trusted and mutually respectful environment. I observed that in all three schools, efforts were made to build school capacity by enhancing pedagogical coherence (CS, HKIS, HKNTS), creating cross-curricular collaborative structures (CS, HKIS), implementing technology across the curriculum (HKIS, HKNTS), leading teacher professional development and modelling best practices (CS, HKIS). Each school has a School-based Management Team (SBMT) or School Council who, in the words of a HKNTS Senior Leader "give advice to unify the whole school policy" [HKNTS-SL2]. Middle leaders in the three schools "develop their courses and improve students' effectiveness in their subjects" [HKNTS SL2] and "represent different aspects of school development so that different voices will be represented… not just

focusing on academics" [HKIS-SL1]. Through their participation in these cross school decision-making bodies, middle leaders played a pivotal role in developing school capacity.

5.2.1. Building pedagogical coherence

Within schools, initiatives to develop the pedagogical capacity of teachers often becomes the purview of middle leaders. China School and Hong Kong Island School were best able to implement initiatives to develop pedagogical coherence across their schools in part because of the willingness of their respective principals to distribute leadership to the middle leaders, who then further distributed and delegated authority, both formally and informally, to members of their teacher teams. On the other hand, the principal of Hong Kong New Territories School stated that he distributed leadership widely in his school and gave absolute authority ("Oh, they do just what they like"), yet he described at great length the many ways in which he led and decided major initiatives and work practices in the school himself ("I will make the final approval"). This "superpresence" of the principal, as described by the SL3, greatly influenced the way middle leaders undertake their leadership tasks in the school: "The principal is always the first person arriving at school and the last person leaving school… he looks into every detail and puts his hands on every task" [HKNTS-SL3]. There was little flexibility in leadership style from the senior leadership downward and little evidence of further shared leadership at the department level. Instead, leadership reflected supervision:

> As mentioned, the middle leaders should be able to see our working styles and we are saying our beliefs explicitly… I will not change anything that the Principal is doing right now. I will insist on the in-class observations and homework inspections. [HKNTS-SL3]

Middle leaders in all three schools demonstrated that when they worked together, they were able to apply new initiatives and practices across the school, building both teacher and student capacity, for quality teaching and learning to take place "I have tried to bring people together, not just English teachers taking care of English matters, Chinese teachers taking care of Chinese [language] development" [CS – ML2]. The use of an action research cycle of reflection, plan, act, observe and critical reflection (Hairon et al., 2015) within a scheduled time period and with a subject team is an example of how middle leaders can support and sustain enhanced teaching and improved student learning outcomes. Despite the impact of senior leaders, all three schools had outstanding examples of middle leader cooperation which genuinely impacted student learning and enabled each school to develop its capacity to deliver a positive teaching and learning environment as illustrated in Table 2.2 below:

Table 12

Middle Leader contribution to building pedagogical coherence

School	ML Cross-school Engagement	Strategies for Pedagogical Coherence Building	Reported by
China School	Leading Cross-subject Planning Teams	Aligning IB PYP programme horizontally Linking PYP to MYP standards	SLs MLs Ts
Hong Kong Island School	Leading PD activities Leading Department Planning Teams	Developing student-led learning pedagogy Refining norms of collegiality within teacher teams Engagement in SBMT for school-wide policies.	SLs MLs Ts
Hong Kong New Territories School	Leading PD activities Leading Department Planning Teams	Developing student-led learning pedagogy Developing uniform planning horizontally Engagement in School Council for school-wide policies development and enactment.	SLs MLs Ts

5.2.2. Creating cross-curricular collaborative structures

As shown above, in the three schools, middle leaders enhanced student learning by inspiring their teacher teams to work together and also engage in collaboration with other teacher teams as well. Routines and practices such as lesson observations, lesson studies, professional development and department meetings were conduits for professional collaboration and teambuilding, which further enhanced student learning.

At Hong Kong Island School, middle leaders coordinated collaboration opportunities with other middle leaders, allowing interdepartmental lesson observations to take place so a "language teacher can observe the music teacher and the music teacher will go and observe the geography lesson" [HKIS - SL1]. In the words of the principal, the initiative is to see each student as a "360-degree learner," not only just in a teacher's subject area, but as a learner in general. At China School, grade-level leaders work with subject heads and the programme coordinators to ensure the curriculum is horizontally aligned. Specialist teachers, such as Art, Music and P.E. teachers work alongside classroom teachers to implement various literacy and numeracy projects within their individual programmes. At Hong Kong New Territories School, a middle leader called a "Curriculum Supporting Coordinator" supports teachers

encountering difficulties in their professional life. HKNTS-ML4 describes the cross-department support provided:

> I, the curriculum supporting coordinator and the other panel heads, have desirable teaching method diversity. We have the skill-set to deliver SDL, e-learning, or the traditional pedagogy. We will find out the area that requires development and provide that teacher with the related information. I will also invite the teacher to observe our lessons and see how we tackle those issues. The teacher will figure out how to handle the problems via different methods, but still achieving the same target. This kind of issue usually happens to the newcomers.

Such initiatives provide supportive structures to allow teachers to firmly focus on students and their learning needs. Through the use of PLCs at all three schools, middle leaders create structures that support pedagogical diversity and cross-curricular collaboration.

5.2.3. Leading teacher professional development

Middle leaders, by virtue of their proximity to the classroom and their collegiality with fellow teachers are often in the best position to understand the professional development needs of their teacher teams whilst having access to resources from the senior leadership. By adopting a team approach to teacher learning, all three schools used their unique resources to, in the words of the HKIS-SL2 “keep up their performance and take care of their team members.”

China School’s organizational structure includes teams led by middle leaders at grade and subject levels. Middle leaders not only play a pivotal role in horizontal and vertical

curriculum articulation, but also make use of the professional capital they possess within their teams. As such, they are able to develop the teachers' professional capacity within their teams. Here, one participant explains the strategies to facilitate team learning:

> We have those meetings, we talk about best practice, we talk about vertical alignment, we talk about what fits. We take it straight from the scope and sequence in the curriculum to our plan and we're trying to get it all in line. And while we're also trying to celebrate different teaching styles, we are also creating new scopes and sequences this year. So, trying to get that to inform everything, whilst talking about best practice, collaborating and sharing what works well for us is what our teams are all about [CS - ML 6].

This excerpt suggests that middle leaders support professional learning effortlessly through high norms of collegiality and a willingness to meet the developmental needs, e.g., learning styles, of their in-service teachers. Interviews with middle and senior leaders alike revealed that collaboration, advice seeking and constructive feedback are the "norm," the "way things are done":

> Now, we've adopted [new standards]. So our Maths head would be someone I would be able to go there with - if you didn't know the answer, you could get the answer. [CS - ML 12]

> Newbies walking into school like being invisible. I got one new teacher at the start of the year come and ask me if everything was okay: was she in trouble because I walked into a classroom and had a look and chatted to some kids and walked out. That was the culture (of under-performance) at her previous school. At this school, if someone walks into the classroom - and that's the culture - or if you compliment them for questioning, they may think, am I overstepping now? Am I being a problem maker? And that's exactly the last thing we wanted to create" [CS – SL3].

For new teachers to the school, a projected ambience of de-privatised practice may be confronting, particularly when using new techniques and pedagogies. The concept of 'open classrooms' where colleagues and senior leadership can walk through at any time without notifying the teacher first, can be quite intimidating to some teachers. As described above, the random entering of another teacher's classroom while they are teaching, or commenting on their teaching by a middle or senior leader may initially provoke doubt or concern in the new teacher. A school culture of mutual trust, respect and support had begun to emerge in the China School and this was valued by the SLs and MLs interviewed in this research.

Responses in interviews showed that middle leaders at Hong Kong New Territories School played a more "explicit" role in facilitating team learning within their departments. In order to ensure that the professional standards of all members improved, middle leaders directed staff to learn important skills from each other. A middle leader explains:

> If I help the teacher individually, of course, the teacher will grow. However, the other colleagues will miss something. I may not directly work with the challenged teacher. I will assign the challenged teacher to observe the lessons of the other teachers. Teachers, who demonstrate the classroom practice to the challenged teacher, will have better preparation, and the demonstrator will improve as well. I will try the best to work as a team [HKNTS – ML4].

By extending norms of collegiality, middle leaders are not only able to assist teachers to improve upon any shortcomings in their practice, but also encourage collaboration focused on learning and collective responsibility for learning. This process also helps ensure that support

exists in schools where high staff turnover is a critical factor as staff cohesiveness and mutual support are key factors in staff retention.

At Hong Kong Island School, staff professional development time is allocated in the timetable with two lessons allocated per cycle. Known as the professional training programme, the goal of this programme is to upskill teachers in their subject areas. This change from school-wide to department-focused professional development came from a middle leader's request to the Vice Principal in-charge of professional development. It allowed one middle leader to develop professional development activities to meet the needs of his teachers:

> So in terms of professional development, we actually review the lesson pedagogies and review some of the topics to deepen some concepts or theories. The whole preparation process may involve lots of deliberation on how to engage not only in a subject but also beyond the subject. The goal is to have students develop stronger empathy for society. [HKIS-ML3]

He went on to justify why a middle leader leading the professional learning of his specific team was more beneficial than programmes emanating from the senior leadership:

> But also I think on some occasions, some teachers may have difficulties understanding the curriculum, and that's why actually we need the [subject specific] professional training programme within the timetable, so that we can also enhance their subject knowledge and understanding as well. So, I think we have quite a different scenario from other departments [HKIS-ML3].

The middle leaders interviewed in all three schools demonstrated their ability to not only identify the professional development needs of their staff, but also to develop remedies to

problems of practice within their teacher teams. They were able to call upon their own experience and strategies to provide valuable input, support and guidance to their teacher teams or to identify key personnel within their teams, or indeed outside of them, to provide the expertise and skills to support teacher learning and professional development.

5.3. External Influences

5.3.1. Mediating external standards & practices

In all three schools, middle leaders indicated a significant amount of their time was spent mediating external standards and practices to their teacher teams. When the Education Bureau in Hong Kong (in the case of HKIS and HKNTS) or the International Baccalaureate Organization (in the case of CS) disseminated new policies or curricular standards, the various middle leaders needed to immediately communicate the new information or practices and associated work requirements to teachers for integration into the instructional programme. Such external requirements often created tension, particularly if they required significant effort to implement and it fell to the middle leaders to mitigate any negative sentiments.

> We look at the standards and practices all the time when we're doing our CIS WASC [certification]. We looked at the IBO standards when we were creating the teaching and language programmes, or the language policy, and the Math policy here at our school, and each time, we have to go through the IB standards and practices. [CS-ML3]

In this excerpt, the English teacher at China School highlights the impact of the multiple external forces. Programmes and policy are deeply influenced by certification requirements. The process of embedding external standards and policies is achieved through regular meetings and the use of collective processes and formal documentation to align curriculum and instructional change to IB standards. In this way, mutual trust, respect and support can be developed whilst giving teacher teams the opportunity to develop individual and collective professional capacity.

In Hong Kong, both schools (HKIS and HKNTS) teach the local curriculum and need to follow guidance and guidelines from the Education Bureau (EDB). There have been waves of changes almost yearly since the 2009 introduction of the New Academic Structure (NAS) applied to the last three years of the secondary school curriculum leading to the matriculation examinations. Secondary schools reduced the number of years of education from seven to six and all of the syllabi were changed. The curriculum was further reformed in 2012 and again in 2018. Each reform requires middle leaders to spend vast amounts of time ensuring teachers are aware of all the reforms and their impact on the instructional programme. A HoD (middle leader) at Hong Kong New Territories school explains:

> The curriculum reform of the HKEAA indeed brought us some issues. The two dramatic changes in the high school system require the reconstruction of our programmes. The first thing is the changes to the examination: paper-three (the integrated ability assessment) came from a fusion of papers 3 and 5. They also amended the assessment model introducing a

> school-based assessment component. Teachers have been teaching under this model for 5 years, from 2012 to 2017. With all these changes, we start back at zero again. [HKNTS-ML4]

Such tumultuous changes, such as the addition of 12 Classical Chinese texts to Hong Kong's Chinese Language and Culture curriculum, intensifies the pressure on public sector schools to amend all of their teaching programmes. Middle leaders guide their teachers and students through the changes and attempt to mediate the impact on their charges. Beyond curriculum, the system also presents several enormous challenges. Even though both schools are part of the local system and are funded by the EDB, they operate as individual entities and need to be highly competitive in order to recruit students, and thus ensure survival in a region of ever-falling birth rates. A middle leader at Hong Kong Island school describes the dilemma:

> We need to make sure we have enough students to sustain this college; otherwise we need to close. So how can we recruit the students to study here, or do we just rely on the final exam results when they graduate to show our school's quality? We have to [show what we do to] attract people to study here. For example, character building, [assessing] students' all-round performance, not just academic performance. [HKIS-ML2]

In this excerpt, the middle leader describes the pressure schools have in Hong Kong to recruit students in a societal environment of falling birth rates and a rising number of international schools. In response to these pressures, certain new pedagogies have been introduced in public sector schools in Hong Kong, such as self-directed learning and student-centred learning with very little support from the government.

5.3.2. Enabling access to quality external professional development

Due to this de-centralised laissez-faire attitude to educational provision, local schools in Hong Kong, which are normally competitors, are forced to collaborate, even though their school cultures and populations may be very distinct. As such, middle leaders need to mediate pedagogies, tools, practices and routines when passing them to their teacher teams for use. A senior leader at Hong Kong Island School describes the phenomenon:

> I will try my best to liaise or connect with empowered counterparts to see whether we can learn and exchange our information or experience with other school. When there is any chance that we can go to some other school to visit, I will encourage the department or even arrange for them to go to see some new practices that some other school has been doing pretty well with. [HKIS-SL2]

According to many middle leaders, creating networks outside of their own schools has only recently become official practice; in the past, the sharing of materials and practices was restricted for fear that the beneficiaries may gain some advantage over the benefactor school. Another senior leader of Hong Kong Island School, recognising the isolation certain teachers feel, also promoted external professional development:

> I will also link up our Chinese department through my network with some other principals, so that they will have this kind of professional development dialogue with other English medium schools. I have also used my network to link up my music teachers with other music teachers. Being a music teacher can be a very lonely job as there are not many music teachers in a school. Therefore, they need a kind of network, and also for our music teacher he is very new: It's only his second year of teaching [HKIS-SL1].

From this initial demonstration of practice and support, a middle leader continued the practice.

> Sometimes I call other schools' panel heads to see if they are interested to do a joint school activity and some of them are interested. So we have the network of similar level schools. Within this network, we may share teaching methods, marking schemes, mock papers, and this I develop for the benefit of my teacher team [HKIS-ML4].

By accessing external support and providing professional development activities tailored to the needs of their teacher teams, middle leaders are able to build the capacity of their teachers and focus their attention on improving student learning. This Chinese department middle leader, via external collaboration, was able to refine her teachers' ability to develop mock examinations and marking schemes, and develop teaching materials and methodology in order to better equip her teachers. Such networks also assist in the de-privatisation of practice and the building of norms of collegiality while engendering a strong sense of mutual trust, respect and support.

5.3.3. Leading external professional teams

At Hong Kong New Territories School, middle leaders bring practices learned from outside the school back to their teacher teams. The middle leaders also discuss their good practices with other schools, where they refine and further consolidate their understanding. They encourage their teacher teams to engage in the reform and continue to develop their practices. The principal of the school is instrumental in setting the direction of this development, but in the excerpt outlines how the middle leaders play a key role in implementing innovation:

> The middle managers play a very important role in school management and if we want to make some significant improvements, actually the middle managers play the essential role. Starting from this year, we adopted self-directed learning which was organised by the Hong Kong Association of Heads of Secondary Schools. We tried to engage more with other schools, so we invited about ten schools to work with. Our teachers joined some groups like a Chinese group, with Chinese teachers from different schools. We came together to discuss what we do with self-directed learning for the HKDSE. In Chinese, our department head takes the lead. Our Chinese teachers then take the lead to form the learning circle. [HKNTS-SL1]

The interviews revealed that effective middle leaders, when provided with autonomy and authority, are able to lead effective PLCs in their own schools. They are able to access even more resources and support from a greater number of practitioners and re-direct it back to the benefit of their teacher teams. As seen through the practices of the three schools, they encourage their teachers to engage in reflective enquiry with a collaborative focus on student learning, and as such, are able to bring valuable tools, practices and routines into their instructional environments. A middle leader described leading a group of teachers to Shandong, China to view self-regulated student learning pedagogy in-situ: “Teachers went to a famous school in Shandong to observe lessons and learn more. Then afterwards, [we] came back to share with our colleagues. I lead groups to other schools in Hong Kong too [HKNTS – ML4].

5.4. Chapter Summary

The findings show middle leaders in these three schools had the inherent ability to focus their teachers' attention on enhancing student learning. By mediating instructional initiatives, they were able to lead quality instructional programmes which demonstrated both vertical and horizontal curriculum articulation, ensuring that student learning was at the centre of practice in the school. These findings further demonstrate that the middle leaders were able to ensure quality learning by devising structures for curriculum enactment. They created opportunities for professional dialogue among teachers, ensuring high levels of support and guidance were available. They built pedagogical coherence by ensuring instructional methods and resources were well utilised and abundant. Beyond their own areas of responsibility, they built school capacity by initiating and then managing cross-curricular collaborative structures to ensure breadth and depth in the whole school curriculum. At HKIS, the HoDs of English and Liberal Studies, for example, gave numerous examples of how they ensured their teacher teams have all the pedagogical tools they require to ensure learning takes place. They did this through modelling, peer planning, routines of lesson observations and book inspections. Thus, effective middle leaders led the professional development of their teachers. Middle leaders created networks with other aided schools under the auspices of the Hong Kong Association of Heads of Secondary School (HKAHSS) [HKNTS-SL1]. The middle leaders mediated external standards and practices, ensuring that their teacher teams prepared their schools and

their students for assessment and certification. When certain innovations and practices were not widely present in a school, middle leaders enabled access for their teacher teams to quality external professional development ensuring time, money and logistics did not form barriers to teachers receiving the tools that they needed to best facilitate student learning [CS-ML2]. When required, the middle leaders rose to the challenge of leading external professional teams, particularly if in doing so, they were able to provide more opportunities for their own teacher teams. In doing so, the outstanding middle leaders in the three schools were able to influence the teachers in their teams and thus, were able to focus their attention on enhanced student learning.

In the final chapter of findings on how middle leaders focus teachers' attention on student learning, the characteristics and cultivation of middle leader-led PLCs will be examined. How effective middle leaders instil a culture of sharing and inclusivity, cultivate reflective group practices focused on learning and facilitate and encourage partnerships and respect for team learning will be explained.

CHAPTER 6: FINDINGS ON HOW MIDDLE LEADERS FOCUS TEACHERS' ATTENTION ON STUDENT LEARNING

Overview

This chapter presents the findings on how middle leaders focus their professional learning committee members' attention onto the task of ensuring students are learning. The purpose of this chapter is to consolidate upon our understanding of the impact the school context has on middle leaders (chapter 4) and the influence they have over their teams (chapter 5) by examining how they focus their teachers' attention on student learning. Moving from the literature into the three case studies' situational contexts, this chapter presents the data from the three schools and explains how three main themes emerge when discussing the skills and attributes of these leaders: 1) effective middle leaders instil a culture of sharing and inclusivity; 2) they cultivate reflective group practices focused on learning and 3) they facilitate and encourage partnerships and respect for individual as well as team learning.

There are a number of characteristics present in effective middle leaders and a plethora of skills and attributes are required for them to lead their teacher teams to focus on student learning. As stated in the literature review in Chapter 2, the roles undertaken by middle leaders in 21st century schools have moved away from simply administering programmes, managing resources and people and filling in timetables to activities aligned with enhancing

student learning (Bryant, 2019). It is through middle leaders' work with their teacher teams that they are able to integrate strategies such as the (co-) development of new curricula, assessment and instructional strategies in collaboration with other teachers, identifying, designing and implementing professional development activities which build high-level professional capacity within a culture of shared responsibility, mutual trust and high norms of collegiality (Bennett et al. 2007; Bryant, 2019; Gurr & Drysdale, 2013; Harris, 2009; Harris & Jones 2017; Irvine & Brundrett 2016; Leithwood et al., 2007; York-Barr & Duke 2004). The findings of this study will serve to further consolidate and illuminate upon the corpus of research already undertaken and demonstrate the important and under-researched role middle leadership plays (Hairon et al., 2017) in PLCs and their impact on student learning.

6.1. Shared values and vision

Effective middle leaders in this study instilled a culture of sharing and inclusivity: "They are the best people to build their teams so that we are all moving in the same direction" [HKIS-SL1]. They do this by communicating effectively with others, being the "channel between the school leadership and frontline teacher, so then it will be two-way traffic" [HKIS-SL1]. Middle leaders believe that exceptional interpersonal skills are required for them to be able to lead their teacher teams [HKIS-ML1, CS-ML2]. Teachers in their teams also identified the need for any effective leader to not only be a messenger, but to also be able to articulate and

mediate initiatives from outside the team [HKIS-T3]. Although teacher team members recognise that outstanding middle leaders do need to perform the role of a bridge between people and organisations outside the team, their duty remains to support the teacher team [CS-ML1].

> There is so much change going on and it can be difficult to motivate your team, and to go back and give them reasons for what they're doing. But as leaders, we have to try and do that at least. [CS-ML6]

> It's been incredibly helpful to have someone from middle management, to communicate between the upper management and us, and then assign us this program. It's been important to have that voice there, and to have someone to communicate our ideas to and then someone to reflect back (those ideas). [CS-T5]

At China School, there has been a recognition from the school that middle leaders and teachers need to have buy-in to the school's organisational mission and vision. The Head of School has been strengthening middle leaders' scope for leadership opportunities and to ability to lead new initiatives: "So we need to build the capacity of the team leads and the subject leads to allow them to have more initiatives and leadership, and not just act as messengers." These middle leaders are then able to create the same culture of creativity and leadership through their practices with their teacher teams. One classroom teacher noted: "The coordinator helps us to stay on task or make sure we're doing what we have to do at the meetings, but it's always open to communication and the sharing of ideas" [CS – T3]. The

middle leaders model the values of collegiality, openness and support by espousing and "living" these norms. They discuss and incorporate shared values and visions in their work and gain credibility in their leadership.

At Hong Kong Island School, middle leaders are able to motivate their teachers to share in the school's collective vision and mission by embodying the desired practices and values in their daily work. "For me I feel like he leads by example" was how one teacher described her HoD [HKIS-T3]. In turn, because many middle leaders lead by example, they are able to entice their members to do the same, and to support the values and vision being promoted. "I see our middle managers are quite supported by their team members no matter if they are department heads or team leaders in various committees," HKIS-SL2 stated.

6.1.1. Inclusive membership

A common view stated across all three cases was that any success in team building is underscored by the middle leader's ability to make all team members feel part of a collective effort. At China School, the senior leadership concurred that not only should a middle leader possess strong teaching, inter-personal, administrative and organizational skills, but they should also have a sense of openness to new and diverse points of view and encourage participation in PLC activities. As two teachers at China school elaborate:

> I think it depends on how much the English team lead wants to delegate but I feel like everyone has a voice, everyone gets listened to and we are free to suggest our ideas and bring something new to the table and it will be considered. [CS-T5]

> [The middle leader] questions and calls on everyone for ideas, so we can hear every voice. Then we will have a discussion and write down all the ideas and make sure that everybody actually has input, so in science, it's not just the strongest voice which dominates [CS-T6].

Middle leaders do not only emphasise inclusivity and openness in their leadership practice, but may also explicitly state it and even require it of colleagues. One HoD at Hong Kong Island School described this phenomenon: "That's why actually when I recruit a colleague, the first message that I always keep reminding them is to be open-minded, to be open to different initiatives" [HKIS-ML3]. He saw it as not only being beneficial to the organization, but to the teacher themselves: "[If you are] open to different initiatives, it could be one of the very good chances for you to sharpen your soul." In doing so, the whole team creates a shared sense of inclusivity which further creates a conducive environment for collaboration. Middle leaders are then able to harness the "power of we" to focus their team members on collectively improving student learning.

6.1.2. Shared leadership

My discussions on distributed leadership with the principals of all three schools yielded the same point of view: shared or distributed leadership is often used to improve teachers' professional practice. When used well, it can empower teachers and allow them to develop a

sense of professional accomplishment. In an era of increasing teacher mobility, shared leadership gives teachers experience in leading and can be seen as a part of succession planning and strengthening of the school's organizational structure as underscored here by one of the teachers:

> In the meeting, the HoD will go through each section, and whoever is responsible for that section, if it's not him, say some event coming up, or an attainment test, whatever, then that teacher will step forward and speak to the group. [HKIS-T3]

At Hong Kong Island School, , the senior leadership saw teacher mobility as having a critical impact on schools. Although this view was shared in all three schools, formal and informal sharing of leadership was seen as a mechanism for stability in DSS schools, where additional responsibility allowances can be paid out of the additional school fees that this school-type can levy. Such fees cannot be levied in government aided schools in Hong Kong. The principal of Hong Kong Island School describes her views on shared leadership with teachers:

> We are preparing them or at least giving them [teachers] the opportunity to work with colleagues in a kind of coordinating role, so, at the same time, they are assisting the head of department and preparing themselves for some sort of promotion later on. [HKIS - SL1]

One of her HoD applied this sharing of leadership in his department in the following way: "The delegation of task means that everybody is in charge of at least one thing. In terms of scale, each may be different, but everybody has the opportunity to lead one area" [HKIS-

ML1] The principal saw the sharing of leadership as an essential component of team-building. She viewed middle leaders as consensus builders and sharers of the vision and values:

> I would say nobody is a perfect leader but we need leadership. At different levels, when you want to move so many people, to mobilize all of them, to be on board with you, we need a team. Then the middle managers will be the best persons to do that; but how to build this team so that we are all moving in the same direction?

Middle leaders use strategies of developing high norms of collegiality and shared leadership to develop their teacher team's ethos with a focus firmly on student learning. Through multiple interviews, it became apparent that when middle leaders engage in favoritism or do not engage in practices of shared vision and values, team building, and team dynamics are frequently impacted as typified by the following comment about a dysfunctional team:

> The leader tends to only include the people who is close to him/her. Since we have this new panel [head]… Everyone knows it. (Laugh) We have no team spirit. The school has fired many people from this panel. They got fired when they have opinions which differ from that of the new panel [head]. [HKNTS-T1]

One standout notion emerging from the interviews and focus groups was that leadership styles which deny teachers the opportunity to engage in professional dialogue undermine the ability of middle leaders to cultivate a collaboration culture. An approach which was more engaging and sought opinions from colleagues in contrast to those used by another middle

leader in the same school (HKNTS) demonstrates how alternative leadership styles can yield more positive team cultures:

> When I arrange my colleagues to do the teaching materials, I would be the first person to do it. Then I will talk to them. I will only assign them to work on this if everyone thinks the method is feasible. Even though I don't teach in junior high school, I would look at their teaching material, and I would give them advice. They may reflect to me that 'This is not the actual situation. The fact is that…' and I will listen to their opinions. I will have some conversation with them and together, we will design the teaching material. [HKNTS-ML3]

In all three schools, shared leadership was seen as being valuable. Teachers and middle leaders viewed the difference between delegating work to individuals within a team and empowering people to work within the team as two different actions, with two different outcomes. Middle leaders in these schools made use of shared leadership to enhance curriculum articulation and ensure positive learning outcomes for students. As one HoD at Hong Kong New Territories School described the role of a coordinator:

> Their main responsibility is to follow up on the curriculum development. As a result, the coordinator will have a relatively better understanding of the curriculum than the other colleagues. They tend to understand their panel head as well. They will not be named as a formal leader; but as an informal leader. The other colleagues will implicitly think they are an informal leader but instead call that colleague a curriculum supporting coordinator [HKNTS-ML4].

As this HoD at Hong Kong New Territories school recognized, the role of such informal leaders is to not only support the work of the panel head (Head of Department), but to ensure that expertise in matters such as curriculum, come from more than one source. Such shared leadership provides teacher teams with more resources and provides further support to the

middle leaders to transmit the schools' shared vision and values related to student learning: "We have clear messages to our new and existing colleagues that we emphasize the improvement in students' academic performance"[HKNTS-ML4]. Therefore, these informal leaders not only provide valuable organizational support, but their work can also be linked to assisting middle leaders to focus their teacher team's attention on to enhanced student learning outcomes.

6.1.3. Collaboration focused on learning

Interview responses revealed that although middle leaders approach the work of leading their teams differently in each of the three schools, multiple commonalities arise. Middle leaders in all three schools facilitated collaboration amongst team members focused on student learning. Participants described how they design teaching materials [CS, HKIS, HKNTS], implement new teaching methodologies [HKIS, HKNTS] and curricula [CS] and design and deliver assessment that considered diverse student learning needs [CS, HKIS, HKNTS]. According to the three principals, middle leaders' proximity to the classroom and their understanding of teachers' challenges and strengths allow them to manage their teams and best utilize their allocated resources. This understanding was agreed to by a HoD at Hong Kong New Territories School, who describes how he manages his team teaching Secondary 2 students:

> Since I am not teaching that grade, I will talk to my colleagues about the performance of the students. We will revisit the teaching material and the performance of those high school

> students. We will find the way to optimize the curriculum design and will take the students' performance as the starting point. This is what I am doing. [HKNTS-ML3]

This outstanding middle leader understood that the learner must come first in curriculum design. Their students acquired skills and knowledge needs to form the base of any instructional plan. By placing the students' needs at the centre of the discussion, this middle leader was able to focus teachers' attention on student learning. At Hong Kong Island School, another middle leader describes his teacher team's focus for another cohort of students:

> We obviously look at the HKDSE [Public Examination] results as well. When we analysed the data, we realised actually our students have very good spoken skills. They are quite good in terms of comprehension, but they are weakest in the writing paper. Having been a marker for few years, I noticed that. One of the things that limits that paper would be their range, so one of the foci that we implemented this year is on vocabulary building. [HKIS-ML1]

As a subject expert and a respected leader, this middle leader was able to use his experience to provide valuable insights to his team. As they were focused on improving student learning, they analysed their results looking for ways to improve their performance: in this case, improvement through vocabulary building. This middle leader was able to influence his teacher team through his character and practices. One of his colleagues describes what makes him an influential middle leader:

> "He is all about the students and he leads from the front. He's that type of leader that would never assert his authority. Instead, he just is in the front lines, in the trenches, doing it first: that's his style" [HKIS-T1].

6.1.4. Collective responsibility for pupils' learning

Effective PLCs, contrasted with less effective ones where a group of teachers works independently of each other, can be distinguished by the perspective that middle leaders give their teacher teams. . Ensuring a collective focus on student learning is a strategy frequently cited by middle leaders as essential for a successful PLC as noted by one middle leader: "I hope they will consider the issue [of student exam performance] as a team. I actively work to support my panel members and will bear some responsibility when there are problems" HKNTS-ML4]. Successful middle leadership-led teacher teams, such as this one at HKNTS, use the term "we" rather than "me" when it came to taking responsibility for student learning. The team ensures that the student learning is the core of everything they do. Middle leaders in these three schools use a variety of strategies, such as shared leadership, transparency and openness to give their teacher teams a sense of real participation in decision-making revolving around the instructional programme. This feeling of "we work it out together" [HKNTS-ML6] comes about from the way in which the middle leader leads the work of each teacher team. At China School, a classroom teacher describes how her teacher team is led:

> I mean it's all about the students, that's all about the teachers being given a voice because I think they do listen to us and I feel comfortable going ahead. Even in their planning meetings, it's always coming back to… when we are discussing central ideas… how it's going to work for the kids. So, I feel that they are always the centre [CIS-T2].

This belief about placing students in the centre of deliberation for improvement in learning was a hallmark of effective middle leaders. Admired by many of their superiors and subordinates alike, the impact on their learning organizations by many of the middle leaders in this study impact was frequently noted during the interviews. Comments supporting this included:

> Already our data from external assessment after the first six months shows improvement and that directly links to our tidying up of collaborative planning and the accountability behind what we're doing with grade level articulation [CS-SL1].

Here, two middle leaders illustrate the way they focused their teacher teams on student learning through the conversations they have with their teacher teams:

> The first thing I said was regardless of how you feel about your unit, if you like it or hate it, what's important is what's best for student learning. Think about where are the gaps. What do our students actually need? Then make sure they have that, so try to get that focus. Sometimes, it not always the actual focus... [we're] shifting away from that mindset and getting to the how do you plan and what do we want the end goal [to be]. [CS-ML2]

> We do have some informal communication with other panels. For example, we have more conversation with Chinese teachers because the Chinese teachers can share with us composition skills so we can teach our students to write better. [HKIS-ML3]

These excerpts show how middle leaders aimed to improve the learning and achievements of their students; however, in order to do so, they understood that they cannot simply work in

isolation. They need to motivate their teachers and cultivate an environment where the collective takes responsibility for the learning that takes place across the organisation. “We will set new development goals and see how we can improve in the coming year. It doesn’t apply to any specific teacher, it is applicable to the whole team” [HKNTS-ML3] In all three schools, middle leaders tackled this challenge using a plethora of tools, routines and practices.

6.1.5. Reflective professional enquiry

For learning to improve, teachers need to have conversations about the serious educational problems that they face and seek solutions through joint planning, analysis of student data and by examining teacher practice. At China School, time is given specifically for this purpose as noted by the principal: “We've got collaborative planning banded into our timetable, so grade 4 can meet every single day at the same time as a team.” Likewise, the principal of Hong Kong Island School gives a snapshot of the middle leader-led reflective professional enquiry practices going on in her school: “We started off on the right track I believe. Within departments, there are lesson observations, lesson studies, professional development dialogues and departmental meetings. I'm sure that a lot of time and energy has been spent on that by the middle leaders.”

Middle leaders play a fundamental role in leading reflective professional enquiry in their schools. Each of the three schools undertook reflective practices by reviewing student and assessment data, analysing lesson feedback, engaging in conversations with stakeholders and de-privatising practice through lesson observations and case studies. Each school created structures for such tasks to be undertaken within their teacher teams.

A middle leader at Hong Kong New Territories School describes the process of evaluating a sequence of work already being used by students who are facing difficulty:

> We will first look at the design of the teaching material, if it is indeed the case that teaching material is too difficult for our students. Our panel will discuss solutions and then have a joint preparation lesson. We will sit together to discuss the issues. We have deputy teachers to design the teaching materials. We will invite them to the meeting as well. We will analyse the students' performance in the meeting and think of ways for improvement [HKNTS-ML3].

Skilled middle leaders are able to guide their teachers through the processes of reflective professional enquiry as cited above. They use their experience as practitioners to provide resources and pedagogical solutions as evidenced in the curriculum meeting held in CS, HKNTS and HKIS. Most middle leaders involve their teams actively in discussions and seek advice and contributions from the entire team. Their leadership style places students at the centre and ensures that discussions focus on improving their learning outcomes.

6.1.6. Openness, networks and partnerships

Middle leaders work to encourage and support their teachers to realise their full potential as inspiring educators. They facilitate support, provide resources and foster collegiality within their teacher teams. Middle leaders are open and ensure that communication channels are clear and unobstructed. They de-privatise practice and create networks and partnerships for their teachers to access. Schools with fewer economic resources make use of networks to provide shared resources for their staff. Hong Kong New Territories School's middle leader asked other schools' specialists to come to his school to broaden his teacher team's network: "After taking us ages to come out with a proposal, we will have some open lessons in the coming year. We will invite multiple schools to our lesson observation on SDT and e-Learning" [HKNTS – ML5]. One middle leader at China School exemplifies a do-it-yourself attitude to network creation: "I took it upon myself this year to organize a 'job-alike session' [a type of Professional Development in IB schools] for music teachers in the community, but again that was all about developing professional knowledge and community networks" [CS-ML7].

Middle Leaders need to take into consideration the personality and skill sets of their members before developing networks for their members. Many use various forms of social capital to develop their teacher team members. A middle leader at Hong Kong Island School describes

how he uses pair-up to ensure all his members can access the local schools' maths teacher network.

> Yeah, sometimes we will use pair-up. For some teachers who are more assertive, ready to attend more new initiatives, we will pair them with less confident teachers to encourage them to develop professional networks [HKIS-ML2].

The data shows that middle leaders used a wide range of strategies to support their teacher team members. They were able to overcome any shortcomings in their own professional knowledge and skill sets by identifying potential partnerships and networks as evidenced in their internal and external network building. They demonstrated openness and a willingness to embark on new initiatives. Their practices and attitudes inspired their colleagues into action.

6.2. Group, as well as individual, learning is promoted

The three schools are organizations which foster learning at every level as their core business. Their middle leaders recognize the importance of this and create a culture of learning within their teacher teams. They seek resources for high quality professional development and ensure that learning takes place individually and in teams. Inspirational middle leaders find sources of learning both inside and outside their organizations. The Head of School at China School depicts this phenomenon: "We always encourage them [middle leaders] to pilot [new

initiatives] in their grade level, in their team, to find out if it works. Then if it's really worked well, they can share with the whole staff. So, we have an 'experts within program' " [CS-SL1].

Middle leaders also take the lead to develop quality professional development for staff when there is no provision for it. This can be as simple as creating a departmental line of enquiry and pursuing it: "We actually took it upon ourselves as a department to plan our own PD for that, and look at our own research because I mean you know in the art community worldwide there are different ways of teaching our disciplines, so we've kind of done it ourselves I guess and then observed each other's lessons" [CS-ML6].

Some middle leaders from all three schools in this study shared their skills and knowledge outside of their teacher teams, developing networks that their members could utilise later on. The principal of Hong Kong New Territories School describes the practice: "We encourage the middle leaders to share with other schools. They will share in many different ways like through the EDB or some other organizations. Alternatively, they may share with some other schools about SDL (self-directed learning) about our recent practice."

Table 13

Funds and examples of PD by school

School	Professional Development (PD) Funds / quotes by ML	Examples of PD	Time Allocated for PD
China School	Every teacher has a PD fund + targeted funds for specific school priorities	Literacy workshops in New York. Reading workshops in New Zealand. Curriculum meetings in Holland.	Staff released to attend PD in school time easily. Regular school-based PD.
Hong Kong Island School	Teachers participate in school and education department organised PD. May attend sponsored PD that requires school financial contributions (e.g., airfare for overseas workshops). Payments for external facilitators.	HKDSE meetings in Hong Kong. IELTS training in the School. IT workshops in L.A.	Staff released rarely to attend PD in school time. Regular school-based PD.
Hong Kong New Territories School	Teachers participate in school and education department organised PD. Most PD must be free or sponsored by other parties. middle leaders are expected to attend 1 or 2 workshops per year.	School Visits in Mainland China. University / EDB organised workshops.	Staff released to attend PD in school time but must make up lessons. Regular school-based PD.

Each of the three schools utilized its respective resources to support teachers' learning and effective middle leaders ensured that their teacher teams could access what they needed and when they needed it. These effective middle leaders were able to promote the respective talent within their team whilst ensuring both individual as well as group learning goals were achieved. Through various forums, the middle leaders were able to provide individualised mentoring and support for their team members, ensuring professional growth.

6.3. Mutual trust, respect and support among members

As part of their leadership role, middle leaders in the three schools created an environment in which their teacher team members could practise their profession. Through their routines,

tools and practices, middle leaders encouraged mutual trust, respect and support and demanded the same from their members. Middle Leaders understood the importance of relationships and invested considerable time in developing them:

> The relationship is significant. The panel members can see I will negotiate with the top management, and I am taking care of their needs. This is a required skill set for a middle leader. You are the person who is sandwiched in between. You need to be transparent, and you need to be open-minded. The workload and pressure will be eased. Also, you need to adjust your mind against the stress. [HKNTS-ML2]

Each school recognizes the support required to develop their human capital within their available resource constraints. For middle leaders to ensure their initiatives are implemented efficiently, they need to model the supportive environment needed. “We also keep encouraging people. I know the HoD has come into the classroom, to come and see how some of their initiatives are working, wanting [to support] a learning community” [CS-SL1].

To build trust, middle leaders exercise their functions with openness and transparency. They de-privatise their work and establish high norms of collegiality, support and mutual trust. A HoD at Hong Kong Island School created an online shared drive to allow colleagues see the duty list for team staff: “One of the first things I did when I took on the role was to make it very transparent. Every single duty, of every single teacher, it’s in a shared document, so everyone can see what is being done by whom” [HKIS-ML1].

6.4. Chapter Summary

From the data, I observed three factors that contribute to middle leaders' successfully leading their teacher teams: instilling a culture of sharing and inclusivity; cultivating reflective group practices focused on learning; and facilitating and encouraging partnerships and respect for team learning. Through these three practices, the data supports the proposition that middle leaders raised the standards of professional dialogue and encouraged reflective professional enquiry through collaboration and refined norms of collegiality. Through shared values and vision, they were able to infuse collective responsibility for student learning into their teams, ensuring efforts for student learning were the central focus. These findings are discussed further in Chapter 7, where some explanations for the reported improvements in student learning and attitudes as a result of the work of these middle leader-led teams are presented.

CHAPTER 7: DISCUSSION, SUMMARY & IMPLICATIONS

Overview

In this chapter I discuss the findings from the documentary analysis, the interviews held with the senior leadership, middle leadership and the PLC members in three schools across Hong Kong and Shenzhen. The documents collected from the three schools, previously discussed in Chapters 4 to 6, included school-designed role and position descriptions, which outlined the principal roles and responsibilities of middle leaders as well as mission and vision statements and staff handbooks. These documents helped me understand the organisational structures present in each school's type, and the key functions and roles of each middle leader with their PLC. These understandings are then summarised and, where supported by the literature, are further signposted. Research gaps which were previously highlighted in the literature review (Chapter 2) are discussed and the findings from this study applied to provide new insights. Finally, the implications for practice, policy and future research are presented . The major contributions with a new framework for future research are provided at the end of this chapter with a statement of limitations.

The early literature supports the role that PLCs play in improving student learning outcomes (Berry, Johnson, & Montgomery, 2005; Bolam et al., 2005; Hairon & Dimmock, 2012; Hairon et al.; 2014; Hairon et al.; 2017; Hollins, McIntyre, DeBose, Hollins, & Towner,

2004; Louis & Marks, 1998; Phillips, 2003; Strahan, 2003; Supovitz & Christman, 2003) yet fails to link the role middle leaders play in focusing the PLC members attention on improving student learning outcomes (Hairon et al., 2017; Spillane et al., 2019). Studies on mathematics teachers in the United States (Spillane et al., 2019) show that supportive structures (often led by a maths coach) promote changes in teacher practices and beliefs. The findings in the present study align well with this conclusion.

Middle leaders' impact on organizational change and improvement in student learning has increasingly been discussed in the literature (Bennett et al., 2007; Bryant, 2019; Crane and De Nobile, 2014; De Nobile, 2018; Fullan, 2001; Hord, 2004; Stoll et. al, 2006; Strahan et. al, 2001; Wells & Feun, 2012;) but little research on the link between middle leaders' leadership of PLCs and their subsequent impact on student learning outcomes is evident.

What we do know is that middle leaders lead teachers, whether as individuals or as teams, in order to contribute to school improvement (Dinham, 2007; Hairon et al., 2015, Harris, 2003; Leithwood, 2016; Spillane et al., 2008) and the present study highlights this phenomenon. By establishing high norms of collegiality and a close rapport between themselves and teachers (Day et al., 2008; Lieberman and Mace, 2009; York-Barr & Duke, 2004), middle leaders are able to harness their PLCs to collectively improve student learning and at the same time

develop teachers' capacities as well. The use of PLCs is seen as a catalyst for best practice in each of the three schools and the characteristics of each school's PLCs were explored in this study. As teacher members of different PLCs were also interviewed to understand the work and influence of middle leaders from different perspectives, a clearer picture emerged about the important role middle leaders play in leading their teacher teams.

7.1. What factors in each school type support or inhibit middle leaders' influence on their professional learning communities?

Several unexpected insights emerged related to school type factors and their impact on middle leadership's influence on their PLCs. Following a review of literature about middle leadership and professional learning communities, the semi-structured interviews elicited views on how school context impacted middle leaders and their work with their PLCs. The findings revealed the following elements were key influential factors: funds for professional development; the competitive environment of each school; staff stability and longevity; the leadership style of the principal; support for middle leadership; and role descriptions, authority and recognition. Very little insight has been unearthed from the literature relating to school type in Hong Kong and its impact on middle leadership and PLCs. Whilst Zhou, Wong and Li (2015) identified salient facts such as the increased number of middle leaders in

DSS schools or salary variation among school types (Chan & Tan, 2008), little understanding of the way this impacts the work of PLCs has been observed.

7.1.1. Funds for Professional Development

Throughout the semi-structured interviews, I repeatedly heard senior leaders, middle leaders and teachers alike identify professional development as a conduit to enhance student learning. Each school had its own strategies for encouraging and developing professional development for its staff (see Table 13 p. 151). China School used professional development not only as a tool to enact new curriculum initiatives and to mediate external standards, but also as an incentive to further professional growth of staff. They created several funds: one for each staff member, one for each division and one school-wide special fund for professional development. One of the senior leaders claimed that this was a major factor in her applying to work at the school. Other teachers cited this as a reason for extending their contracts for an additional year or two. Those interviewees also noted teacher development taking place in Holland, New Zealand, the US and across Asia as examples of their school investing in their employees' professional development. With annual tuition fees ranging from USD$15,000 to almost USD$30,000, China School has the financial resources to ensure that high quality, individualised professional development is available to all staff.

At Hong Kong Island School, with annual tuition fee of USD$5000 on average, plus a capped student subsidy of approximately USD$8000-USD$9700 to cover all operating expenses including staff salaries, there is significantly less income to fund high quality, individualized professional development for all employees. Nevertheless, interview participants from the school cited the importance of professional development to improve student learning. At this school, the middle leaders lead much of the professional development. The English Head of Department has specifically asked the school to use school-wide professional development days to lead his staff members in targeted professional learning focused on providing them with skills to improve specific areas of student learning. Such a targeted approach, developed after consensus building, enabled this middle leader to focus the attention of his teacher team on specific student needs. Financial resources, for use in procuring trainers and buying professional development materials, are made available, but on a significantly more modest scale. Most teachers participate in professional development activities organized by the Education Bureau or Hong Kong Examinations & Assessment Authority or university-based courses which are generally free-of-charge. In their interviews, teachers at Hong Kong New Territories School stated that they attended only Education Bureau or Hong Kong Examinations & Assessment Authority organised professional development activities or university-based courses. Even so, a senior leader said she expected only 20%-30% of middle

leaders to attend professional development outside the school once a year. Financial constraints and time release were cited as the reasons for this.

The literature supports the important role middle leaders have in creating structures including: collaboration with other teachers; identifying, designing and implementing professional development activities; and mutual trust and high norms of collegiality (Bennett et al. 2007; Bryant, 2019; Gurr & Drysdale, 2013; Harris, 2009; Harris and Jones 2017; Irvine & Brundrett 2016; Leithwood et al. 2007; York-Barr & Duke 2004). However, it is not surprising that where economic and time constraints curtail or hinder these processes, PLCs, and their middle leaders, feel a negative impact. Recent studies looking at the impact of PLCs on instructionally focused interaction by mathematics teachers in the United States (Spillane et al., 2016) further demonstrate the effectiveness of these structures when formal leaders (sometimes as boundary spanners) are able to focus teachers attention on issues related to instruction (Shirrell & Spillane, 2019; Shirrell et al., 2019; Spillane et al., 2016; Spillane et al., 2018).

7.1.2. Competitive environment

The need to recruit students greatly influenced middle leaders' work in both Hong Kong schools. Staff at senior leader-, middle leader- and teacher-levels all described the need for

middle leaders to take responsibility for making their respective schools attractive to students and to focus their teams' attention on student learning which would entice students to join the school. The greatest pressure among the three schools was exerted in Hong Kong Island School, where school funding is based on per student subsidies. The greater the number of vacancies there are, the less there is funding available to cover school operating expenses. Even a middle leader at the aided-school in this study, Hong Kong New Territories School, described the pressure placed on teachers at DSS schools to "have no choice but to follow the principal's instruction to lead extra activities." Such pressures were not stated by teachers at China School. The competitive school environment greatly effects Hong Kong schools. The falling student-age population, due to a low fertility rate (1.125 live births per woman with the total number of births being only 56,548*) is seen as one of the critical factors. Thus, many schools have closed over the past 36 years with 13 local secondary schools (2.7% of 485 schools) closing within the past five years and 20,251 fewer Secondary 1 to Secondary 3 students (10.8% of 187,631) in 2018-19 as compared with the 2013-2014 school year#. Therefore, there is great pressure on schools to recruit students in order to remain open.

* Hong Kong Monthly Digest of Statistics December 2018 **Census and Statistics Department, Hong Kong Special Administrative Region**

(https://www.statistics.gov.hk/pub/B71812FA2018XXXXB0100.pdf)

 # Education Bureau (https://www.edb.gov.hk/en/about-edb/publications-stat/figures/sec.html)

7.1.3. Staff stability and longevity

In all three schools, senior leaders and middle leaders cited staff mobility and recruitment as key challenges. At China School, senior leaders have used several strategies, such as professional growth and leadership opportunities and incentives such as bonuses to encourage teachers to stay longer than the average of three years. Even so, a four-year teacher tenure was seen as approaching the maximum most teachers were willing to stay and more than four years was unusual. At HKNTS, staff longevity and stability was often linked with the lack of promotional opportunities and salary advancement. With limited additional income and ability by the school's leadership to freeze the number of Senior Graduate Master (SGM) posts (higher salary rank) in favour of hiring more teachers with the goal of reducing the student-teacher ratio, senior and middle leaders spoke of teachers frequently leaving in search of better employment opportunities.

At Hong Kong Island School, senior and middle leaders have also recognised the challenges associated with the excessive mobility of teachers in Hong Kong public schools. In order to prevent a leadership crisis, more teachers have been promoted into the Senior Teacher rank, offering better salary conditions, using the additional income DSS schools have due to their ability to charge tuition fees. The principal at HKIS claimed that creating "spares" for senior and middle leader posts was a school priority and this strategy had been approved by the

School Management Committee and had already begun to be implemented. A further distribution or sharing of leadership was widespread with a focus on developing staff being an explicit part of the school culture of distributing leadership and empowering teachers.

7.1.4. Leadership Style of the Principal

The leadership style of the principal, although important, played less of a role in giving middle leaders the space to lead their teacher teams than the personality and enacted philosophies of each principal. Each principal clearly articulated their personal belief in distributed leadership and cited how they shared leadership. Yet, only China School and Hong Kong Island School had policies which enacted this philosophy and put into place strategies to recruit middle leaders and permit the sharing of leadership within the teacher teams. Lárusdóttir & O'Connor's research (2017) in Iceland showed that those middle leaders who were members of a leadership team found more job satisfaction than those who did not. Yet, even though senior leaders, middle leaders and teachers at Hong Kong New Territories school described the hardworking nature of their principal and his constant involvement in even the smallest details of the school while admiring his energy and commitment to the school, they also described the need for his involvement and approval in almost all decisions as demonstrative of his leadership. This ran contrary to his stated philosophy and views on

distributed leadership. Spillane, Halverson and Diamond (2004) describes leadership as the enactment of specific tasks:

> Leadership is not simply a function of what a school principal, or indeed any other individual or group of leaders, knows and does. Rather, it is the activities engaged in by leaders, in interaction with others in particular contexts around specific tasks (p.5).

In this context, distributed leadership cannot be seen in isolation, but should only be viewed in-situ and as perceived by those involved in the interaction.

The enacted philosophies of the principals of China School and Hong Kong Island School saw the rapid growth of middle leadership in their schools and sharing of leadership within their teams, particularly regarding curriculum mediation, planning and evaluation. Middle leaders in both these schools spoke of autonomy, of being encouraged to develop their PLCs and of being entrusted to develop their teams. This is something which has not appeared in the literature previously and thus provides interesting insights for further investigation.

Whilst distributed leadership has recently been studied (Bryant, 2019; Bush, 2009; De Nobile, 2018; Gurr, 2018; Gurr & Drysdale, 2013; Hadfield, 2007; Hallinger, 2012; Irvine & Brundrett, 2017; Kwan & Walker, 2010; Turner & Sykes, 2007), its benefits related to PLCs led by middle leaders who have been granted autonomy and structure has not been widely researched (Hairon et al., 2017). Hence the insights gained from the participants in the three

schools demonstrate that shared leadership was not only appreciated by teachers, but by senior leaders who encouraged shared leadership themselves.

7.1.5. Role descriptions, authority and role recognition

As stated above, middle leader efficacy within the three schools, varied according to the authority and role recognition offered by the principal and the resources available for them to develop their teams. All three schools provided their middle leaders with explicit job descriptions, describing tasks and responsibilities to be undertaken. None of the schools provided their middle leaders with specific training to assist them in undertaking these leadership and managerial tasks. All three schools cited a lack of such training opportunities as the main barrier for not "assisting" them with their leadership development needs.

At China School, middle leaders were authorised to mediate curriculum and pedagogical initiatives with their teacher teams. Their expertise and role were recognised and enabled them to focus their teachers' attention onto tasks, documents, and strategies related directly to student learning. They created cultures of collaboration and used their positional authority to procure resources for their teachers, particularly through their participation in developing teachers' professional goals. As a result, the middle leaders were able to assist teachers in overcoming knowledge or skill barriers which may have prevented them from meeting their

required curriculum objectives. Middle leaders used their authority to require teachers to work together and develop high norms of collegiality which in turn provided the teachers with instructional support. The greatest challenge for middle leaders, i.e., their role separate from and simultaneously being part of the faculty, (the proverbial "cheese in the sandwich") (Bryant, 2019; Lárusdóttir & O'Connor, 2017; Wise, 2000), when skilfully managed, proved to be their most successful accomplishment.

Middle leaders indicated that developing their staff was not an explicit requirement of their jobs, but they increasingly took on this responsibility. Although the schools tended to centralise professional learning, middle leaders said that they requested the senior leadership to give them more opportunities to train staff and to participate in their PLC members' development of professional learning goals. Similar to China School, middle leaders at Hong Kong Island School used their role and authority in team meetings to develop learning and collaboration through high norms of collegiality. Middle leaders shared their leadership, often requiring almost all members to lead initiatives that they had significant experience and/or interest in. Whilst leading with authority, most teachers cited their willingness to follow a leader "who lead by example." Shared leadership has not appeared in the previous literature on effective PLCs (Bolam et al., 2005; Hairon et al., 2014; Hord, 1997; Stoll et al., 2006) yet the findings from these three case studies show this practice as an important characteristic of

a successful PLC. When middle leaders monopolised the power dynamic within their teacher teams, the effectiveness of the team to influence and improve student learning was found to be adversely impacted. Therefore, I posit that shared leadership should be included in the characteristics of optimal professional learning, adding to the eight other characteristics: (1) shared values and vision; (2) collective responsibility for pupils' learning; (3) reflective professional enquiry (4) collaboration focused on learning; (5) group as well as individual professional learning is promoted; (6) openness, networks and partnerships; (7) inclusive membership; (8) mutual trust, respect and support as the key components. My proposed framework is thus adjusted.

It is therefore not surprising that at Hong Kong New Territories School, although a few middle leaders distributed leadership within their team, many staff viewed the leadership exercised as being more authoritarian because of the school culture. Some teachers cited a lack of collaboration with decisions often being imposed upon them by the middle leader. The use of temporary employment contracts was used, not as a financial tool, but as an expression of the middle leader's authority. Wise (2000) found that senior leaders' conflicting beliefs about the roles of middle leaders often led to middle leaders facing conflict in the exercising of their functions. However, in certain PLCs, the middle leaders ceded authority to other members and norms of collegiality, particularly around school-wide

initiatives such as e-learning and student-regulated learning, were developed collaboratively which led to these PLCs being operated more harmoniously.

7.2. What is the influence of Middle Leaders on Professional Learning Communities?

The research findings identify six principal areas of middle leadership influence across the three domains of middle leadership enactment. These three broad domains are teaching and learning, school capacity building and external influences. The data shows that middle leaders' greatest influence is felt in the domain of teaching and learning which is not surprising given that they spend the most time engaged with their PLCs on tasks and activities to improve instruction and student learning. Yet, middle leaders were often uniquely positioned to help their teams more when they encouraged teachers to also focus on school capacity building and the use of external agencies to enhance professional learning communities' work.

7.2.1. Teaching and Learning within Middle Leader-led PLCs

7.2.1.1. Mediating instructional initiatives

Interview responses revealed the omnipresent role that middle leaders play in mediating instructional initiatives from within and outside the schools ensuring that teaching and learning activities matched the goals of the school and the system in which the school

functions (see Ganon-Shilin & Schechter, 2017; Hairon et al., 2017; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Teacher feedback in the interviews highlighted the positive and negative influences middle leaders had on their teacher teams. Middle leaders in all three schools used a plethora of tools, routines and practices to guide their teacher teams. They provided critical guidance and focus to teacher team meetings and were most successful when they ensured that deliberations and discussions focused on student learning (see Fullan, 2001; Stoll et al., 2006; Strahan et al., 2001). They did so by establishing and maintaining high norms of collegiality, where mutual trust, support and respect were evident. However, when they failed to engage their teacher teams in shared leadership, and imposed their own opinions, strategies and practices without allowing for collaboration focused on student learning, their ability to gain consensus drastically affected team morale and impeded their abilities to effectively mediate instructional initiatives. Due to several exceptionally good middle leaders, fully supported by a senior leadership who espoused and practised distributed leadership, China School was able to enjoy five years of rapid curriculum development and programme authorization and improved student learning, not unlike the scenarios observed in the literature (see Hord, 2004). Likewise, Hong Kong Island School, had begun to build PLCs led by some very capable middle leaders. These middle leaders used a personal approach to mediating instructional initiatives and pedagogies supporting team learning and widely sharing leadership. At Hong Kong New Territories School, certain middle leaders also used their

PLCs to share instructional experience and to further refine student learning opportunities. These middle leaders shared leadership and engaged members in professional dialogue and exchanges of good practices which were seen as demonstrations of mutual trust, support and respect. Such findings support the concept of a PLC posited by Vescio et al., (2007) as resting "on a premise of improving student learning by improving teaching practice."

7.2.1.2. Devising structures for curriculum enactment and alignment

Effective middle leaders in this study played a pivotal role in curriculum enactment and alignment. They did so by creating structures that facilitated professional dialogue, ensuring external standards and practices were understood while also monitoring and intervening in teaching and learning when needed. Middle leaders used many tools, routines and practices such as team planning, online feedback, peer lesson observations and delegation of leadership opportunities to engage team members whilst constantly keeping the focus on student learning. Recent research from the United States looking at the creation of infrastructures supporting mathematics teachers also supports the above findings (Shirrel et al., 2019; Spillane et al., 2016; Spillane et al., 2019).

In all three schools, the middle leaders who were viewed as outstanding demonstrated the need for teachers to learn together to improve the curriculum and ensure vertical and

horizontal curriculum alignment. China School's use of grade-level leaders allowed them to have a specific person in place to focus on horizontal articulation whilst the subject leader focused on the vertical articulation of the curriculum. Through shared leadership, these two leaders, as well as the PYP coordinators, were able to work with teachers to create as much symmetry in the curriculum as possible. "Advice giver," "focus setter" and "curriculum designer" were all terms used to describe middle leader actions with their professional learning communities.

Middle leaders were viewed as unsuccessful when they failed to engage teachers in professional dialogue, particularly around horizontal articulation in schools where streaming was practised. One middle leader in Hong Kong New Territories School was heavily criticised by members of his PLC for requiring the same curriculum materials, lesson sequences and assessment to be used across a year level with significant learner diversity. Teacher suggestions were ignored, and a perceived lack of understanding was attributed to this middle leader who taught the highest ability group. Teacher responses across all three schools indicated that when middle leaders denied professional dialogue within their PLCs to discuss and solve problems of practice in curriculum enactment and alignment, their members views of their leadership were negative.

7.2.2. Creating opportunities for professional dialogue

Creating opportunities for professional dialogue was seen as an essential tool used by middle leaders in exercising their duties and is also viewed by teachers as one of the key components of effective middle leadership. Respondents in all three schools recognised the importance of this and tried to build collaboration time into the timetable. At China School, senior leaders also gave teachers time out of classes to collaborate on unit plans and activities related to both horizontal and vertical curriculum alignment. Hong Kong Island School provided a common meeting time every cycle of six days for department meetings and lesson planning. Likewise, collaborative team meetings are part of the established school culture of inclusiveness.

This study highlights not only how middle leaders encourage professional dialogue, but also the valuable impact it has on school capacity building and enhanced student learning. Middle leaders not only focus teacher attention on student learning through the provision of expert advice, resources, time and professional development, but also facilitate shared leadership so that teachers learn with and from other teachers in their PLCs. Collaboratively, teachers exchange ideas, develop strategies and evaluate practices with student learning as its focus. Middle leaders lead these discussions, during formal meetings and encourage team members to continue informal interactions. As such, they develop not only their own leadership

toolkits, but also the leadership capacity within their teams. Such findings have been replicated in recent studies coming from Hong Kong (Bryant, 2019), where we see middle leaders as being the centre for teacher team interaction.

The absence of such open, professional dialogue is the anti-thesis of an effective middle leadership-led PLC. One PLC member described the fear her members had when they asked to discuss curriculum design with their middle leader: "We don't have discussion on it… if you don't inform them [of any informal collegial discussions], then you will be in trouble. We will be blamed… You must follow the panel head" [HKNTS – T3].

7.2.2.1. School capacity and pedagogical coherence building within Middle Leader-led PLCs

In all three schools, the role middle leaders played in building school capacity should not be understated. Each school had their own structures, tools and practices to enable middle leaders to contribute to cross-school development. China School used middle leaders in vertical, horizontal and within programme roles to ensure that the curriculum, pedagogy and school mission and vision were enacted from multiple dimensions. All middle leaders were also part of a single middle leader PLC, led by the PYP coordinators and also by the senior leadership team.

In Hong Kong, both schools have created a school administration committee, which consists of all senior, and certain middle leaders. This committee develops policy and sets the path for future school development. Importantly, middle leaders are involved in the shaping of the work of this committee. As leaders and frontline teachers, they ensured that communication between teachers and senior leaders is two-way. Middle leaders in all three schools viewed their involvement in setting school policy as being very important. As such, middle leaders played a fundamental role in designing school-wide strategies that enhance student learning and are able to have significant influence on their teacher teams. Implementation of school-wide pedagogies, such as student-directed learning and the use of IT in curriculum delivery, were two examples cited by middle leaders for developing school capacity to improve instruction and student learning.

Pedagogical coherence across the three schools was evident via the middle leaders' enabling of practices and routines, such as lesson observations, lesson studies, professional development and department meetings; these served as strategies for strengthening pedagogical collaboration and team learning with a focus on enhancing student learning. Middle leaders were observed leading cross-subject planning teams, leading professional development activities and leading department planning teams as three examples.

7.2.2.2. Leading Teacher PD to ensure school-wide pedagogical and curricular alignment

Middle leaders contribute to school-wide pedagogical and curricular alignment by facilitating professional learning within and across their teacher teams. They do so by encouraging collaboration focused on learning and collective responsibility for learning. Middle leaders also create the conditions for collegiality. They direct staff to learn from each other and to de-privatise practice.

Middle leaders mediated external and school-wide initiatives for their teacher teams, identify deficits in curriculum knowledge and pedagogy, resource materials and professional development activities to "plug the gaps" as stated by one middle leader [CS-ML1]. They request time for professional learning and often call upon their own experiences and strategies to assist colleagues with problems of practice. Finally, effective middle leaders call upon other members of their teacher teams to provide their expertise and share leadership in order for the team to better supported.

7.2.2.3. External Influence within Middle Leader-led PLCs

Middle leaders use their experience, positional authority and access to resources to assist their teacher teams in embedding external standards and practices into their learning programmes. Effective middle leaders balance external requirements and skills and morale of their teacher teams in order to optimise students' learning (Bryant, 2019; Stoll et al., 2006). They use a variety of routines, tools and structures, such as team planning, feedback from staff and students and high-quality professional development to maintain teacher focus on student learning.

Middle leaders identify tensions that such external influences may create and are able to find synergies within their teacher team to mediate the negative effects. Teachers at the three schools in this study, cited their middle leaders' ability to manage curriculum planning sessions with a clear focus on external curricular standards and practices as one of the important functions their middle leaders have within their teacher teams.

Participants from each school described their collaboration with teachers from other schools and external agencies and organisations as important conduits for improvement. In Hong Kong, each school described the pressure to recruit students as the ever-shrinking school-aged population increased the burden on middle leaders to make their learning areas more

attractive to potential candidates. Considering their small professional development budgets, middle leaders leveraged expertise from other schools and organisations to ensure that their teacher teams' professional learning needs were met. Middle leaders linked their departments up with other schools in their personal network, providing teachers with valuable collegial collaboration and professional learning. This is particularly important for subjects like music, art or foreign languages, where the number of teachers of such subjects in one school may be small, thus denying them subject specific colleagues to collaborate with.

As stated above, middle leadership of teacher PD ensures the school's pedagogical and curricular alignment with external standards and practices. Teachers and middle leaders in this study described the sharing of mock exams and marking schemes, the co-development of teaching materials, and pedagogies such as e-learning and student-regulated learning as techniques to better equip teachers inside their classrooms with a clear focus on improving student learning. Such networks assist in the de-privatisation of practice and the building of norms of collegiality within the team, across the school and outside the organisation, via a strong sense of mutual trust, respect and support.

By leading external teams, middle leaders are able to develop their leadership repertoire whilst bringing valuable knowledge and skills back to their own schools and their teacher

teams. Middle leaders in this study described their chairing of committees and leading of pedagogical initiatives under organisations such as the Hong Kong Association of Heads of Secondary Schools, the DSS Council and the International Baccalaureate Organization. Such leadership also provides opportunities for experienced, informal leaders to gain leadership experience when such possibilities may not have been available within their own schools.

Through a plethora of leadership opportunities, middle leaders are able to focus the attention of their teacher teams on student learning. Middle leaders funnel resources and experience to the teachers who need them most, mediating external standards and practice while developing high norms of collegiality based on mutual respect, trust and support. They ensure school capacity building is undertaken and the school's goals are achieved.

7.3. How do middle leaders focus teachers' attention on student learning?

In order to answer the third research question, three key attributes that enable middle leaders to focus their teachers' attention on student learning in the PLCs. These attributes were: inclusivity and culture of sharing; collaboration and collective responsibility for learning; and the facilitation of a team culture.

7.3.1. Inclusivity and culture of sharing

In order to understand how middle leaders are able to focus their teachers' attention on student learning, the way in which middle leaders lead their teacher teams needs to be understood. Although the literature suggests that certain attributes, such as shared value and vision and inclusive membership (Stoll et al., 2006), are present, the findings of this study show that middle leaders contribute to the creation of this climate within their teacher teams. Middle leaders ensure their teacher teams share common values and vision. Whether it be by using common teaching methodologies, or approaches to teaching and learning, middle leaders use a variety of practices, structures and tools to allow opportunities for discussion and consensus building.

7.3.1.1. Inclusive membership

My observation of middle leaders actively including varied and wide points of view in professional dialogue reinforces the importance of inclusive membership in their teacher teams. By ensuring inclusive participation in their teacher teams, middle leaders are able to mediate instructional mandates to meet the needs of students and their learning. Such unity allows for mentoring and coaching to take place. Teacher participants in their interviews cited examples of middle leader conduct as being key to a middle leader's ability to focus teacher

attention on student learning. Leading by example motivated teachers to engage with each other to improve instructional practices.

7.3.1.2. Shared Leadership

Effective middle leaders demonstrated a willingness to share leadership across the teacher team. They identified strengths and weaknesses within their teacher teams and facilitated teacher team members to lead various activities and tasks according to the needs of the team and the strengths of individual members. Instructional leadership was seen as being increasingly devolved to middle leaders by principals (see Hallinger & Lee, 2012.) In doing so, principals were able to amplify support and provide various focal points to target teachers' attention on improving student learning. As Hallinger & Heck (2011) posited, such leadership devolution is primarily aimed at school improvement and, as is the case with this study, improved student outcomes. Senior leaders believe that sharing informal leadership opportunities within teacher teams also allows for succession planning for middle leaders, particularly as staff longevity and stability vary according to the school and school type. However, in the present study, middle leaders who excluded members and failed to share leadership opportunities within the team adversely impacted team morale and efficacy. Such leaders failed to gain sufficient influence to focus their teachers' attention on their students' learning, and therefore experienced disproportionately high staff turnover.

The literature on PLCs has very few references to the importance of shared leadership (Hairon et al., 2014, Hairon et al., 2017). Middle leaders in this study demonstrated the importance of shared leadership in the operations of the team and in focusing teachers' attention on student learning. As such, more research into this, especially with regard to middle leadership work with PLCs. Leadership has long been viewed as pivotal to school improvement and maintaining the importance of learning for teachers as well as students (Bolam et al., 2005; Hallinger & Heck, 2011; Stoll et al., 2006)

7.3.1.3. Collaboration and collective responsibility for learning

Middle leaders' facilitation of collaborative curriculum design, mediation and implementation of new teaching methodologies and pedagogies, and the design and delivery of assessment for diverse learning needs are seen as pivotal in school improvement. Interviewed teachers identified the collaboration fostered by middle leaders as directly optimizing curriculum design and ensuring students' performance was taken into account in the planning-implementation-evaluation process (PIE) within the teacher team.

Middle leaders influenced their teacher teams by ensuring that students remain at the centre of their discussions and collaborations. I heard senior leaders directly link improved external

assessment results to middle leader-led teacher team work on grade-level articulation but evidence of this was not provided for this research study and so remain observations. Middle leaders demonstrated throughout this study how their leadership impacted their teacher teams. At China School, and across the two Hong Kong schools, middle leaders encouraged all team members to take collective responsibility for student learning. As stated in Chapter 6, regardless of how individual teachers may have felt about the unit of instruction, middle leaders had to focus their team members efforts on what was best for student learning. Thus, they ensured that each teacher had the same focus.

7.3.1.4. Openness, networks and partnerships

Middle leaders espouse openness and a willingness to learn from others and pass this practice onto the team. Through the use of networks and partnerships, effective middle leaders find the resources and skills teachers need to improve student learning. At Hong Kong New Territories School, a middle leader regularly sought advice from teachers in other panels on composition skills to ensure his own students were able to write better for examinations. In doing so, this middle leader modeled responsibility for student learning and demonstrated why good teachers do not work in isolation. This same middle leader's team set new development goals each year which applied to the whole team.

Middle leaders in this study demonstrated the power of collaboration, collective responsibility for learning and reflective professional enquiry for improving student learning. By embedding high norms of collegiality and openness, they created and maintained networks and partnerships outside of their teams to provide resources and skills to their PLCs. As the ebb and flow of ideas filtered through their enthusiastic and collegial PLCs, middle leaders focused their teachers' attention on student learning. In turn, improved student learning and the development of symmetry in curriculum articulation was noted.

7.3.1.5. Focus on Teams

The three schools fostered learning at every level of the organization. Increasingly, as middle leadership develops more deeply across each organisation, it is the middle leaders themselves who create conditions for team and individual learning. The principals of both China School and Hong Kong Island School made the development of middle leadership key to their school's future success and recently created structures to support this, whilst the principal of Hong Kong New Territory School stated clearly his fundamental belief in and support of middle leadership through clear role descriptions and empowerment of middle leaders over their PLCs.

Middle leaders increasingly support their members by ensuring their professional needs and goals are met. With middle leaders being frontline teachers themselves, the findings showed a pattern of support of their leadership by their teacher teams, as middle leaders themselves (for the most part) supported and respected their members' professionalism. They often initiated professional development activities for their members to meet shortcomings in skills, practices and professional knowledge. They mediated pedagogical and curricular initiatives from outside the team ensuring external standards and practices were shared across the team.

7.3.1.6. Group, as well as individual, learning is promoted

Effective middle leaders facilitate opportunities for individual as well as group learning to take place. They use individualised mentorship and coaching as tools to support teachers and to focus their attention on student learning. They make use of experiences of team members to support team efforts. This promotion of the respective talent within their teams allow for significant professional learning to take place with the team, and as has been evidenced in this chapter, contribute to school capacity building as well. Language teachers may support teachers of science or social science in writing or making presentations which strengthens student learning. Middle leaders often coordinate such interaction across departments and may share leadership with experienced or skilled team members to lead such initiatives.

7.3.1.7. Mutual trust, respect and support among members

Mutual trust and respect for each member's skills, knowledge and abilities enabled effective middle leaders in this study to share leadership through a sharing of vision and values and espoused inclusive membership. Their support for their team members' efforts coupled with meeting their professional needs empower middle leaders to focus their teachers' attention on student learning. Responses from Hong Kong New Territories School highlight this perception in the eyes of middle leaders. Middle leaders there believed "transparency," "openness," "taking care of their needs" and "negotiating with the management" enabled them to have a "significant relationship" with their teams, which made mutual trust, respect and support bi-directional.

7.3.1.8. School type and Middle Leadership-led professional learning communities

Middle leadership of PLCs is deeply contextualised and dependent on several factors. This study has looked at the impact middle leaders have in leading their teacher teams and their ability to focus their teachers' attention on student learning. In the three schools, the influence middle leaders had on their teacher teams in the domains of teaching and learning, school capacity building and external influences was substantial. They created a culture of inclusivity and sharing, collaboration and collective responsibility through reflective inquiry

and a focus on team building to improve student learning in their contexts. Yet, I have been unable to identify research which qualifies the impact school type has on middle leaders work with their PLCS. Nonetheless, emerging factors from the interview data, in addition to research into outstanding middle leadership and effective PLCs as distinct entities, guided my research towards looking at traits in school type which support and impede middle leadership and the work with PLCs. The data from this study indicates that school type impacted six areas:

- Funds for professional development;
- competitive environment;
- staff stability and longevity;
- leadership style of the principal;
- support for middle leadership and
- role descriptions, authority and role recognition.

The literature cited previously on the leadership style of the principal, support for middle leadership and middle leaders' role descriptions, authority and recognition indicate that each of these impact the efficacy of middle leadership and their work with school improvement and student learning. Although no study to date has explicitly looked at a cross-school type comparison of government-aided, DSS schools and international schools in Hong Kong and

Shenzhen, my experience in the region, in both government-aided and direct-subsidy schools, as well as the professional conversations I have had with other colleagues across these school types suggests that variation across individual schools is broad, but that this is not dependent on school type. That is not to say that the capacity for all school types to deal with deficiencies in these areas are the same. Improving and increasing opportunities for middle leaders to engage in targeted and individualised middle leadership development, and initiatives to further collegiality, such as mentoring and coaching and appraisal processes training, would not be able to be funded by all school types. Budgets for professional development in some school types would not stretch so far.

Therefore, the three remaining factors that emerged on school-type impact, i.e., funds for professional development, competitive environment and staff stability and longevity do seem to be linked to the school context. In Hong Kong and Shenzhen, falling school-age populations place genuine pressure on schools to recruit students. With increasing middle-class wealth and smaller families, parents in the region are increasingly more willing to pay higher school fees with the hope that a better education and more post-school opportunities will accompany the higher fees. As indicated in chapter 4 and in this chapter, China School, an international school, is able to offer targeted professional development and opportunities for professional growth to attract and retain staff. Hong Kong New Territories School, a

Government-aided school with less than USD$100 in annual school fees and charges needs to rely on the government, tertiary and charitable foundations to help them provide their staff with professional learning. Hong Kong Island School, a DSS school with ~USD$5000 in annual school fees and charges is able to target professional development for some staff, but still relies on government, tertiary institutions and charitable foundations to help them provide their staff with the majority of their professional learning. This lack of government support for targeted and individualised professional learning is seen as hampering middle leadership development, and their work with their PLCs. This is in stark contrast to Singapore, for example, which has set up units within the Department of Education, targeting leadership and PLCs in publicly funded schools in the country.

As funding is seen as the principal factor impacting middle leadership, it is not surprising that the competitive environment and staff stability and longevity are also heavily influenced by school finances. Due to the falling population in Hong Kong, the difference in the number of school places versus the school-aged population continues to grow with 15 publicly funded secondary schools having closed in the past decade. As DSS schools are funded per capita based on actual student enrolment, intense competition to recruit students places enormous pressure on middle leaders and their PLCs. As funds for professional development, school facilities and additional staff is paid directly from school fees, changes in enrolment numbers

can have significant and potentially dire consequences. The heavy pressure on middle leaders and their staff in DSS schools was cited by both DSS and government-aided school participants.

Likewise, schools also compete for good staff. As most aided schools do not have the financial resources to increase salaries or employ additional staff beyond the formula given to them by the Government, many aided schools are at a disadvantage to DSS and international schools who, through school fees, are able to pay more and provide more opportunities for career advancement and leadership opportunities. To sum up, school type does impact middle leaders and their work with their teacher teams. Without access to quality professional development and the ability to retain and promote staff, certain school types may not be able to engage in significant improvement and school capacity-building without further external support.

7.3.1.9. Implications of the development of Middle Leadership-led professional learning communities

Whilst there has been a considerable focus on middle leadership in research over the past decade following numerous calls for more enquiry, research into the impact it has on PLCs in Hong Kong remains limited although the corps of research into PLCs in Mainland China is

growing (Qiao, Yu & Zhang, 2018; Sargent, 2015; Wang et al., 2017) but little reference to the role middle leaders play in their operations is evident although they highlight the difference between Chinese professional learning communities and those found in western contexts.

Likewise, although the body of research on PLCs is growing with some studies even taking place in the Asian context (Hairon, 2013; Hairon, 2014; Ko, 2014), understanding about the interplay between middle leadership and PLCs remains incomplete.

Middle leaders play a pivotal role in improving student learning and building school capacity through their work within PLCs. This study helps to build on the knowledge acquired from research into middle leadership and PLCs over the past two decades. By clearly defining middle leader roles and authority, facilitating and maintaining middle leader-led PLCs and ensuring a focus on student learning, the findings have revealed the crucial role middle leaders played in improving learning within their organizations.

Increasingly, schools are beginning to recognise the importance of middle leaders in contributing to school capacity building. Through their creation of collaborative cultures and collective responsibility for student learning, middle leaders are uniquely positioned to ensure teachers focus their attention on improving student learning. Yet, the literature has not kept up with the fundamental importance of how middle leaders share leadership opportunities within their teacher teams. In an era of frequent job and career changes, contingency and succession planning is crucial to school stability and student learning. Effective middle leaders add the sharing of leadership to their toolkits to not only ensure inclusivity, collegiality and cohesiveness, but to recognise the fast pace of change in education and in society in general. The lack of reference to the sharing of leadership in the PLC-oriented literature appears obvious in light of this study's findings and needs to be considered in future research.

Contrary factors have been used throughout the thesis to highlight opposing views. Middle leaders, as apparent in the literature, face significant challenges and struggle for resources, influence and the ability to enact practices and routines they feel may best meet their professional learning communities' needs. The political environment within the school, the competitive nature of schools, the leadership style of the principal and the need to recruit both staff and students have all been highlighted as challenges for middle leaders, informal leaders

and their teacher teams. Nevertheless, this thesis equally celebrates their many successes and their desire to overcome all of these obstacles for the benefit of their staff and also for their students.

Implications

This research on the work of middle leaders and their PLCs not only contributes but further extends the important knowledge-base on instructional leadership by casting a spotlight on middle leaders, their PLCs and the interplay between the two in the context of three school types in Shenzhen and Hong Kong. As the body of research looking at the interplay between these two constructs is very limited, the present study offers several important implications for policy, practice and the further study of middle leader-led PLCs.

Implications for policy

Although there was significant similarity across school types in strategies used to enable middle leader influence over their PLCs and their ability to focus teachers' attention on student learning, school-type did impact access to professional development, staff longevity and stability and competitive environment.

Policy makers and education administrators need to take these three critical findings into account as decisions taken on the distribution of funds to schools and within schools is contemplated. In agreement with the education reform recommendations made by the permanent Secretary for Education in 2004, the findings here show that more discretionary funds are needed for public sector schools; however, such funding should be aimed at providing time for quality, targeted and individualised professional development, development of PLCs with the specific goal of producing teacher stability. As in Singapore (Hairon, 2013), more effort needs to be put into the establishment, development and training of middle leaders and middle leader-led PLCs. Likewise, the International Baccalaureate Organisation (IBO), and its professional development division need to develop training modules which take into account cultural contexts and diversity when developing middle leader-led professional learning communities. This research strongly shows that middle leader-led PLCs can be powerful tools for developing school capacity, improving student learning and creating conditions for teacher collegiality and collaboration.

Implications for practice

As leadership in schools becomes more complex in an era of increasing accountability (Walker & Ko, 2011), the need for school leader development is significant. Recognising the transient nature of teachers and middle leaders in Hong Kong public schools and in

international schools worldwide, school capacity building and development strategies need to fully utilise middle leaders' unique proximity to the classroom and their interactions with their teacher teams in order to induce teachers to effectively work together in PLCs. As such, this research has special significance for middle leadership and PLC development. Education authorities need to invest in research which looks at middle leader-led PLCs within their unique cultural and social contexts. In Hong Kong, further policy development for each school funding type needs to be developed, in order to reduce the present disparity between intended and operational professional development practices. Policy, funding and support needs to be developed within schools to develop middle leaders with the necessary skills set to lead their PLCs with efficacy and expertise.

This study has identified key factors present in effective middle leader-led professional learning communities; these include teaching and learning, and to a lesser extent, school capacity building. This study has also demonstrated the need for senior school leaders and education authorities to develop even more opportunities for middle leaders and their teacher teams to exert greater external influences beyond their departments, their schools, and in some cases, their regions or countries.

The findings further uncovered three key attributes present in the outstanding PLCs observed in this study: inclusivity and a culture of sharing; collaboration and collective responsibility for learning; and the facilitation of a team culture. School administrators need to not only look at formal middle leaders, but also to ensure a vibrant and flourishing culture of shared leadership where opportunities for informal leadership can thrive. With such a culture, staff instability and longevity will have a more limited negative effect on school operations and student learning.

Implications for research

This study highlights the nascent literature on middle leaders' impact on PLCs in North Asia. Although the corpus of this research has explored PLCs or middle leadership as separate entities, I have identified limited literature on the interplay between the two. Adding to that, with the laissez-faire system of governance in Hong Kong and the multiple varieties of publicly funded primary and secondary schools that have been permitted to grow under the Education Bureau, it seems there is much scope for research and inquiry. For all its similarities, the findings highlighted significant differences between the two schools.

The challenges that middle leaders faced and the inhibitions to lead their teacher teams highlighted the micropolitical aspects identified in each school type and in each school

context. Future research emanating from this study could focus on these micropolitical aspects such as the leadership style of the principal or funds available for professional development and deserve greater attention from researchers.

As Hong Kong and China's education systems continue to merge in the coming years as "one country, two systems" reaches its mid-point of development, exploring school types on either side of the border seems timely and relevant. As part of this study, I looked at a highly successful state-owned and operated international school in Shenzhen. Further research into middle leader-led PLCs in other state-owned international schools as well as the more numerous private sector international schools in mainland China may also yield more clarity on the influence of school-type within this important school sector.

Major contributions of the study

It is significant that this study highlights the pivotal role leadership plays in the execution of effective professional learning communities and its contribution to the instructional leadership theory and the literature is important. Middle leaders engagement with their PLCs and their ability to focus their teachers' attention on student learning is undeniable in these three schools. Middle leaders, who shared leadership with members of their professional learning communities and allowed informal leaders to lead PLCs initiatives further enhanced

their PLCs activities. These two findings should drive future research into instructional leadership and unveil the hidden potential of middle leaders and their work with PLCs, irrespective of school type.

This qualitative, multi-case study across three schools in Shenzhen and Hong Kong investigated whether school-type has any implications on how middle leaders lead PLCs, including the impact of their leadership. The following contributions appear pertinent. First and foremost, the findings reveal the pivotal role that middle leaders play in leading their PLCs irrespective of whether these communities are housed in a government-aided, DSS or international school. When inclusivity and a culture of sharing, collaboration and collective responsibility for learning, plus the facilitation of a team culture was present, middle leader-led PLCs flourished and middle leaders were able to influence their teachers to focus their efforts on student learning.

Secondly, I showed that a key characteristic of effective middle leadership shared informal leadership, was an important characteristic in high performing, middle leader-led PLCs. This expanded on the work of Stoll et al. (2006) which looked at the characteristics present in effective PLCs. This additional characteristic dovetails with other studies that have concluded similarly about the importance of distributed leadership for school improvement

(Bryant, 2019; Hallinger, 2012; Spillane, 2006; Walker, 2007; and student learning (Leithwood, 2016). Shared leadership allowed for additional expertise and knowledge to be brought into the team deliberations and discussions, providing important support whilst demonstrating a sharing culture of mutual respect and support. Each of the eight elements of effective professional learning, as described in Stoll et al. (2006) are further elevated and amplified with the incorporation of shared leadership. Thirdly, understanding of the importance of context on middle leadership enactment within their PLCs and the tools, practices and routines that they used to focus teachers' attention on student learning has been further enriched and extended by this study. The study has also shown how school-type plays a role in how middle leaders lead their teacher teams and strengthen their ability to improve student learning.

By focusing on what Spillane and Coldren (2011) refer to as the practice and situation aspect, a kit of tools have been identified, namely, routines and practices which aspiring middle leaders may consider using in order to improve the efficacy of their PLCs' core duty of improving student learning. The sharing of leadership was also an important discovery in the context of this study because it enabled schools to broaden the pool of expertise and knowledge available to frontline teachers. Fourthly and finally, the domains of middle leadership enactment allowed me and the case study schools to better understand the focus of

middle leadership activities with their PLCs within each context, and how synergies can be achieved through understanding and redirecting middle leaders' efforts. Gurr and Drysdale (2013)'s framework on domains of middle leadership enactment provided an important reference for the framing of the study. However, the interplay between the three theories meant that none of them fully represented the phenomena unfolding in the interviews and the document study.

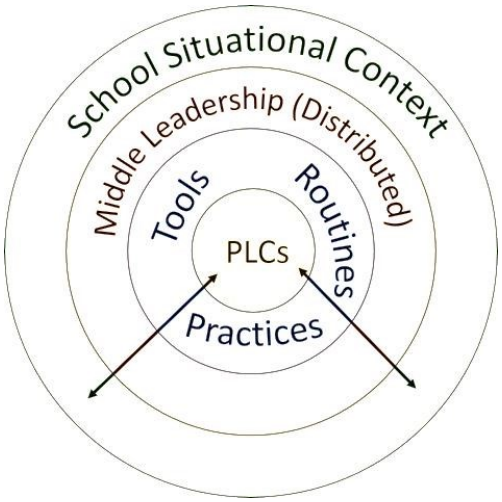

Figure 2: Framework A

The initial framework provided direction for the study and created a focus for the interview questions to be developed. It also provided guidance for the initial data analysis as well. Throughout this analysis, the interaction between middle leaders and their PLCs within their unique situational contexts demanded a further broadening of this framework, to encompass the literature in the framework and allow for further targeted research. Faced with this, I created framework B. This contribution from my study will allow future researchers to look

at the impact of each independent factor regarding the effectiveness of middle leader-led PLCs. An important contribution to instructional leadership is the pivotal role that middle leaders play in teaching and learning, school capacity building and external influence. Further research on their important influence on their teacher teams must be more thoroughly investigated in differing social and political contexts with actors from varying cultures. Through this new framework, for example, the researcher was able to identify the influence of shared leadership, in the practice aspect within the domain of teaching and learning.

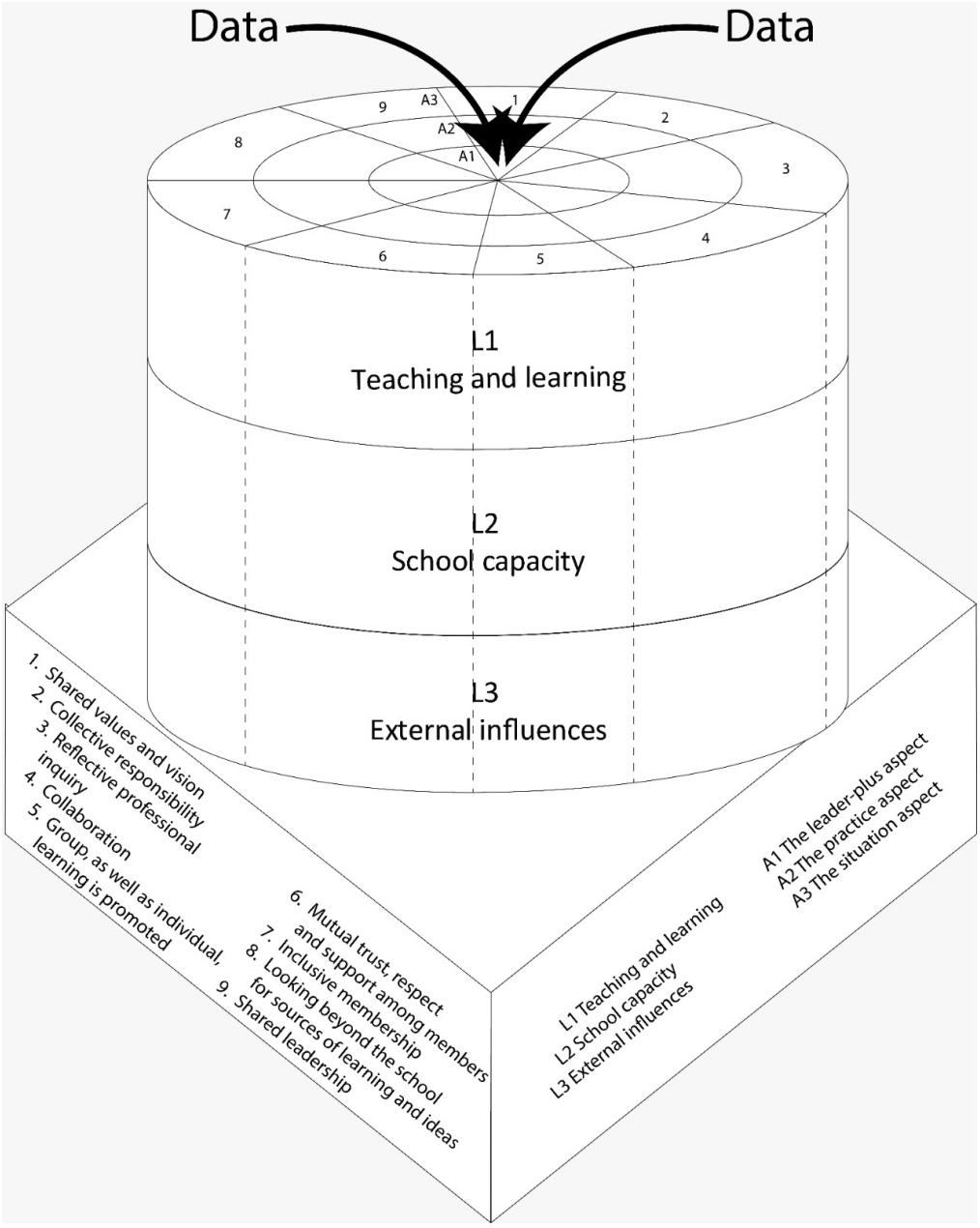

Figure 3: Framework B

Using the analogy of a drum, the focus of analysis could be limited to a particular portion of this "drum," allowing for deeper research into middle leadership of PLCs from a variety of perspectives. The researcher would able to alter the "rhythm" of the research by combining factors to create themes for study such as "shared values and vision, collective responsibility

and reflective professional inquiry" as a "culture of sharing and collective responsibility" for school capacity builds within an international school (the situational aspect). This modular framework allows for flexibility and focus for future researchers and could fill a research gap which has been identified in the literature several over the past decade (Brouwer et al., 2011; Hairon et al., 2014; Hairon et al., 2017).

Limitations

Despite this research study having a number of significant implications for policy, practice and research of middle leader-led PLCs in Shenzhen and Hong Kong and beyond the region, it equally has some limitations. First, as access to unique schools required bridging linguistic gaps, it was necessary for interviews in one school to be mostly conducted in Chinese. As I do not have native-speaker proficiency in Chinese, there may be unintended biases in the process of translation, which was undertaken by a Senior Research Assistant from the Department of Education Leadership and Policy at the Education University of Hong Kong. I nevertheless took great care to ensure the accuracy of the interview questions and interview transcripts. Nonetheless, being able to speak freely in their mother tongue allowed the participants to convey valuable insights into middle leaders and their leadership of PLCs. The interviews at the other two case study schools were conducted completely in English.

The rich findings of this multi-case research study are important because they not only narrow the knowledge gap on middle leadership and more to the point, middle leader-led PLCs, on which there is very limited literature but mark a very clear direction for future research. With the diminishing influence of principals on instructional leadership in schools, more research into middle leaders and their professional learning communities, particularly in non-western contexts is urgently needed. This research study selected government financed international, aided and DSS schools in Shenzhen and Hong Kong and an enlarged study of each individual school-type, as well as a comparative study might be interesting and further develop the theory on the impact of both middle leadership and shared leadership on professional learning communities. In particular, DSS schools in Hong Kong are a relatively new phenomenon, having existed for less than three decades and as such have garnered much parental and media interest, but little in the way of research and even less so in the area of middle leadership and their work with professional learning communities.

Second, the laissez-faire education system present in Hong Kong, where the model of funding schools is heavily weighted towards non-government schools (34 government-run primary schools out of 477 non-government-funded primary schools / 31 government-run secondary schools out of 452 non-government-funded secondary schools), provides a unique

opportunity for school-type focused studies on middle leadership and their work with middle leaders. Third, government-run international schools are in unique situational contexts to view the mixing of eastern and western educational and leadership philosophies particularly with regard to middle leadership and teacher teams. The application of this study's framework in an enlarged study could allow for a deeper understanding of how culture, school type and leadership enactment differ across regions in China.

References

Advisory Committee of Teacher Education and Qualifications. (2009). *Third report on teachers' continuing professional development (2009)*. Hong Kong: Author.

Advisory Committee on School-based Management. (2000). *Transforming schools into dynamic and accountable professional learning communities school-based management consultation document*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong Government.

Angelle, P.S., & Schmid, J.B. (2007). School structure and the identity of teacher leaders: perspectives of principals and teachers. *Journal of School Leadership, 17 (6),* 771-799.

Avolio, B., Rotundo, M., & Walumbwa, F. (2014). Retraction notice to "Early Life Experiences as Determinants of Leadership Role Occupancy: The Importance of Parental Influence and Rule Breaking Behavior". *The Leadership Quarterly 20 (2009)* 329–342]. *The Leadership Quarterly, 25(5),* 1069-1070.

Bennett, N., Woods, P., Wise, C., & Newton, W. (2007). Understandings of middle leadership in secondary schools: A review of empirical research. *School Leadership & Management, 27(5)*, 453-470.

Bergman, Jacqueline Z, Rentsch, Joan R, Small, Erika E, Davenport, Shaun W, & Bergman, Shawn M. (2012). The shared leadership process in decision-making teams. *The Journal of Social Psychology, 152(1),* 17-42.

Berry, B., Johnson, D., & Montgomery, D. (2005). The power of teacher leadership. *Educational Leadership, 62(5),* 56.

Bolam, R., McMahon, A., Stoll, L., Thomas, S., Wallace, M., Hawkey, K., & Greenwood, A. (2005). Creating and sustaining effective professional learning communities [*DfES Research Report, 637*]. London: University of Bristol.

Bromley, D. B. (1986). The case-study method in psychology and related-disciplines. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons.

Brouwer, P., Brekelmans, J.M.G., Nieuwenhius, A.F.M. and Simons, P.R.J. (2011, April). *Community development in the school workplace*, paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans LA.

Bryant, D. (2019). Conditions that support middle leaders' work in organisational and system leadership: Hong Kong case studies. *School Leadership & Management, 39(5),* 415-433.

Bush, T. (2009). Leadership development and School improvement: Contemporary issues in Leadership Development. *Educational Review, 61(4)*, 375-389.

Busher, H., Harris, A., & Wise, C. (2000). *Subject leadership and school improvement*. London: P. Chapman.

Chan, D., & Tan, J. (2008). Privatization and the rise of direct subsidy scheme schools and independent schools in Hong Kong and Singapore. *International Journal of Educational Management, 22(6)*, 464-487.

Cheng, Y., & Walker, A. (2008). When reform hits reality: The bottleneck effect in Hong Kong primary schools. *School Leadership & Management, 28(5)*, 505-521.

Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2011). *Research methods in education (7th ed.)*. London: Routledge.

Crane, A. & De Nobile, J. (2014). Year coordinators as middle-leaders in independent girls' schools : Their role and accountability. *Leading and Managing, 20(1),* 80-92.

Creswell, J. W. (2013). Qualitative inquiry and research designs: *Choosing among five traditions (3rd ed.)*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Crowther, F., Kaagan, S., Ferguson, M., & Hann, L. (2002). *Developing teacher leaders: How teacher leadership enhances school success*. Corwin Press.

Danielson, C., & Association for Supervision Curriculum Development. (2006). *Teacher leadership that strengthens professional practice.* Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Day, C., Sammons, P., Hopkins, D., Leithwood, K., & Kington, A. (2008). Research into the impact of school leadership on pupil outcomes: Policy and research contexts. *School Leadership & Management, 28(1)*, 5-25.

De Nobile, J. (2018). Towards a theoretical model of middle leadership in schools. *School Leadership & Management, 38(4)*, 395-416.

Dimmock, C., & Walker, A. (2005). *Educational leadership: Culture and diversity*. SAGE Publications.

Dinham, S., & Scott, C. (2002). Awards for Teaching Excellence: Intentions and Realities, 1-30.

Dinham, S. (2007). How schools get moving and keep improving: Leadership for teacher learning, student success and school renewal. *Australian Journal of Education, 51*(3), 263-275.

Drysdale, L., & Gurr, D. (2011). Theory and practice of successful school leadership in Australia. *School Leadership & Management, 31(4),* 355-368.

Dufour, R., Eaker, R., National Educational Service, B., & Association for Supervision Curriculum Development, A. (1998). *Professional learning communities at work: Best practices for enhancing student achievement.* National Educational Service.

Dufour, R. (2004). What is a “Professional Learning Community?” *Educational Leadership*, *61(8)*, 6-11.

DuFour, R. (2006). Learning by doing : *A handbook for professional learning communities at work*. Bloomington, Ind.: Solution Tree.

DuFour, R., & Eaker, R. (2008). *Revisiting professional learning communities at work : New insights for improving schools*. Bloomington: Solution Tree.

Education Bureau (2004, 4 May) Speech at Luncheon Meeting of Hong Kong Democratic Foundation [Speech transcript]. Retrieved from https://www.edb.gov.hk/en/about-edb/press/speeches/psed/2012/20040505122341.html .

Education Bureau (2019). *School enrolment statistics, 2018/2019 (Kindergarten, primary and secondary levels).* Retrieved from https://www.edb.gov.hk/attachment/en/about-edb/publications-stat/figures/Enrol_2018.pdf .

Education Department (1981) *White Paper on Primary Education and Pre- primary Services*. Hong Kong: Government Printer.

Ellen, R.F., ed. (1984). *Ethnographic research: A guide to general conduct*. San Diego, CA: Academic Press.

Fleming, P. (2014). *Successful middle leadership in secondary schools: A practical guide to subject and team effectiveness (Vol. 1)*. Taylor and Francis.

Fullan, M. (1993). *Change Forces. Probing the Depths of Educational Reform (Vol. 10, School development and the management of change series)*. London: The Falmer Press.

Fullan, M. (2001). *Leading in a Culture of Change*. Jossey-Bass.

Ganon-Shilon, S., & Schechter, C. (2017). Making sense of school leaders' sense making. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership, 45*(4), 682-698.

Gardner-Mctaggart, A. (2019). Leadership of international schools and the International Baccalaureate learner profile. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership, 47(5)*, 766-784.

Gurr, D. (2018). High-need schools in Australia : *The leadership of two principals*. [On screen presentation].

Gronn, P. (2003). Leadership: Who needs it? *School Leadership and Management, 23(3),* 267-290.

Gurr, D., & Drysdale, L. (2013). Middle-level secondary school leaders. *Journal of Educational Administration, 51(1)*, 55-71.

Gurr, D. (2015). A Model of Successful School Leadership from the International Successful School Principalship Project. *Societies, 5(1)*, 136-150.

Gurr, D., & Drysdale, L. (2018). System Leadership and School Leadership. *Research in Educational Administration & Leadership*, *3(2),* 207-229.

Gurr, D., Drysdale, L., & Mulford, B. (2006). Models of successful principal leadership. *School Leadership & Management, 26(4)*, 371-395.

Hadfield, M. (2007). Co-Leaders and middle leaders: the dynamic between leaders and followers in the network of schools. *School Leadership and Management: Formerly School Organization, 27(3)*, 259-283.

Hairon, S. (2006). Action research in Singapore education: Constraints and sustainability. *Educational Action Research, 14(4),* 513-523.

Hairon, S., & Dimmock, C. (2012). Singapore schools and professional learning communities: Teacher professional development and school leadership in an Asian hierarchical system. *Educational Review, 64(4),* 405–424.

Hairon, S., Goh, J., & Lin, T. (2014). Distributed leadership to support PLCs in Asian pragmatic Singapore schools. *International Journal of Leadership in Education, 17(3),* 370-386.

Hairon, S., Goh, J., & Chua, C. (2015). Teacher leadership enactment in professional learning community contexts: Towards a better understanding of the phenomenon. *School Leadership & Management, 35(2*), 163-182.

Hairon, S., Goh, J., Chua, C., & Wang, L. (2017). A research agenda for professional learning communities: Moving forward. *Professional Development in Education, 43(1),* 72-86.

Hairon, S., & Tan, C. (2017). Professional learning communities in Singapore and Shanghai: Implications for teacher collaboration. Compare: *A Journal of Comparative and International Education, 47(1),* 91-104.

Hallinger, P. (2004). Meeting the Challenges of Cultural Leadership: The changing role of principals in Thailand. Discourse: *Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education, 25(1),* 61-73.

Hallinger, Philip. (2011). Leadership for learning: Lessons from 40 years of empirical research. *Journal of Educational Administration, 49*(2), 125-142.

Hallinger, P. (2012). A conceptual framework for systemic reviews of research in educational leadership and management, Journal of Educational Administration, *51*(2), 126-149.

Hallinger, P., & Heck, R. H. (2010). Collaborative leadership and school improvement: Understanding the impact on school capacity and student learning. *School Leadership & Management, 30(2)*, 95–110.

Hallinger, P., & Heck, R. H. (2011). Exploring the journey of school improvement: Classifying and analyzing patterns of change in school improvement processes and learning outcomes. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement, 22(1)*, 1–27.

Hallinger, P., & Lee, M. (2012). A global study of the practice and impact of distributed instructional leadership in International Baccalaureate (IB) schools. *Leadership and Policy in Schools, 11(4)*, 477-495.

Hansen, K. (1999). A qualitative assessment of student interest in science education. *Studies in Educational Evaluation, 25(4)*, 399-414.

Harris, A. (2003). Distributed leadership in schools: Leading or misleading? *Management in Education, 16(5)*, 10-13.

Harris, A. (2005). Reflections on distributed leadership. *Management in Education, 19(2),* 10-12.

Harris, A. (2009). Creative leadership: Developing future leaders. *Management in Education, 23(1)*, 9-11.

Harris, A. and Jones, M., (2017). Leadership in turbulent times: A moment to pause? *School Leadership and Management, 37 (1-2)*, pp. 1-2.

Harrison, H., Birks, M., Franklin, R., & Mills, J. (2017). Case Study Research: Foundations and Methodological Orientations. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research, 18*(1). doi:http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/fqs-18.1.2655

Hattie, J. A. C. (2009). Visible learning: *A synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses relating to achievement*. London: Routledge.

Highfield, C. (2012). The impact of middle leadership practices on student achievement outcomes in New Zealand secondary schools. Auckland, New Zealand: University of Auckland.

Hilliard, A. (2012). Practices and Value of a Professional Learning Community in Higher Education. Contemporary Issues in Education Research, 5(2), 71-74.

Hjertø, K., Merok Paulsen, J., & Petteri Tihveräinen, S. (2014). Social-cognitive outcomes of teachers' engagement in learning communities. *Journal of Educational Administration, 52(6)*, 775-791.

Hollins, E., Mcintyre, L., Debose, C., Hollins, K., & Towner, A. (2004). Promoting a self-sustaining learning community: Investigating an internal model for teacher development. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 17(2),* 247-264.

Census and Statistics Department Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (2016). *Hong Kong monthly digest of statistics (September 2016)*. Retrieved from https://www.statistics.gov.hk/pub/B10100022016MM09B0100.pdf

Hopkins, M., & Spillane, J. (2015). Conceptualizing relations between instructional guidance infrastructure (IGI) and teachers' beliefs about mathematics instruction: Regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive considerations. *Journal of Educational Change, 16(4),* 421-450.

Hord, S. (1997). Professional learning communities: Communities of continuous inquiry and improvement. *Undefined*, 1-71.

Hord, S. (2004). *Learning together, leading together: Changing schools through professional learning communities (Critical issues in educational leadership series)*. New York: *Teachers College Press*.

Hord, S. (2008). Evolution of the professional learning community. *Journal of Staff Development, 10-13*,66.

Huberman, A., & Miles, M. (1984). Rethinking the Quest for School Improvement: Some Findings from the DESSI Study. *Teachers College Record, 86(1),* 34-54.

Irvine, P., & Brundrett, M. (2016). Middle leadership and its challenges: A case study in the secondary independent sector. *Management in Education, 30(2),* 86-92.

Irvine, P., & Brundrett, M. (2019). Negotiating the next step: The part that experience plays with middle leaders' development as they move into their new role. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership, 47(1),* 74-90.

Javadi, V., Bush, T. & Ng, A. (2017). Middle leadership in international schools: Evidence from Malaysia. *School Leadership & Management 37 (5):* 476–499.

Katzenmayer, M., & Moller, G. (2001). *Awakening the sleeping giant: Helping teachers develop as leaders (2nd ed.)*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Kemp, R., & Nathan, M. (1989). *Middle management in schools: A survival guide*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Lee, C.K.J. & Kennedy, J.K. (2018). *Routledge Handbook on Schools and Schooling in Asia*: (pp. 257-260). London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

Ko, J., Hallinger, P., & Walker, A. D. (2012). Exploring school Improvement in Hong Kong secondary schools. *Peabody Journal of Education, 87,* 216–234.

Ko, J., Hallinger, P., & Walker, A. (2015). Exploring whole school versus subject department improvement in Hong Kong secondary schools. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement, 26(2),* 215-239.

Koh, H., Gurr, H., Drysdale, D., & Ang, L. (2011). How school leaders perceive the leadership role of middle leaders in Singapore primary schools? *Asia Pacific Education Review, 12(4),* 609-620.

Kotter, John P. (1990). A Force for Change: How Leadership Differs from Management. New York: Free Press.

Kruse, S., Louis, K. & Bryk A. (1994). Building professional communities in schools. *Issues in Restructuring Schools 6,* 3–6.

Kruse, S., & Johnson, B. (2017). Tempering the normative demands of professional learning communities with the organizational realities of life in schools: Exploring the cognitive dilemmas faced by educational leaders. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership, 45(4),* 588-604.

Kvale, S. & Brinkmann, S. (2009). *Learning the craft of qualitative research interviewing*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage

Kwan, P. and Walker, A. (2010). Secondary school vice-principals: Commitment, challenge, efficacy and synchrony. *British Educational Research Journal, 36(4),* 531-548.

Lárusdóttir, S., & O'Connor, E. (2017). Distributed leadership and middle leadership practice in schools: A disconnect? *Irish Educational Studies, 36(4),* 423-438.

Lauer, P., & Dean, C. (2004). Teacher Quality Toolkit. *Mid Continent Research for Education and Learning*, 1-71.

Lee, M., Walker, A., & Ling Chui, Y. (2012). Contrasting effects of instructional leadership practices on student learning in a high accountability context. *Journal of Educational Administration, 50(5)*, 586-611.

Lee, V.E., and Smith, J.B. (1996). Collective responsibility for learning and its effect on gains in achievement for early secondary students. *American Journal of Education, 104(2),* 103-147.

Levicki, Cyril. (2001). *Developing leadership genius: The nature and nurture of leaders*. London: McGraw-Hill.

Leithwood, K., & National College for School Leadership. (2006). *Seven strong claims about successful school leadership.* Nottingham [England]: NCSL.

Leithwood, K., Harris, A., & Hopkins, D. (2007). Seven strong claims about successful school leadership. *School Leadership & Management, 28(1),* 27-42.

Leithwood, K., Patten, S., & Jantzi, D. (2010). Testing a conception of how school leadership influences student learning. *Educational Administration Quarterly,46(5),* 671-706.

Leithwood, K. (2016). Department-head leadership for school improvement. *Leadership and Policy in Schools, 15(2)*, 117-140.

Leithwood, K., Sun, J., & Mccullough, C. (2019). How school districts influence student achievement. *Journal of Educational Administration, 57(5),* 519-539.

Lieberman, A., & Mace, D. (2009). The role of 'accomplished teachers' in professional learning communities: Uncovering practice and enabling leadership. *Teachers and Teaching, 15(4),* 459-470.

Louis, K.S., Marks, H.M. and Kruse, S. (1996) Teachers' professional community in restructuring schools. *American Educational Research Journal, 33(4),* 757-798.

Louis, K., & Marks, H. (1998). Does professional community affect the classroom? Teachers' work and student experiences in restructuring schools. *American Journal of Education, 106(4),* 532-575.

Mason, J. (2007) 'Re-using' qualitative data: On the merits of an investigative epistemology. *Sociological Research Online*, 12(3), 1-4.

Maxwell, J. (2013). *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach*. Thousand Oaks, CA.: Sage Publications, Inc.

Merriam, S. B. (1998). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Merriam, Sharan B., & Ebrary, Inc. (2009). *Qualitative Research : A guide to design and implementation (Jossey-Bass higher and adult education series).* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Miles, M.B., Huberman, A.M. & Saldaña, J.(2019). Qualitative Data Analysis: A methods sourcebook (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Muijs, D., & Harris, A. (2003) Assistant and deputy heads: Key leadership issues and challenges. *Management in Education 17(1)*: 6–8.

Muijs, D., & Harris, A. (2006). Teacher led school improvement: Teacher leadership in the UK. Teaching & Teacher Education: *An International Journal of Research and Studies, 22(8),* 961-972.

Ng, S. W. (2013). Equipping Aspiring Principals for the Principalship in Hong Kong. *Educational Management Administration and Leadership, 41(3),* 272-288.

Ng, S., & Kenneth Chan, T. (2014). Continuing professional development for middle leaders in primary schools in Hong Kong. *Journal of Educational Administration, 52(6),* 869-886.

OECD. (2006). Assessing Scientific, Reading and Mathematical Literacy: *A Framework for PISA 2006*. Paris: OECD.

OECD. (2010). *Pisa 2009 at a glance*. Paris: OECD.

OECD. (2014). *PISA 2012: What students know and can do: Student performance in mathematics, reading and science.* Paris: OECD.

Pang, S.K.N., Wang T. and Leung, L.M.Z. (2016). Educational reforms and the practices of professional learning community in Hong Kong primary schools. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education, 36(2),* pp. 231-247.

Patton, M.Q. (2002) *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods, 3rd edition, Thousand Oaks*, CA: Sage.

Peng-Ju Zhu. (2014). The Influence of Neo-liberalism in Education Policy-Leadership and Equity. *International Journal of Modern Education Forum, 3(2),* 75-78.

Phillips, J. (2003). Powerful Learning: Creating Learning Communities in Urban School Reform. Journal of Curriculum and Supervision, 18(3), 240-58.

Qiao, X., Yu, S., & Zhang, L. (2018). A review of research on professional learning communities in mainland China (2006–2015) Key findings and emerging themes. Educational Management Administration & Leadership, 46(5), 713-728.

Ritchie, J. & Lewis, J. (ed.). (2003) Qualitative Research Practice: A guide for social science students and researchers. London: Sage.

Sahlberg, P. (2011). *Finnish lessons: What can the world learn from educational change in Finland?(Series on school reform).* New York: Teacher College Press.

Sargent, T. C. (2015). Professional learning communities and the diffusion of pedagogical innovation in the Chinese education system. Comparative Education Review, 59(1), 102-132.

Scribner, J.P., Sawyer, R.K., Watson, S.T. and Myers, V.L. (2007). Teams and distributed leadership: a study of group discourse and collaboration, *Educational Administration Quarterly, 43(1)*, 67-100.

Senge, P. (1990). *The fifth discipline: The art and practice of the learning organisation*. New York, NY: Doubleday.

Shirrell, M., & Spillane, J. (2019). Opening the door: Physical infrastructure, school leaders' work-related social interactions, and sustainable educational improvement. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, Teaching and Teacher Education.

Shirrell, M., Hopkins, M., & Spillane, J. (2019). Educational infrastructure, professional learning, and changes in teachers' instructional practices and beliefs. *Professional Development in Education,45(4),* 599-613.

Silins, H., & Mulford, B. (2004). Schools as Learning Organisations - Effects on Teacher Leadership and Student Outcomes. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement, 15(3-4),* 443-466.

Song, K.O. & Choi J. (2017). Structural analysis of factors that influence professional learning communities in Korean elementary schools. *International Electronic Journal of Elementary Education, 10(1),* 1-9.

Spillane, J. (2006). *Distributed leadership: (The Jossey-Bass leadership library in education).* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Spillane, J.P. & Orlina, E.C. (2005). Investigating Leadership Practice: Exploring the entailments of taking a distributed perspective. *Leadership and Policy in Schools, (4)3,* 157 -176.

Spillane, J. P., Pustejovsky, J. S., Pareja, A. M., Lewis, G., & Camburn, E. (2008). Taking a distributed perspective: Epistemological and methodological tradeoffs in operationalizing the leader-plus aspect. *Journal of Educational Administration, 46(2)*, 189-213.

Spillane, J.P. (2010). Conceptualizing school leadership and management from a distributed perspective: An exploration of some study operations and measures. *The Elementary School Journal, 111(2), The Conceptualization, Measurement, and Effects of School Leadership,* 253-281

Spillane, J., & Coldren, A. (2011). *Diagnosis and design for school improvement: Using a distributed perspective to lead and manage change.* New York: Teachers College Press.

Spillane, J., Halverson, R., & Diamond, J. (2004). Towards a theory of leadership practice: A distributed perspective. *Journal of Curriculum Studies, 36(1),* 3-34.

Spillane, J., Shirrell, M., & Hopkins, M. (2016). Designing and deploying a professional learning community (PLC) organizational routine: Bureaucratic and collegial arrangements in tandem. *Les Dossiers Des Sciences De L'éducation, (35),* 97-122.

Spillane, J., Hopkins, M., & Sweet, T. (2018). School district educational infrastructure and change at scale: teacher peer interactions and their beliefs about mathematics instruction. *American Educational Research Journal, 55(3),* 532-571.

Stake, R. E. (1995). *The art of case study research.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Stake, R. E. (2006) A needed subjectivity in educational research, discourse: *Studies in the cultural politics of education, 1:2,* 1-8. DOI: 10.1080/0159630810010201

Stoll, L., Bolam, R., McMahon, A., Wallace, M., & Thomas, S. (2006). Professional learning communities: A review of the literature. *Journal of Educational Change, 7(4),* 221–258.

Stoll, L. and Seashore Louis, K. (eds.) (2007). *Professional learning communities: Divergence, depth and dilemmas.* Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Strahan, D., Cooper, J., & Ward, M. (2001). Middle school reform through data and dialogue: Collaborative evaluation with 17 leadership teams. *Evaluation Review, 25(1)*, 72-99.

Strahan, D. (2003). Promoting a collaborative professional culture in three elementary schools that have beaten the odds. *The elementary school journal,104(2),* 127-146.

Supovitz, J., and J. B. Christman. 2003. Developing communities of instructional practice: Lessons for Cincinnati and Philadelphia. *C.P.R.E. Policy Briefs. RB-39*. Philadelphia, PA: Consortium for policy research in Education.

Swanborn, P. (2010). *Case study research : What, why and how?* London: SAGE.

Sweeting, A. (2007). Education in Hong Kong: Histories, mysteries and myths. *History of Education, 36(1),* 89-108.

Tam, A. (2015a). Exploring teachers' beliefs about teacher learning in professional learning communities and their influence on collegial activities in two departments. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education, 45(3),* 422-444.

Tam, A. (2015b). The role of a professional learning community in teacher change: A perspective from beliefs and practices. *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice, 21(1),* 22-43.

Tse, T. (2008). Choices for whom?: The rhetoric and reality of the direct subsidy scheme in hong kong (1988-2006). *Education and Urban Society, 40(5),* 628-652.

Turner, C. and Sykes, A. (2007). Researching the transition of middle leadership to senior leadership in secondary schools: some emerging themes. *Management in Education, 21(3),* 25-31.

Vescio, V., Ross, D., & Adams, A. (2008). A review of research on the impact of professional learning communities on teaching practice and student learning. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 24(1),* 80-91.

Walker, A. (2007). Leading authentically at the cross-roads of culture and context. *Journal of Educational Change, 8*(3), 257-273.

Walker, A., & Hallinger, P. (2007). Navigating culture and context: The principalship in East and South-East Asia. In *Learning and Teaching for the Twenty-First Century: Festschrift for Professor Phillip Hughes* (pp. 255-273). Springer Netherlands.

Walker, A., & Ko, J. (2011). Principal leadership in an era of accountability: A perspective from the Hong Kong context. *School Leadership & Management, 31,* 369–392.

Wang, D., Wang, J., Li, H., & Li, L. (2017). School context and instructional capacity: A comparative study of professional learning communities in rural and urban schools in China. International Journal of Educational Development, 52, 1-9.

Wang, T. (2015). Contrived collegiality versus genuine collegiality: Demystifying professional learning communities in Chinese schools. *Compare, 45(6),* 908–930.

Weiss, R. (1994). *Learning from strangers: The art and method of qualitative interview studies*. New York: Toronto: New York: Free Press; Maxwell Macmillan Canada; Maxwell Macmillan International.

Wells, C., & Feun, M. (2013). Educational change and professional learning communities: A study of two districts. *Journal of Educational Change, 14(2),* 233-257.

Wenger, E. (1998). Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity. Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press.

Wenger, E. (2000). Communities of practice and social learning systems. *Organization, 7(2),* 225-246.

White, P. (2001). The leadership of curriculum area middle managers in Victorian government secondary schools. *Leading and Managing 7 (2),* 131–150.

Wise, C. (2000). *The monitoring role of the academic middle manager in secondary schools*. Paper presented at the British educational management and administration society (BEMAS) research conference, Cambridge.

Wood, D. (2011). And then the basals arrived: School leadership, learning communities and professionalism. *International Journal of Leadership in Education, 14(4),* 475.

Yin, R. K. (1994). *Case study research: Design and methods (2nd ed.).* Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

Yin, R. K. (2003). *Case study research: Design and methods (3rd ed.).* Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications

Yin, R. (2014). *Case study research : Design and methods (5th ed.).* Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications

Ylimaki, R., & Jacobson, S. (2011). *US and cross-national policies, practices, and preparation : Implications for successful instructional leadership, organizational learning, and culturally responsive practices.* Studies in educational leadership, 12. Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer.

York-Barr, J., & Duke, Karen. (2004). What do we know about teacher leadership: Findings from two decades of scholarship. *Review of Educational Research, 74,* 255-316.

Zhou, Y., Wong, Y.-L., & Li, W. (2015). Educational Choice and Marketization in Hong Kong: The Case of Direct Subsidy Scheme Schools. *Asia Pacific Education Review, 16(4)*, 627-636.

Appendices

Appendix I Ethical Approval

香港教育大學
The Education University of Hong Kong

31 January 2019

Mr Anthony Robert ADAMES
Doctor of Education Programme
Graduate School

Dear Mr Adames,

Application for Extension of Ethical Approval <Ref. no. 2017-2018-0434>

I am pleased to inform you that further approval has been given by the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) for your research project:

Project title: The Role of Middle-leader-led Professional Learning Communities in Focusing Teachers' Attention on Student Achievement in Direct Subsidy Scheme, Aided and International Schools in Hong Kong and Southern China

Ethical approval is granted for the project period from 5 July 2018 to 31 August 2019. If a project extension is applied for lasting more than 3 months, HREC should be contacted with information regarding the nature of and the reason for the extension. If any substantial changes have been made to the project, a new HREC application will be required.

Please note that you are responsible for informing the HREC in advance of any proposed substantive changes to the research proposal or procedures which may affect the validity of this ethical approval. You will receive separate notification should a fresh approval be required.

Thank you for your kind attention and we wish you well with your research.

Yours sincerely,

Patsy Chung (Ms)
Secretary
Human Research Ethics Committee

c.c. Prof CHOU Kee Lee, Chairperson, Human Research Ethics Committee

香港新界大埔露屏路十號
10 Lo Ping Road, Tai Po, New Territories, Hong Kong
T (852) 2948 8888 F (852) 2948 6000 www.eduhk.hk

Appendix II Consent (for School)

THE EDUCATION UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG

Department of Education Policy and Leadership

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Project Title: *The role of Middle Leadership-led Communities of Practice in focusing teachers' attention on student achievement in Direct Subsidy Scheme, Aided and International Schools in Hong Kong and Southern China."*

My school hereby consents to participate in the captioned research conducted by Anthony Adames, a Doctor of Education Student Researcher in the Department of Education Policy and Leadership at The Education University of Hong Kong and supervised by Dr. Darren Bryant, Head of Department of Education Policy and Leadership at the Education University of Hong Kong.

I understand that information obtained from this research may be used in future research and may be published. However, my right to privacy will be retained, i.e., my personal details will not be revealed.

The procedure as set out in the **attached** information sheet has been fully explained. There will be no potential risk to you due to your participation in this study. I understand the benefits and risks involved. My participation in the project is voluntary.

I acknowledge that I have the right to question any part of the procedure and can withdraw at any time without penalty of any kind.

Signature _____

Name _____

Position _____

Name of School _____

Date _____

Appendix III Consent (for participants)

THE EDUCATION UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG

Department of Education Policy and Leadership

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Project Title: **"The role of Middle Leadership-led Communities of Practice in focusing teachers' attention on student achievement in Direct Subsidy Scheme, Aided and International Schools in Hong Kong and Southern China.".**

I _____ hereby consent to participate in the captioned research conducted by Anthony Adames, Principal Investigator supervised by Dr. Darren Bryant, Head of Department of Education Policy and Leadership at the Education University of Hong Kong.

I understand that information obtained from this research may be used in future research and may be published. However, my right to privacy will be retained, i.e., my personal details will not be revealed. I understand that there are no potential risks to myself due to my participation. The procedure as set out in the **attached** information sheet has been fully explained. I understand the benefits and risks involved. My participation in the project is voluntary.

I acknowledge that I have the right to question any part of the procedure and can withdraw at any time without penalty of any kind.

Signature _____

Name _____

Position _____

Name of School _____

Date _____

Appendix IV Interview Questions for Principals

Research Questions	Interview Questions for Principals (AA)
LEADER-PLUS ASPECT *What is the influence of Middle Leaders on Professional Learning Communities?*	1. How are PCs/MLs selected for their posts? 2. What do you think might explain the pattern of PC/ML's engagement in the different levels of leadership? 3. What in your view is the main work of PCs/MLs in each category? Is there something obviously missing? 4. What do you think might challenge their effectiveness? **Are there any factors which may inhibit ML work in PLCs?** 5. What is done in-house to help develop them for their roles? 6. How have PCs/MLs work changed over time? 7. What makes for a successful PC/ML? **Are there any factors which may support ML work in PLCs?** 8. Are Middle Leaders in your school active in setting school direction and school policy? How is this done? **Does this work focus teachers' attention on student learning in your opinion? If so, how?** 9. Do Middle Leaders in your school have the opportunity to engage with Middle Leaders in other schools or to develop networks outside of the school? In what capacity and how? **How does or could this filter through to form a student-focus faculty?** 10. **Do these external networks help MLs with their work with their teacher teams or PLCs? How?** 11. Do Middle Leaders have any role in engaging with community stakeholders? If so, what is the nature of this? If not, is it desirable?
THE PRACTICE ASPECT *How do Middle Leaders focus teachers' attention on student learning?*	12. Do you co-lead or collaborate? ***Do you expect your MLs to do likewise?*** 13. Are there differences in how MLs in your school do their jobs? What accounts for these differences? 14. How successful are Middle Leaders in your school in building and working with teacher teams? **Why is that?** 15. **How do ML use their teacher teams to focus on improved student learning? Is this encouraged?** 16. Do Middle Leaders regularly engage in dialogue with other Middle Leaders and key staff? What are the main foci of this dialogue? When does it occur? **How does this impact on their PLCs or teacher teams?** 17. Do PCs and MLs have autonomy in decision making over their areas of responsibility? **Can you illustrate how this may impact on teachers' focus on student learning?** 18. What do you see as the particular areas of challenge that Middle Leaders face? a. With other middle leaders? b. With teachers? c. In interacting with leadership? d. In interacting with other stakeholders? e. **Focusing teachers' attention on student learning?** 19. Do Middle Leaders in your school delegate work to other teachers? Is this formal or informal? **Does this delegation have student learning foci?** 20. Do they have a role in developing the capacity of others? 21. **In your opinion, does delegation strengthen Teachers' focus on student learning or is it best done directly from the Middle Leader?**
THE SITUATION ASPECT *What factors in each school type support or inhibit Middle Leaders' influence on Professional Learning Communities?*	22. How do you distribute (or structure) leadership at your school to ensure that the school's mission is addressed? **Does the purpose for this distribution have a focus on student learning and accomplishment?** 23. How does the school's unique mission/vision impact on Middle Leaders' work? **Does it allow them to effectively lead their Teams?** 24. Does working in a three programme school bring challenges? **Do these challenges impact on MLs influence their teams?** 25. Do MLs at this school need to navigate the cultural setting? **If so, what is the impact?** 26. How much does guidance from the IB shape the work of PC and MLs? **How does it shape their work with their teams?** 27. Are IB documentation helpful? How do they support ML-led Teacher team's focus on Student learning? 28. Does the school create additional documents, structures, committees to focus the work of PCs/MLs (**and their Teacher Teams to maintain focus on Student learning**)?

Appendix V Interview Questions for Coordinators

Research Questions	Interview Questions for Programme Coordinators / Middle Leaders (AA)
LEADER-PLUS ASPECT *What is the influence of Middle Leaders on Professional Learning Communities?*	1. What led you to take up your positon in this school? 2. What does your position involve? 3. How were you prepared for these responsibilites? 4. What is the most challenging aspect of your job? 5. Is the result of the time-use survey typical? 6. What do you think explains this distribution? What activities in each category are you most focused on? 7. What do you do to address these areas? 8. Is there something not represented here that should be included? 9. Do you work with colleagues to identify and implement new practices? What supports or inhibits this? 10. **Do you help Teacher Team members to focus their efforts towards improving student learning? If so, how?** 11. Are you involved in setting the school vision or developing school-wide policies? 12. How do colleagues respond to school-wide initiatives? What challenges do they face? How do you support them? 13. Do you have a role in developing others' capacity? How do you influence them? 14. To what extent does your role involve implementing mandates from outside of the school? Are there any tensions in doing this? 15. Does the school (or IBO / EDB) vision and policies constrict or free you to accomplish your goals? **When it comes to improving student learning, do these help influence?** 16. Are there ways that you are able to interact with colleagues in other schools or other organizations in order to develop your area of responsility? **How?** 17. To what extent do you have autonomy to initiate networks beyond the school? 18. Are you free to identify your own goals for your area of responsibility? 19. How would you like to develop more? 20. What is done in the school to support your own development? **Is this related to improving student learning? Does this help you in your daily work?**
THE PRACTICE ASPECT *How do Middle Leaders focus teachers' attention on student learning?*	21. Does your work involve dialogue or collaboration with other programme coordinators or subject area coordinators in the school? What is the focus of these discussions? 22. Are there other teams that you work with? **How do you influence them?** 23. **Do you try to focus teachers' attention onto student learning? How?** 24. Are others involved in leading with you? **How do you establish a common point of view?** 25. What are the main areas that you are working on with others? **Are you able to focus team members on student learning? If so, how do you do that?** 26. Are there any "go to" people that you involve? How does this work? 27. How do you engage or motivate others that you lead? 28. How do you delegate work to others? Is this done formally or informally?
THE SITUATION ASPECT *What factors in each school type support or inhibit Middle Leaders' influence on Professional Learning Communities?*	29. Does the school mission or values influence your work? **Do they inhibit your work and influence on your team members? Do they support it?** 30. Is being a leader here different from in other schools? **If so, how has it changed the way you lead others?** 31. What is the impact of being a three programme school? 32. What is the impact of being located in this societal culture? 33. Are there any formalized structures to focus or prioritize you work (committees, strategic plans, annual plans…) **If so, is there a student learning focus?** 34. Are IB standards and practices, programme frameworks, authorization standards frequently used in your work. **Do these help you lead your team members to focus on improving student learning? If so, how?** 35. Are IB provided tools, like common planners or routines like peer review of unit plans, sufficient for your work? **Do these influence your team members' focus on student accomplishment? If so, how?**

Appendix VI Interview Questions for SACs and MLs

Research Questions	Interview Questions for Subject Area Coordinators / Middle Leaders (AA)
LEADER-PLUS ASPECT *What is the influence of Middle Leaders on Professional Learning Communities?*	1. What does your position involve? 2. How were you prepared for these responsibilites? 3. What is the most challenging aspect of your job? *4.* Where is most of your work focused? *5.* **Are you able to influence your team members'work? If so, how?** *L1* 6. Do you work with colleagues to identify and implement new practices? What supports or inhibits this? *L2* 7. Are you involved in setting the school vision or developing school-wide policies? 8. How do colleagues respond to school-wide initiatives? What challenges do they face? How do you support them? 9. Do you have a role in developing others' capacity? 10. **Do you help teacher teams members to focus their efforts towards improving student learning? If so, how?** *L3* 11. To what extent does your role involve implementing mandates from outside of the school? Are there any tensions in doing this? 12. Does the school (or IBO / EDB) vision and policies constrict or free you to accomplish your goals? **When it comes to improving student learning, do these help influence?** 13. Are there ways that you are able to interact with colleagues in other schools or other organizations in order to develop your area of responsibility? **How?** 14. To what extent do you have autonomy to initiate networks beyond the school? 15. Are you free to identify your own goals for your area of responsibility? 16. What is done in the school to support your own development? **Is this related to improving student learning? Does this help you in your daily work?**
THE PRACTICE ASPECT *How do Middle Leaders focus teachers' attention on student learning?*	17. Does your work involve dialogue or collaboration with programme coordinators or other subject area coordinators in the school? 18. What do you work on together with them? 19. Are you involved with what goes on in MYP and PYP / HKDSE? 20. Are there other teams that you work with? 21. Are others involved in leading with you? **How do you establish a common point of view?** 22. What are the main areas that you are working on with others? **Are you able to focus team members on student learning? If so, how do you do that?** 23. Are there any "go to" people that you involve? How does this work? 24. How do you engage or motivate others that you lead? **How do you keep their focus on student accomplishment and achievement?** 25. How do you delegate work to others? Is this done formally or informally? 26. If you were to sketch a leadership distribution for your area, what would it look like?
THE SITUATION ASPECT *What factors in each school type support or inhibit Middle Leaders' influence on Professional Learning Communities?*	27. Does the school mission or values influence your work? **Do they inhibit your work and influence on your team members? Do they support it?** 28. Is being a leader here different from in other schools? **If so, how has it changed the way you lead others?** 29. What is the impact of being a three programme school? 30. What is the impact of being in this societal culture? 31. Are there any formalized structures to focus or prioritize you work (committees, strategic plans, annual plans…). **If so, is there a student learning focus?** 32. Are IB standards and practices, programme frameworks, authorization standards frequently used in your work. **Do these help you lead your team members to focus on improving student learning? If so, how?** 33. Are IB provided tools, like common planners or routines like peer review of unit plans, sufficient for your work? **Do these influence your team members' focus on student accomplishment? If so, how?**

Appendix VII Interview Questions for Teacher Focus Groups

Research Questions	Interview Questions for Teacher Focus Groups (AA)
LEADER-PLUS ASPECT *What is the influence of Middle Leaders on Professional Learning Communities?*	*1.* What do you see as being the role of PCs / MLs? **How do they influence their teacher teams?** *2.* What is the role of subject area coordinators? **How do they influence their teacher teams?** *3.* Do you take up leadership in any way? **If yes, what do you hope to achieve through your leadership?** *4.* Are you involved in setting the strategic direction or annual plan in your area? *5.* Do you collaborate with PC or SACs / MLs? In what way? **Do they tend to help focus you towards Student learning?** *6.* How do you determine who to talk to about instructional issue?
THE PRACTICE ASPECT *How do Middle Leaders focus teachers' attention on student learning?*	*7.* What do you see as being the main priorities for this school? *8.* How are these communicated to you? *9.* What is your role in addressing these priorities, in particular any beyond classroom teaching? How are you supported in it? *10.* Are you encouraged to take up specific areas of responsibility beyond classroom teaching? *11.* How are roles and responsibilities distributed? *12.* What could be done to help PC and SACs / MLs support you better? Do they need any resources? **Do you believe they help focus teacher attention towards improving students achievement?** *13.* Does the school mission or values influence your work? **Do PCs and SACs use these to influence your focus on students?** *14.* Is being a leader here different from in other schools? **How?** *15.* What is the impact of being a three programme school? *16.* What is the impact of being in this societal culture? *17.* **Is a teacher focus on student learning part of this school's culture? Is this displayed in your team's leader?**
THE SITUATION ASPECT *What factors in each school type support or inhibit Middle Leaders' influence on Professional Learning Communities?*	*18.* Are there any formalized structures to focus or prioritize you work (committees, strategic plans, annual plans…) *19.* Are IB standards and practices, programme frameworks, authorization standards frequently used in your work. **If so, are they useful? How?** *20.* Are IB provided tools, like common planners or routines like peer review of unit plans, sufficient for your work? **Do these inhibit or support your work improving student learning?** *21.* How does being in this school help your teacher teams improve student learning and accomplishment? Do the PCs and SACs influence your thinking and your work? How?

Appendix VIII Codebook

Name	Description
Leadership Aspects (Spillane & Coldren, 2011)	
Leadership Plus Aspect	Leadership undertaken by informal leaders. Leadership tasks undertaken by non-GLLs, non-SLs, non-PCs.
Practice Aspect	Routines, Tools, Structures used by MLs such as meetings, online planning, discussions, lesson and classroom visits, moderation exercises, peer coaching, advice giving, advice seeking, etc.
Situational Aspect	School type, location, culture, language, policies & programs, community, social & economic context.
Middle Leadership Domains (Gurr & Drysdale, 2013)	
External Influences	Social and economic conditions, external organisations' policy and procedures, community, situational culture and language, legal considerations.
School Capacity Building	Professional capacity, personal capacity, organizational capacity, community capacity, values and vision, mission and organizational goals, individual and collective support and commitment.
Teaching & Learning	Instructional quality, curriculum design, assessment, student learning, pedagogy, instructional development, standards and practice development related to student learning, curriculum articulation
Professional Learning Communities (Stoll, 2006)	
Collaboration focused on learning	Instructional planning, lessons, formative and summative assessment, protocols, meetings, collaboration, ATLs, feedback, joint review, interdependence, shared purpose,
Collective responsibility for pupil's learning	Sustained commitment, peer pressure and accountability, doing one's fair share, collective decision-making, common voice
Group, as well as individual, learning is promoted	Professional learning, deliberating and interpreting data, collective knowledge creation, skills building
Inclusive Membership	Open membership requirements, support staff, community members, external members,
Mutual trust, respect & support	Nurture professional and personal relationships, provide help, offer guidance, scaffold assistance, cultural and linguistic sensitivity, aide emotional well-being, provide professional / pedagogical solutions.
Openness, networks & partnerships	Looking beyond the school for learning & ideas, IBO, local, regional & national education authorities, clubs, societies, experts, creative partnerships and organizations, WASC, etc.
Reflective Professional Enquiry	De-privatization of practice, reflective, dialogue, evaluation, case analysis, examining practice, joint-planning, curriculum development, sharing knowledge, problem solving and applying solutions
Shared leadership*	Distribution of leadership, co-opt members for leading tasks or people, collective leadership, informal leadership, horizontal leadership.
Shared Values and Vision	Focus on student learning, shared, collective, ethical decision-making, common purpose.