

**Middle Leadership and School Effectiveness: The Role of Heads of Departments in
Private and Public Schools in Astana.**

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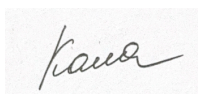
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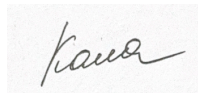


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Ethical Approval



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NUGSE IREC Protocol Approval

Date: 30 October 2025

To the attention of Oksana Banshchikova Kala, MSc in Educational Leadership Program Dear Oksana,

This letter confirms that your research project titled “**Middle Leadership and School Effectiveness: The Role of Heads of Departments in Private and Public Schools in Astana**” has been approved by the Nazarbayev University Graduate School of Education Institutional Research Ethics Committee (NUGSE IREC). You may now proceed with your fieldwork and data collection as indicated in your ethics application. Please note that the NUGSE IREC must be contacted if there are any changes to the protocol during the period of your fieldwork.

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Best wishes for your research work!

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Abstract

Middle Leadership and School Effectiveness: The Role of Heads of Departments in Private and Public Schools in Astana.

This study aimed to explore how Heads of Departments (HoDs) in one public and one private secondary school in Astana enact their roles as middle leaders and examines the impact of their leadership on departmental and school effectiveness. Drawing on the Middle Leadership in Schools (MLiS) model (De Nobile, 2018), the study adopted a qualitative embedded multiple-case study design. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with nine participants, including HoDs, teachers, and senior leaders, and analyzed using a deductive thematic analysis approach. The study aimed to contribute to the limited body of knowledge on middle leadership in Kazakhstan by highlighting the role of HoDs in enhancing teaching quality, promoting professional development, and fostering a collaborative school culture. The findings indicated that HoDs in both contexts perform a combination of managerial and leadership roles, including coordination, supervision, communication, and support for teacher development. However, the enactment of these roles is strongly shaped by institutional conditions. In the public school, HoD leadership is largely informal, constrained by bureaucratic structures, limited autonomy, and lack of formal recognition, resulting in a predominantly administrative and compliance-oriented role. In contrast, the private school provides greater structural support, including reduced teaching load, financial incentives, and involvement in professional development and strategic decision-making, enabling HoDs to function as instructional leaders and agents of school improvement. Across both contexts, relational leadership, characterized by trust, communication, and interpersonal skills, emerged as central to leadership effectiveness. Despite these contextual differences, HoDs demonstrated strong intrinsic motivation and professional

commitment. The study contributes to the limited research on middle leadership in Kazakhstan and offers implications for policy, leadership development, and school improvement practices.

Keywords: middle leadership, heads of departments, school effectiveness, qualitative case study, Kazakhstan, educational leadership

Аңдатпа

Орта жетекшілік және мектептің тиімділігі: Бөлім басшыларының рөлі

Астанадағы мемлекеттік және жекеменшік мектептерде.

Бұл зерттеу Астана қаласындағы бір мемлекеттік және бір жекеменшік орта мектептегі бөлім жетекшілерінің (HoD) орта буын көшбасшылар ретінде өз рөлдерін қалай жүзеге асыратынын және олардың көшбасшылығының бөлім мен мектеп тиімділігіне әсерін зерттеуге бағытталған. Зерттеу De Nobile (2018) ұсынған Middle Leadership in Schools (MLiS) моделіне негізделіп, сапалық кіріктірілген көп жағдайлы зерттеу әдісін қолданады. Деректер бөлім жетекшілері, мұғалімдер және әкімшілік өкілдері қатысқан тоғыз жартылай құрылымданған сұхбат арқылы жиналып, тақырыптық талдау әдісімен өңделді. Нәтижелер көрсеткендей, екі мектепте де бөлім жетекшілері басқарушылық және көшбасшылық рөлдердің үйлесімін орындайды, соның ішінде үйлестіру, бақылау, коммуникация және мұғалімдердің кәсіби дамуын қолдау. Алайда бұл рөлдердің жүзеге асуы институционалдық жағдайларға тікелей байланысты. Мемлекеттік мектепте бөлім жетекшісінің рөлі көбінесе формалды түрде бекітілмеген, бюрократиялық шектеулермен, шектеулі автономиямен және ресми мойындаудың болмауымен сипатталады, бұл оның әкімшілік және талаптарды орындауға бағытталған сипатын күшейтеді. Ал жекеменшік мектепте оқыту жүктемесінің азайтылуы, қаржылық ынталандырулар және стратегиялық шешім қабылдауға қатысу сияқты құрылымдық қолдау бөлім жетекшілеріне оқыту көшбасшылары және мектепті дамыту агенттері ретінде әрекет етуге мүмкіндік береді. Екі жағдайда да сенімге, тиімді қарым-қатынасқа және тұлғааралық дағдыларға негізделген қатынастық көшбасшылық тиімділіктің негізгі факторы ретінде анықталды. Құрылымдық айырмашылықтарға қарамастан, бөлім жетекшілері

жоғары ішкі мотивация мен кәсіби жауапкершілік танытты. Бұл зерттеу Қазақстандағы орта буын көшбасшылығы туралы шектеулі ғылыми әдебиетті толықтырып, білім беру саясаты, көшбасшылықты дамыту және мектепті жетілдіру бойынша ұсыныстар ұсынады.

Түйінді сөздер: орта буын көшбасшылығы, бөлім жетекшілері, мектеп тиімділігі, сапалық зерттеу, Қазақстан, білім берудегі көшбасшылық

Аннотация

Руководители среднего звена и эффективность школы: Роль руководителей методических объединений (МО) в частной и государственной школах города Астана.

Данное исследование направлено на изучение того, как руководители методических объединений (МО) (Heads of Departments, HoDs) в государственной и частной средней школах города Астаны интерпретируют и реализуют свои лидерские роли как представители среднего звена управления, а также как их лидерство влияет на эффективность работы кафедры и школы в целом.

Исследование опирается на модель Middle Leadership in Schools (MLiS) (De Nobile, 2018) и использует качественный дизайн множественного кейс-стади. Данные были собраны с помощью полуструктурированных интервью с девятью участниками, включая руководителей методических объединений, учителей и представителей администрации, и проанализированы с использованием тематического анализа. Результаты показывают, что в обоих типах школ руководители МО выполняют сочетание управленческих и лидерских функций, включая координацию, контроль, коммуникацию и поддержку профессионального развития учителей. Однако реализация этих ролей существенно зависит от контекста школы. В государственной школе роль руководителя МО носит преимущественно неформальный характер, ограничена бюрократическими требованиями, низкой автономией и отсутствием формального признания, что приводит к доминированию административно-исполнительских функций. В частной школе, напротив, наличие структурной поддержки, включая снижение учебной нагрузки, финансовые стимулы и участие в стратегическом планировании, позволяет HoDs выступать в роли педагогических лидеров и

агентов школьного развития. В обоих контекстах ключевым фактором эффективности является реляционное лидерство, основанное на доверии, коммуникации и межличностных отношениях. Несмотря на различия в условиях, руководители МО демонстрируют высокий уровень внутренней мотивации и профессиональной приверженности. Исследование вносит вклад в ограниченную научную литературу по лидерству среднего звена в Казахстане и предлагает практические рекомендации для образовательной политики и развития лидерства.

Ключевые слова: лидерство среднего звена, руководители МО, эффективность школы, качественное исследование, Казахстан, лидерство в образовании

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Effective leadership is critical to school effectiveness, with middle leaders playing a pivotal role in school improvement. Motivating people and building a positive ‘can-do’ culture is essential for success (Fleming, 2014). Middle leaders serve as a bridge between senior leadership and classroom teachers, translating organizational goals into actionable practices and ensuring that policies are enacted in ways that are meaningful and contextually appropriate (Skerritt et al., 2021). Their dual role as both practitioners and leaders enables them to understand the practical challenges faced by teachers while simultaneously guiding departmental priorities, fostering collaboration, and promoting professional growth (Edwards-Groves et al., 2016).

Over the last thirty years, the terms ‘middle management’ and, more recently, ‘middle leadership’ have become firmly established in the language of secondary schools globally (Fleming, 2014). However, this term remains relatively new in Kazakhstan.

Middle leaders are those teachers who lead across, they have an acknowledged position of leadership or responsibility for the professional development of colleagues while maintaining a significant teaching role (Edwards–Groves et al., 2016). Grootenboer et al. (2014) describe middle leaders as educators who occupy a unique space between senior leaders (e.g., principals, vice-principals) and classroom teachers. These teacher-leaders lead from the middle, acting as a bridge between top-down policies and everyday classroom practices. Relationships within are often a fundamental condition for implementing change (Smeets & Ponte, 2009).

Considering global education policy priorities - innovation, creativity, inclusion, and well-being - implementation requires more than directives from the top. Leaders at higher levels may lack contextual knowledge of day-to-day learning practices, while

teachers require support and guidance to enact reform. Middle leaders are uniquely positioned to bridge this gap (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2019).

Despite their significant influence on teacher development and policy translation, middle leaders have received minimal attention in academic discourse (Stone & Stone, 2024). As policy translators, they organize, manage, inspire, and interpret school policies into actionable practices (Skerritt et al., 2021).

Much of the existing literature emphasizes senior leadership and school-wide governance, with limited research exploring the nuanced roles of HoDs in professional development and policy implementation (Stone & Stone, 2024). Two broad areas - role complexity and impact - dominate current discussions on middle leadership (Stone & Stone, 2024). Stone & Stone describe role complexity as the dual responsibilities that HoDs must manage. They are expected to lead their departments while maintaining their teaching duties, balancing administrative tasks with classroom responsibilities. Moreover, HoDs must navigate the tension of being both leaders and peers, managing relationships with colleagues while fulfilling their leadership responsibilities. Impact, on the other hand, concerns the significant influence HoDs have on school improvement and student learning. While senior leaders set the direction, HoDs play a key role in translating policies into practice within their departments, fostering professional development, and ensuring that teaching aligns with the broader school goals. Their ability to lead by example and support their colleagues directly impacts teaching quality and student outcomes (Stone & Stone, 2024).

1.1 Problem Statement

Although international research increasingly highlights the value of middle leadership in educational improvement, the concept remains under-theorized and underexplored in Kazakhstan. In Kazakhstani secondary schools, the role of Heads of

Departments as middle leaders has been largely overlooked in both research and policy discourse (Badanova, 2024; Yakavets, 2017).

The socio-cultural context of Kazakhstani schools - marked by centralized authority and residual Soviet management - poses challenges for middle leaders, including limited autonomy, unclear expectations, conflicting demands, and lack of institutional recognition (Qanay & Courtney, 2024).

This study adopted a qualitative embedded multiple-case study design to examine how HoDs in one private and one public school in Astana perceive their roles, how their roles are viewed by others, the challenges they encounter, and how they interpret and implement school policies.

1.2 Purpose Statement

This qualitative embedded multiple-case study aimed to explore how Heads of Departments (HoDs) in one private and one public school in Astana understand, perceive, and enact their leadership roles within the context of middle leadership and its impact on school effectiveness. The study specifically examined how HoDs navigate their professional identities and responsibilities, how their leadership is interpreted by both senior leaders and teachers, and the challenges and opportunities they encounter in managing their departments while promoting professional growth and school improvement. By comparing two different school environments, the study highlighted how factors such as funding, governance, and autonomy shape the leadership practices of HoDs, ultimately influencing the overall effectiveness of schools.

1.3 Research questions

1.3.1 Main Research Question:

How do Heads of Departments (HoDs) in one private and one public school in Astana enact their roles as middle leaders, and what impact does their leadership have on departmental and school effectiveness?

1.3.2 Sub-questions:

1. How do middle leaders in private and public schools understand and enact their leadership roles within their respective school contexts?
2. How do teachers and senior leaders perceive the roles and effectiveness of Heads of Departments in the public and private school environments?
3. What challenges and opportunities do Heads of Departments face in leading their departments and contributing to school-wide improvement?

1.4 Significance of the Study

This study addressed a critical gap in the Kazakhstani educational leadership literature by focusing on the experiences and roles of middle leaders, specifically Heads of Departments (HoDs) in one private and one public school. As the concept of middle leadership is relatively new and underexplored in Kazakhstan, this research sought to explore the mediating role of HoDs in translating and implementing school policies. The study aimed to provide insights into how HoDs function as policy translators and facilitators of teacher development, thereby contributing to school effectiveness in different school environments.

Findings from this research could inform school policies, training programs, and leadership development strategies by providing a deeper understanding of the complexities and challenges faced by HoDs. The study highlighted the significance of relational trust, collaboration, and professional development within middle leadership. By emphasizing the

mediating and translating functions of HoDs, it aimed to promote a more distributed and inclusive model of school leadership in Kazakhstan. Ultimately, the research sought to strengthen school effectiveness, support teachers' professional growth, and enhance the overall quality of education based on insights from both private and public school contexts.

1.5 Outline of the Thesis

This thesis is structured into six chapters, each contributing to the overall exploration of middle leadership within the context of Kazakhstani schools. Chapter 1 (Introduction) introduces the study, outlining the research problem, purpose, research questions, and significance, with a focus on the role of Heads of Departments (HoDs) in Kazakhstan's education system. Chapter 2 (Literature Review) reviews the relevant literature on middle leadership, discussing key concepts such as role complexity, policy translation, and the impact of middle leaders on school effectiveness. It also provides a theoretical framework for understanding the roles and challenges of middle leaders, particularly in the Kazakhstani context. Chapter 3 (Methodology) outlines the research design, sampling strategy, and data collection procedures. Chapter 4 (Findings) presents the findings of the study, structured around the thematic analysis of data collected from interviews with HoDs, teachers, and senior leaders in two schools. The chapter provides both within-case and cross-case analysis, highlighting the different ways HoDs enact their roles in the public and private school contexts. Chapter 5 (Discussions) discusses the findings in relation to the literature reviewed in Chapter 2. It explores the implications of the findings for middle leadership, policy translation, and school improvement. It also addresses the limitations of the study and offers recommendations for future research. Finally, Chapter 6 concludes the thesis by summarizing the key findings, reflecting on the

implications for educational leadership in Kazakhstan, and providing recommendations for policy, practice, and further research.

Summary

This chapter outlined the importance of middle leadership in school effectiveness, particularly focusing on the role of Heads of Departments (HoDs) in Kazakhstan. The chapter discussed how HoDs bridge the gap between senior leadership and teachers, guiding departmental priorities while addressing practical challenges. Despite the global recognition of middle leadership, it remains underexplored in Kazakhstan, where HoDs face challenges such as limited autonomy and unclear role expectations due to the centralized education system. The chapter concluded with an outline of the thesis, previewing the upcoming chapters. Chapter 2 will review the literature on middle leadership, exploring key theories and concepts relevant to the study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Defining Middle Leadership and Management

In contemporary educational discourse, middle leadership refers to roles positioned between senior administrators (e.g., principals, vice-principals) and classroom teachers. These roles are often fulfilled by individuals who hold formal leadership responsibilities while continuing to teach. Fleming (2014) characterizes middle leaders as those who bridge the gap between whole-school strategic leadership and day-to-day classroom practice. These leaders play a pivotal role in both instructional leadership and the interpretation and implementation of school policies. Despite their growing prominence in international education systems, the concept of middle leadership remains relatively underexplored in Kazakhstan.

The term middle leadership is often used interchangeably with middle management, yet these concepts denote different aspects of the role. While middle management traditionally refers to administrative oversight, middle leadership emphasizes pedagogical influence, team development, and policy mediation (Fleming, 2014). In the corporate context, middle managers are defined as individuals who operate between top executives and frontline supervisors, facilitating communication and overseeing operations (Robbins & Barnwell, 2006; Samson & Daft, 2012, as cited in De Nobile, 2017). In schools, these functions are often mirrored by Heads of Departments (HoDs) who lead subject areas, guide teachers, and contribute to school improvement strategies.

Scholars have proposed various definitions of middle leadership, highlighting both positional and functional dimensions. According to De Nobile (2017), two main conceptual strands exist: one focuses on *who* middle leaders are - individuals situated between senior leadership and teachers (Bush, 2016; Choi, 2013; Dinham, 2007) - and the other on *what* they do - teachers or staff responsible for leading curriculum, policy, teacher

development, or student welfare (Busher, Hammersley-Fletcher, & Turner, 2007; Wise & Bennett, 2003). These roles are typically performed through formal structures such as departments, committees, or leadership teams.

Over time, the concept of middle leadership has shifted from focusing solely on hierarchy to recognizing the value of leadership practices. Recent research views middle leadership not just as a position but as a set of actions that foster collaboration and improve educational outcomes (Ashmore & Clay, 2016; Choi, 2013). This perspective emphasizes leadership as distributed and relational. Importantly, most middle leaders continue to teach, which enables them to remain grounded in classroom realities while also influencing school-level decisions (Dinham, 2007; Edwards-Groves et al., 2016).

Building on this functional understanding, De Nobile (2017) offers a comprehensive definition: middle leaders are teachers (and occasionally non-teachers) who assume responsibility for the development, maintenance, or improvement of key school domains such as curriculum, student welfare, professional learning, and policy. Their leadership often occurs through collaborative structures and is closely linked to school operations and staff development.

The influence of middle leaders is recognized not only in organizational terms but also in pedagogical impact. Wise (2001) found that teachers perceived middle leaders as more influential in daily school life than senior leaders. Leithwood (2016) adds that departmental leadership has a stronger direct influence on student learning than most school-wide leadership interventions. Common middle leadership positions include head of department, curriculum coordinator, head of year, and key stage leader (Fleming, 2019).

Despite the significant responsibilities associated with these roles, many middle leaders enter them with little or no formal training. Fleming (2014) notes that middle leaders frequently learn through experience, acquiring leadership skills on the job rather

than through targeted professional development. This gap in leadership preparation raises concerns about the effectiveness and sustainability of middle leadership in educational systems, especially in emerging contexts like Kazakhstan.

2.2 Roles and Responsibilities of Middle Leaders

Despite a growing body of research on middle leadership since the late 1990s, the concept remains under-theorized. As De Nobile (2017) notes, ambiguity continues to surround both the identity and functions of middle leaders within schools. While these roles are increasingly recognized in international discourse, there is still a lack of consensus on what is expected of middle leaders, particularly concerning their day-to-day practices and contributions to school development.

Among the most common middle leadership positions in schools are Heads of Departments (HoDs), who occupy a uniquely dual role. They function simultaneously as subject teachers, departmental leaders, and team collaborators. Badanova (2024) emphasizes that HoDs often shift between being leaders within their departments and followers within the school's broader leadership hierarchy. This layered identity illustrates the complexity of the role and underscores its importance in translating school policies into meaningful practice at the departmental level. When effectively enacted, middle leadership can significantly enhance school effectiveness, especially during times of educational change (Badanova, 2024).

To understand what middle leaders do, it is important to distinguish between the concepts of leadership and management. Fleming (2014) describes leadership as the process of motivating individuals toward a shared vision, while management involves organizing resources to accomplish defined goals. In the context of middle leadership, both skill sets are essential. Leaders must inspire their teams, but they must also be able to

operationalize plans, allocate time, and ensure results. As Fleming (2014) notes, successful middle leaders are those who combine visionary thinking with practical coordination.

While the distinction between middle leadership and middle management is often blurred, both dimensions are essential. Effective middle leaders must also be competent managers, capable of coordinating resources, planning, and communicating effectively (Fleming, 2014). Fleming (2019) likens middle leadership to the “engine house” of the school, underscoring its importance in sustaining day-to-day functioning and long-term improvement efforts.

Middle leaders thus serve as a critical interface between the senior leadership team and classroom practitioners. They are responsible for interpreting strategic goals, aligning them with departmental practice, and motivating staff to pursue excellence. Their effectiveness often hinges on their ability to communicate clearly, build trust, and maintain focus on instructional quality (Fleming, 2014). The most common middle leadership titles include head of department, head of year, head of faculty, curriculum coordinator, and key stage coordinator (Fleming, 2019).

Crucially, middle leaders typically retain substantial teaching responsibilities. According to Lipscombe et al. (2023), this ongoing classroom involvement links leadership decisions directly to instructional practice, allowing middle leaders to lead with authenticity and practical insight. Their leadership is therefore not abstract or distant but rooted in the same learning environments they seek to improve. This dual identity enhances their credibility among peers and strengthens their ability to mentor and guide teachers.

To conceptualize the wide scope of middle leadership, De Nobile (2017) outlines six distinct but interconnected role categories. First, the Student-Focused Role (SF) involves supporting student welfare, academic decision-making, behavior

management, and family communication. Second, the Administrative Role (AD) emphasizes task-oriented processes, such as developing procedures and ensuring operational efficiency. Third, the Organizational Role (OR) is centered on people-oriented planning and the coordination of events, programs, and school activities.

Fourth, the Supervisory Role (SU) focuses on evaluating staff performance through classroom observations, feedback sessions, and performance monitoring. This role often overlaps with the Staff Development Role (SD), which involves mentoring and capacity building to enhance teacher professionalism. Finally, the Strategic Role (ST) includes setting goals, articulating a vision, and encouraging others to engage in change processes. This role is particularly aligned with leadership functions, requiring middle leaders to inspire and influence school improvement.

In addition to these six roles, De Nobile (2017) identifies five essential competencies that middle leaders must possess to effectively enact their responsibilities. The first is managing relationships, which includes cultivating trust and navigating school politics. Internal dynamics can often complicate collaboration, making emotional intelligence and interpersonal awareness vital for success. The second competency is leading teams, where cohesion and shared goals are necessary for fostering effective group performance (Fleming, 2014).

Third, middle leaders must communicate effectively, using timely, accessible, and clear messaging to reduce ambiguity and ensure that staff are informed and aligned. This includes both formal communications and informal relational exchanges. Fourth is time management, which remains a persistent challenge. Middle leaders often carry teaching loads equivalent to full-time teachers, limiting their capacity for leadership-related duties such as mentoring or innovation. Some report that time constraints reduce their ability to go beyond “routine but minor administrative tasks” (De Nobile, 2017).

Lastly, middle leaders must focus on managing self, a competency involving the regulation of stress, emotions, and conflicting demands. The multifaceted nature of their work can lead to emotional overload if not balanced with reflective practice and a strong sense of resilience. As such, middle leaders must cultivate not only organizational and pedagogical skills but also strong self-management capacities.

Taken together, these roles and competencies present middle leadership as a highly demanding but critical element of school functioning. Middle leaders are required to balance competing demands, build collaborative cultures, enact school policies, and remain grounded in teaching practice. Their strategic location within the school hierarchy makes them essential policy interpreters, instructional leaders, and agents of change. Yet, their effectiveness depends not only on their individual abilities but also on the institutional support and recognition they receive.

2.3 Distributed Leadership and Leading from the Middle

In recent years, the concept of distributed leadership has gained prominence as a more collaborative and inclusive approach to school governance. Distributed leadership emphasizes shared responsibilities and decision-making processes that extend beyond senior leaders to include individuals at all levels of the school hierarchy. This model acknowledges the critical role of middle leaders, such as Heads of Departments (HoDs), in driving school improvement and fostering professional collaboration (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2020).

One conceptual extension of distributed leadership is Leading from the Middle (LfM), which has been widely promoted as a strategic approach to system-level educational change. Fullan (2015) defines LfM as “a deliberate strategy that increases the capacity and internal coherence of the middle as it becomes a more effective partner upward to the state and downward to its schools and communities”. Rather than

centralizing authority at the top, LfM empowers the “middle tier” - including school districts, regional offices, and school-based middle leaders - to act as mediators between government mandates and local school needs.

The core objective of LfM is to develop greater coherence between system goals and local educational practices. This is achieved by enhancing the capacity of middle leaders to align broader policy aims with the unique contexts of their schools (Fullan, 2015). However, this position is not without its challenges. As Fullan highlights, middle leaders operate under pressure from both ends of the organizational spectrum - responding to expectations from senior leadership while simultaneously supporting teachers and students on the ground. This dual accountability underscores the complexity and strategic importance of the middle leader’s role.

Unlike traditional leadership models that rely on hierarchical, top-down control, LfM is rooted in a culture of collaboration and mutual responsibility. Hargreaves & Shirley (2020) describe LfM as a philosophy, structure, and culture that promotes responsiveness to local needs while maintaining collective responsibility for all students’ success. This framework advocates for school and district leaders to work interdependently toward shared educational goals.

A foundational component of LfM is the development and mobilization of professional capital. According to Hargreaves and Fullan (2012), as cited in Hargreaves & Shirley, (2020), professional capital comprises three interrelated dimensions. First, human capital refers to the competencies and qualifications of teachers who are well-prepared through university-based training. Second, decisional capital reflects the wisdom and professional judgment that educators accumulate through years of practice, mentorship, and reflective dialogue. Third, social capital encompasses the collaborative

culture in which teachers support each other, share expertise, and engage in joint problem-solving. Together, these forms of capital serve as the engine of collective professionalism within schools and underpin the sustainability of distributed leadership practices.

LfM stands in stark contrast to top-down or bottom-up leadership approaches. Top-down leadership is often associated with autocratic behavior and short-termism, where leaders impose policies without engaging educators or addressing the nuanced realities of classrooms. Hargreaves and Shirley (2020) argue that such leadership is frequently unethical or ineffective, as it prioritizes self-interest and compliance over collaboration and genuine improvement. In contrast, LfM offers an alternative that is both ethical and effective - a model where leadership is exercised through influence, dialogue, and shared accountability.

Importantly, LfM is not just a conceptual idea but a model with practical implications for leadership development and policy enactment. It illustrates how leaders can work laterally across schools and vertically across system levels to foster innovation and coherence. As Hargreaves and Shirley (2020) assert, LfM integrates long-standing aspirations for democratic and distributed leadership into a coherent structure that promotes change on a systemic scale. It transforms leadership into a relational and developmental process rather than a directive one.

This systemic perspective is reinforced by Skerritt et al. (2021), who emphasize the strategic importance of middle leaders within the distributed leadership framework. Their research describes middle leaders as occupying positions of “strategic importance in the leadership, management and administration of the school” (p. 137). According to Skerritt et al., in alignment with distributed leadership principles, these leaders collaborate closely with principals and deputy principals, sharing responsibility for areas such as school

improvement, staff development, and the management of teaching teams. Their role is not merely operational but instrumental in shaping the direction and culture of the school.

In sum, distributed leadership and LfM provide a robust conceptual framework for understanding and strengthening the role of middle leaders. These models reposition middle leadership from a reactive, managerial function to a proactive, strategic force capable of bridging policy and practice. Through collaboration, professional capital, and shared responsibility, middle leaders become key agents in advancing school-wide and system-level goals.

2.4 Teacher Leadership and Professional Development

The concept of teacher leadership is gaining traction in educational discourse, although it may not yet be as widely recognized as other leadership models. At its core, teacher leadership refers to the ability of teachers to influence their peers, contribute to school development, and assume responsibility for pedagogical advancement beyond their classrooms. It highlights the leadership potential embedded in everyday teaching roles and emphasizes teachers' agency in initiating change and improving educational outcomes (Stone & Stone, 2024).

Middle leaders, such as Heads of Departments, are often positioned at the intersection of teacher leadership and school-wide leadership structures. Fleming (2019) describes middle leaders as the “engine house” of a school, suggesting that without their contributions, schools would struggle to function effectively. This metaphor underscores the vital role they play not only in policy implementation but also in the mentoring and professional development of their colleagues.

Empirical research supports the influence that middle leaders exert on school functioning. Wise (2001) found that other teachers perceived middle leaders as being more instrumental to the everyday operations of the school than senior leaders. Similarly,

Leithwood (2016) argues that departmental leaders can have a more direct and lasting impact on student learning than broader school-wide leadership initiatives. These findings support the notion that middle leaders serve as both instructional leaders and developmental coaches within their departments.

Despite their central role, middle leaders often operate in an ambiguous professional space. The literature consistently highlights two primary areas of focus: first, the complexity and evolving nature of their roles; and second, their impact on colleagues' practices and school outcomes (Stone & Stone, 2024). When middle leaders are provided with clear expectations and sufficient autonomy, they are more likely to lead effectively and support meaningful change (Leithwood, 2016).

Stone and Stone (2024) identify several factors that shape the middle leader's ability to support teacher development. These include a strong sense of responsibility and engagement in guiding colleagues' practices, a recognized intermediary position between senior leaders and teachers, and the need to balance monitoring responsibilities with professional support. However, these responsibilities are often accompanied by feelings of being under-recognized and undervalued, revealing a disconnect between their actual influence and institutional acknowledgment.

Furthermore, middle leaders frequently assume responsibility for organizing, implementing, and evaluating teacher professional development. This dual role - both as supervisors and mentors - requires them to develop broader interpersonal and leadership skills. As such, middle leaders need specific training in mentoring, coaching, and building teacher capacity, areas that are not always addressed in leadership preparation programs.

Harris and Jones (2019) propose three key dimensions of teacher leadership that are particularly relevant for middle leaders. First, teacher leadership should be seen as a form of influence, not simply a formal position. Second, it involves action - that is, going

beyond classroom responsibilities to initiate change, share best practices, and model instructional improvement. Third, it is rooted in pedagogical excellence, whereby teacher leaders seek to elevate both their teaching and that of their peers through continuous learning and collaboration.

Middle leaders, as experienced practitioners, are uniquely positioned to embody and extend these dimensions of teacher leadership. Their dual identity as both educators and departmental leaders enables them to bridge the gap between policy and practice, theory and application. They guide colleagues through change, mentor early-career teachers, and shape professional norms within their teams. Nevertheless, as Stone and Stone (2024) argue, these contributions remain largely overlooked in the broader academic discourse.

Given their potential to influence school culture, instructional practices, and professional growth, middle leaders are pivotal in fostering sustainable educational change. Their work not only supports individual teacher development but also challenges rigid hierarchies by promoting distributed leadership models. When middle leaders are empowered and supported, they can create environments in which all educators are encouraged to lead, learn, and thrive.

2.5 Policy Translation and Implementation by Middle Leaders

A central function of middle leaders, particularly Heads of Departments (HoDs), is to act as policy translators - mediators who interpret, adapt, and implement educational policies within their specific departmental and instructional contexts (Ball, 1993; Coburn, 2005; Skerritt et al., 2021). This role involves more than simply following directives; it requires deep engagement with the policy content and the practical realities of school life. Middle leaders translate school-wide strategic goals into workable departmental practices,

making them key figures in policy enactment (Skerritt et al., 2021). They turn ideas into actions and bring policy to life (Skerritt et al., 2021).

The translation of policy is particularly evident in areas such as School Self-Evaluation (SSE), where middle leaders serve as the organizational bridge between written mandates and actionable procedures. According to Skerritt et al. (2021), while translators are typically middle leaders, their responsibilities may be shared with principals or other staff in smaller schools that lack extensive middle leadership structures. In all cases, policy translation is not a passive process; it requires agency, interpretation, and leadership.

One essential aspect of policy translation involves planning and production. Translators are responsible for turning abstract ideas and goals into tangible actions. As Skerritt et al. (2021) note, middle leaders often lead the planning and execution of internal events, procedures, and tasks that operationalize broader school goals. This includes drafting internal policies, managing communication among staff, and creating structures that ensure policies are implemented with fidelity. These responsibilities position middle leaders not just as implementers, but as designers of local policy enactment.

Furthermore, effective policy translation demands a collaborative approach. Policies are most impactful when they are not implemented in isolation but rather through collective engagement. Translators facilitate this by organizing formal and informal gatherings - such as staff meetings and planning sessions - that align individual teacher actions with broader school objectives. This ensures that institutional texts do not remain abstract but are actively shaping classroom practices and departmental planning (Skerritt et al., 2021).

The role of HoDs also includes reinforcing the connection between policy and practice at the classroom level. Skerritt et al. (2021) emphasize the importance of department heads reminding teachers to align their lesson planning and documentation

with the school's strategic plan. This act of reinforcement serves both evaluative and developmental purposes, helping teachers see the relevance of policy to their daily work and ensuring that school goals are embedded in instruction.

Beyond planning and monitoring, policy translators must also inspire, persuade, and unify. The successful implementation of initiatives like SSE depends not only on administrative procedures but also on cultivating shared purpose and motivation among staff. As Skerritt et al. (2021) argue, policy translators play a vital role in making strategic efforts meaningful to others, recruiting staff into the process, and ensuring that implementation becomes a collective endeavor.

This dimension of the role requires specific interpersonal qualities. Translators must be not only organized and strategic but also persuasive and empathetic. Skerritt et al. (2021) describe effective policy translators as “courageous, charismatic, communicative, and convincing” individuals who can connect with colleagues, generate buy-in, and ease resistance. These traits enable middle leaders to bridge the often-wide gap between policy intention and classroom reality.

In summary, policy translation is a complex and dynamic process that places significant responsibility on middle leaders. Their ability to interpret, adapt, and communicate policy effectively determines how school reforms and improvement initiatives are enacted at the ground level. Far from being mere conduits of policy, HoDs function as cultural and instructional brokers who shape how policy is experienced and embedded in the everyday life of the school.

2.6 Relational Trust and Leadership Identity

Theorizing the relational and identity-based aspects of middle leadership offers important insight into how middle leaders function effectively within schools. Two interrelated concepts—relational trust and leadership identity - are central to understanding

how middle leaders navigate their professional roles and influence change within their institutions.

Relational trust refers to the capacity to build and sustain trust-based relationships among colleagues, which is critical for fostering successful collaboration and supporting teacher professional development. Trust, in this context, goes beyond interpersonal rapport; it becomes a condition for shared professional learning and organizational improvement (Edwards-Groves et al., 2016). In the practice of middle leadership, trust is not incidental but foundational – it creates the emotional and professional safety necessary for engaging in reflective dialogue and collective decision-making.

Alongside trust, leadership identity plays a pivotal role in shaping how middle leaders understand and enact their positions. Leadership identity refers to how individuals perceive and define themselves as leaders within a specific social and organizational context. According to DeRue and Ashford (2010), the construction of leadership identity is a dynamic and relational process, influenced by recognition from colleagues, personal agency, and the broader institutional culture. For middle leaders, identity is formed at the intersection of teaching practice, departmental oversight, and interactions with senior leadership. Their dual role as both teacher and leader often shapes a hybrid identity that requires constant negotiation and adaptation.

The concept of middle leading as a socially situated educational practice further deepens this discussion. Developed by Grootenboer et al. (2014), the framework of middle-level positions trust is at the core of effective leadership. These scholars identified five interrelated dimensions of relational trust that are essential for middle leaders to influence school culture and practice meaningfully: interpersonal, interactional, intersubjective, intellectual, and pragmatic trust.

Interpersonal trust refers to the open, inclusive, and respectful nature of relationships between middle leaders and their colleagues. It reflects mutual recognition, empathy, and a shared sense of professional belonging (Edwards-Groves et al., 2016). Interactional trust centers on opportunities for democratic dialogue and professional cooperation. It emphasizes the importance of listening to diverse viewpoints and fostering safe, communicative environments for collaborative problem-solving. Intersubjective trust is built through shared professional goals and collective activities. It promotes collegiality and the co-construction of knowledge and pedagogical strategies. Intellectual trust emerges from the recognition of a middle leader's expertise in subject matter and pedagogy. It enables leaders to intellectually challenge their peers in ways that foster growth and development. Pragmatic trust refers to the capacity of middle leaders to lead change initiatives that are practical, achievable, and relevant to the school's context.

These five dimensions are not discrete; rather, they interact to create a professional culture conducive to innovation, shared responsibility, and teacher empowerment. According to Edwards-Groves et al. (2016), cultivating all five forms of trust enables middle leaders to facilitate professional agency, build a shared language of practice, and foster environments where conceptual growth and creativity can flourish.

By integrating relational trust and leadership identity, middle leaders can guide meaningful change in ways that are both personally authentic and professionally responsive. Their success is contingent on their ability to foster relationships, mediate institutional expectations, and nurture a sense of shared ownership among staff. In this way, relational trust and identity construction are not peripheral concerns - they are central mechanisms by which middle leadership operates and sustains educational improvement.

2.7 Theoretical Framework

This study aimed to explore how HoDs in one public and one private school in Astana understand, perceive, and practice their leadership roles; how senior leaders (principals and vice-principals) and teachers view them; what experiences and challenges they encounter; and what roles they play as middle leaders. While there have been some attempts to develop models of middle leadership to guide professional development (De Nobile, 2019), there are relatively few empirically well-grounded theories focused on middle leaders in schools, and even fewer large-scale quantitative studies (Harris et al., 2019; Lipscombe et al., 2021).

The most effective way to examine middle leadership is to analyze the roles middle leaders perform in schools and determine the extent to which those roles align with key aspects of leadership identified in relevant research. Previous studies have attempted to identify the roles leaders and managers play in organizations. Mintzberg, whose work has been cited by many over the years, proposed ten roles that covered the interpersonal, informational, and decision-oriented aspects of managers in large organizations, although this work was not focused just on middle managers per se (Mintzberg, 2009, as cited in De Nobile, 2014).

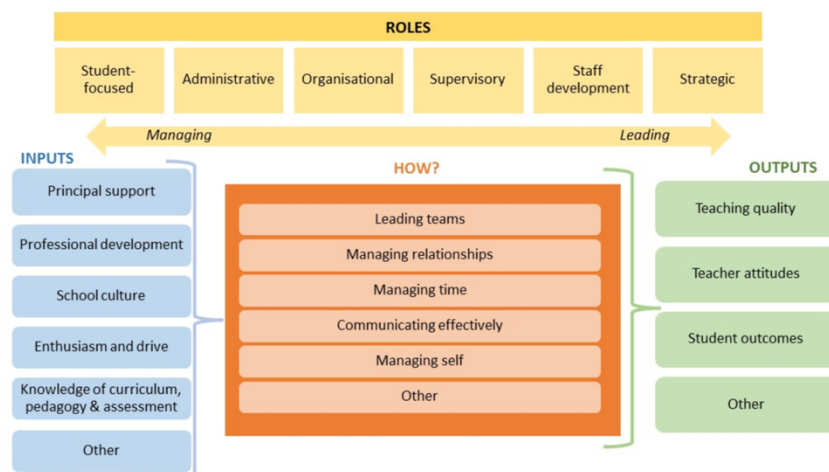
This study is grounded in the concept of the Middle Leadership in Schools (MLiS) model, which was developed from an extensive review of the literature on middle management and middle leadership (de Nobile, 2018). De Nobile (2018) defined middle leadership as teachers (and non-teachers) who are responsible for the maintenance, improvement, or development of aspects of school organization. The model identifies five factors, or inputs, that are required for middle leaders to be effective in their roles: principal support; school culture; professional development; knowledge of curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment; and enthusiasm and drive.

MLiS model divides the roles middle leaders usually hold into two categories – managing and leading roles. Managing roles encompass student-focused roles, administrative roles, and organizational roles. These roles are often focused on developing processes and ensuring organization within the school. Leading roles, on the other hand, comprise supervisory roles, staff development roles, and strategic roles. These roles often aim to motivate others within the school and to improve or change practice through influence (Grootenboer et al., 2021).

The MLiS model highlights the various strategies middle leaders use to enact their roles, including managing relationships, leading teams, communicating effectively, managing time, and managing self. When properly supported in their roles, middle leaders can positively impact teaching quality, teacher attitudes, and student outcomes. The MLiS model had two purposes. First, it was designed to show the state of the art of research into middle leadership in schools. Second, it was intended to guide further research.

Figure 1

Theoretical framework



The Middle Leadership in Schools Model (MLiS), adapted from De Nobile (2018).

2.8 Middle Leadership in the Kazakhstani Context

In the context of Kazakhstani secondary schools, Heads of Departments (HoDs) function as positional middle leaders, positioned between the senior leadership team (principals and vice-principals) and subject teachers. As noted by Badanova (2024), these individuals are simultaneously leaders and followers—they lead within their departments while remaining accountable to senior administrators. This duality often creates complex role expectations and tension in balancing top-down directives with departmental needs.

HoDs in Kazakhstan frequently face dual responsibilities, encompassing both departmental leadership and a full teaching load. This combined role places significant demands on their time and energy, often without corresponding structural support (Badanova, 2024). The lack of distributed workload can limit their ability to focus on professional development, mentoring, or strategic planning, thereby reducing the effectiveness of their leadership practice.

One of the pressing systemic issues in Kazakhstani schools is the absence of adequate financial remuneration for middle leaders. As Badanova (2024) emphasizes, HoDs are often entrusted with extensive administrative and pedagogical responsibilities without receiving any additional compensation. This lack of financial incentives directly impacts motivation, job satisfaction, and long-term commitment to the role. Consequently, many HoDs perform their duties out of professional obligation rather than institutional support, which may lead to burnout or diminished leadership efficacy.

Despite these challenges, HoDs play a critical role in teacher development and capacity-building. In many cases, leadership is demonstrated not through formal authority but through role modeling and the promotion of instructional excellence (Badanova, 2024). Middle leaders are expected to inspire colleagues by sharing best practices, initiating collaborative activities, and fostering a culture of continuous improvement within their

teams. Their credibility as leaders often stems from their professional expertise and ability to motivate peers through example, rather than through structural power or formal recognition.

In summary, the Kazakhstani context reveals a unique blend of high expectations and limited institutional support for middle leaders. Although HoDs are increasingly central to school improvement, they operate within a system that has yet to fully define, reward, or professionalize their roles. These contextual insights underscore the importance of this study, which seeks to explore the lived experiences of HoDs as they navigate the demands of middle leadership in Kazakhstan.

2.9 Challenges Faced by Heads of Departments (HoDs)

A recurring challenge in the literature is the role ambiguity experienced by Heads of Departments (HoDs), particularly concerning their responsibilities in instructional leadership. Leithwood (2016) found that department heads often avoid observing the teaching of their colleagues, preferring instead to focus on preparing lesson plans, assessments, and exercise books. This avoidance may stem from discomfort, lack of authority, or insufficient training, despite an awareness that monitoring instruction is a key aspect of their role.

One of the most significant barriers to effective middle leadership is the lack of dedicated time. Leithwood (2016) emphasizes that strong departmental leadership depends on having adequate time during the school day to balance teaching duties with leadership responsibilities. Without this structural support, HoDs struggle to influence instructional quality meaningfully. Leithwood's findings further suggest that departmental leadership has a stronger impact on student learning than whole-school or principal-level leadership. However, for HoDs to exert this influence effectively, a supportive school-wide context is essential.

Badanova (2024) highlights a unique complexity faced by HoDs in Kazakhstan: many are both department heads and teachers, and in some schools, even senior leaders take on teaching responsibilities. This overlapping of roles blurs traditional hierarchies, making it difficult for HoDs to assert leadership over colleagues to whom they are often subordinate. This dynamic complicates the processes of claiming and granting leadership authority, especially in cultures with hierarchical tendencies.

One of the most prominent challenges for HoDs is motivating teachers to engage in departmental initiatives. According to Badanova (2024), teachers' packed schedules leave them little time or energy for additional tasks, and this makes fostering collaboration or collective reflection particularly difficult. The lack of engagement is often not due to disinterest but to systemic constraints on teachers' time and energy.

The definition of the HoD role in Kazakhstan is closely tied to bureaucratic structures and top-down directives. Badanova (2024) notes that HoDs understand their leadership responsibilities based primarily on official documents such as the Ministry of Education and Science's order "On Subject Methodological Unit" No. 583 (MES, 2007, amended 2022). Each school adapts this national framework into internal job descriptions that detail expectations specific to the institutional context. However, even when not explicitly mentioned in formal job descriptions, teacher and student achievements are informally regarded as the primary indicators of departmental success. This results in implicit performance pressures that further complicate the leadership experience (Badanova, 2024).

In summary, HoDs face a combination of role complexity, time constraints, unclear authority, and systemic ambiguity. Without adequate institutional support, autonomy, or professional development, they are expected to fulfill a wide range of duties while navigating layered and sometimes contradictory expectations. These challenges underscore

the need for clearer role definitions, structured leadership training, and greater institutional recognition of the critical work HoDs perform.

2.10 Impact of Middle Leaders on School Improvement and Student Learning

The impact of middle leaders - particularly teacher leaders and Heads of Departments (HoDs) - on school improvement and student learning is increasingly acknowledged in contemporary educational research. Harris and Jones (2019) assert that teacher leaders, when empowered, can “initiate, innovate, implement, and share a wide range of projects” that foster collaborative professional learning, enhance teaching practices, and support student achievement. Their influence is not limited to measurable outcomes such as improved assessment results but extends to intangible benefits, including a sense of professional agency, empowerment, and recognition. As they encounter and overcome personal and interpersonal challenges, teacher leaders learn how to collaborate more effectively, disseminate knowledge about student learning, and sustain long-term improvements in instructional practices.

The development of teacher leadership contributes significantly to a culture of school improvement, where shared leadership and collaboration become the norm rather than the exception. This aligns with the findings of Leithwood (2016), who emphasizes the centrality of collegial relationships within and across departments. While collaboration can enhance school improvement efforts, conflict or competition among staff members can undermine them. These relational dynamics often stem from individual differences in beliefs, work commitment, and interpersonal trust, reinforcing the importance of middle leaders in cultivating a cooperative departmental culture.

Leithwood (2016) identified several characteristics shared by effective departments. These include: a collegiate management style, a collaboratively developed and well-communicated vision for the subject area; strong organizational practices in

assessment, record-keeping, and homework; sound resource management; robust systems for monitoring and evaluation; well-structured lessons with consistent feedback; clear classroom routines and practices; curriculum alignment with students' needs and abilities; a pupil-centered ethos with systematic recognition of student efforts; and emphasis on autonomous learning opportunities and a strong focus on teaching and learning.

These features not only illustrate the organizational influence of middle leaders but also demonstrate how their leadership directly supports student outcomes and instructional quality. Effective HoDs serve as change agents by guiding curriculum development, promoting pedagogical coherence, and implementing systems for accountability and feedback. Their proximity to teaching practice—combined with their leadership responsibilities—positions them uniquely to mediate reform, enhance teacher collaboration, and promote professional learning communities.

Moreover, teacher and student achievements are often indirect indicators of a middle leader's success. Although not always formally recognized in job descriptions (as noted in Badanova, 2024), such achievements are closely linked to how HoDs are evaluated by their peers and senior leaders. The ability to sustain instructional improvement, maintain teacher morale, and drive departmental effectiveness contributes to the overall performance of the school.

In conclusion, middle leaders play a pivotal role in bridging policy and practice, transforming vision into classroom-level action, and cultivating a professional culture centered on continuous improvement. Their leadership is essential not only for maintaining operational effectiveness but also for enabling transformative change in teaching and learning. This justifies the current study's focus on exploring how HoDs interpret, enact, and influence school improvement through their mediating roles in the Kazakhstani educational context.

Summary

This chapter critically examined the literature on the role of middle leadership, particularly Heads of Departments (HoDs), focusing on their function as both teachers and leaders. It distinguished middle leadership from middle management, emphasizing its pedagogical influence, policy translation, and team development. The chapter explored how HoDs serve as bridges between senior leadership and classroom teachers, highlighting their role in implementing school policies and fostering professional growth. It discussed the challenges faced by HoDs, including role ambiguity, time constraints, and lack of formal recognition, particularly in Kazakhstan, where the concept of middle leadership is underexplored. The chapter also addressed the importance of relational trust and leadership identity, as well as the impact of middle leaders on school culture, teacher development, and student outcomes. Finally, it introduced Distributed Leadership and Leading from the Middle (LfM) as frameworks that empower middle leaders to drive school improvement and foster collaboration.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Research Design

A qualitative embedded multiple case-study design (Yin, 2018) was used to explore the phenomenon of middle leaders, specifically heads of departments, in one private and one public school in Astana, and understand how they understand, perceive, and practice their leadership roles, how senior leaders (principals and vice-principals) and teachers view them, what experiences and challenges they encounter, and what roles they play as middle leaders.

This multiple case study adopted an exploratory approach to identify emerging themes and deviations in perceiving leadership roles of HoDs across private and public schools. The chosen method entails the description and comparison of multiple cases to gain an understanding of an issue (Creswell, 2012). Multiple case study is the study of more than one case to “investigate a phenomenon, population, or general condition” (Stake, 2006, p. 437). This approach of the study is perceived to be effective as it (a) investigates individuals’ views and develops detailed information on a central phenomenon, (b) states the purpose and research questions in general and depicts the participants’ experiences, (c) collects data based on words from a small number of individuals so that the participants’ views are obtained (Creswell 2014, p.31).

3.2 Research Site

Two schools in Astana City were selected for the study: one state school and one private school. Both schools operate within the same national education system and implement state curriculum standards and regulations prescribed by the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan. However, they function within distinct institutional contexts.

School 1 (S1) is a state secondary school located in Astana, Kazakhstan. It operates under the authority of the city Department of Education, which operates within a centralized regulatory framework characterized by standardized curricula, structured reporting mechanisms, and formal accountability procedures. The school provides general secondary education and follows the national curriculum established by the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

School 2 (S2) is a private school located in Astana. It operates with greater institutional autonomy, enabling flexible curriculum design, innovative pedagogical approaches, and strategic development initiatives.

Although both schools are located in Astana and comply with national educational policy, they differ in governance structures, resource allocation, and organizational structures. These differences provide a meaningful basis for cross-case comparison (Yin, 2018).

3.3 Participants and Sampling Strategies

A total of nine participants took part in the research. They represented diverse roles within the school, including HoDs, Vice-principals, and teachers, as well as a variety of subject areas and years of professional experience. The study involved two middle leaders (HoDs) from one private and one public school, two senior leaders (vice-principals), and five subject teachers from both school environments.

All interviews were conducted in the participants' preferred language (Russian) and were transcribed and translated into English. During the interviews, participants were asked to explain how HoDs perceive and enact their leadership roles, what expectations teachers and vice-principals have toward HoDs, and what challenges department heads face while managing their multiple responsibilities.

Participants and the research site were selected using a combination of sampling strategies to ensure diversity and relevance. Convenience Sampling was used to select participants based on their availability and willingness to participate in the study, generating diverse perspectives and experiences. Purposive Sampling was employed to select participants most relevant to the research questions, such as those who actively engage in instructional or leadership work.

Before the interview, the participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the risks and benefits of participation, as well as their rights, withdrawal, and confidentiality procedure. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned to all the participants. Table 1 presents participant profiles, including role, subject area, teaching experience, and department size.

Table 1

Profiles of Heads of Departments by School

Pseudonym	Type of School	Role	Gender	Subject Area	Years in this Role	Number of Departments	Number of Teachers in the Department
Vice-principal 1	State	Vice-principal	Female	Math	2	13	-
Vice-principal 2	Private	Vice-principal	Male	Science	2	6	-
HoD1	State	Head of Department	Female	Russian Language and Russian Literature	2	13	16
HoD 2	Private	Head of Department	Female	Physics Math IT	2	6	19
HoD 3	Private	Head of Department	Female	Novice Teachers of Different Subjects	2	6	15
Teacher 1	State	Teacher	Female	Math	20	13	32
Teacher 2	State	Teacher	Female	Kazakh	42	13	9
Teacher 3	Private	Teacher	Female	English	4	6	20-30

Teacher 4	Private	Teacher	Female	English Preschool	2	6	40
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3.4 Data Collection Instruments

The selection of data collection instruments was influenced by the theoretical orientation, research problem, and purpose, access to data sources, sample selection, and participant availability (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This study used semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection tool.

The interview questions were designed to address the main research questions and primarily consisted of open-ended items, enabling participants to provide rich, detailed accounts of their experiences, attitudes, and perceptions. Follow-up questions were used to encourage elaboration and promote deeper discussion, which allowed for flexibility and adaptability based on participants' responses (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

3.5 Data Collection Procedures

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with school senior leaders (vice principals), department heads (HoDs), and subject teachers. First, I contacted the school principal and explained the purpose of the study. After receiving permission from the principal, I asked for the contact information and phone numbers of vice principals, HoDs, and teachers who agreed to participate in the interviews and meet the sampling criteria. The potential participants were provided with a consent form that outlined the research objectives, confidentiality, and participants' rights. After receiving a signed consent, the participants were scheduled for the interviews. The interviews were conducted via video conferencing in a language convenient for the participants. The interviews lasted approximately 40 to 60 minutes and were guided by open-ended questions focused on leadership strategies, policy implementation, and challenges faced by middle leaders.

With participants' consent, each semi-structured interview was audio-recorded and later transcribed using Turboscribe. All interviews were conducted in Russian and then translated into English by the researcher to ensure accuracy. Before conducting the interview, the participants were informed about the aims of the research, their rights to withdraw from the study, and the risks and benefits of participation. The participants were also informed about the confidentiality measures that would be undertaken to protect the data and their identity, and how the data would be treated during the study and after the completion of the study.

All the interviews were conducted online due to the heavy load of the participants and the lack of time. The semi-structured format of the interviews allowed the participants multiple opportunities to share their experiences and discuss the role of department heads from different perspectives. The actual interviews lasted 40-60 minutes. The interviews followed different protocols depending on the role of the participant (vice-principal, head of department, or teacher). The protocols included questions aiming to explore how department heads interpret and implement their leadership role, the responsibilities they hold, the challenges they encounter, and how the school culture influences their practices.

3.6 Data Analysis

Analyzing data is essential to developing an understanding of gathered information in order to construct answers to the research questions (Creswell, 2014).

This study employed a deductive thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006) that includes within-case and cross-case methods (Yin, 2018) to explore the roles and experiences of Heads of Departments (HoDs) in private and public schools in Astana. Each school, as a case, was analyzed separately to understand the unique context of each case before making any cross-case comparisons. Cross-case analysis included comparing

data across cases to identify similarities and differences between cases (Yin, 2018). Cross-case analysis allowed to build a comprehensive understanding of the subject under study. The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-stage approach: (1) familiarization with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) writing the report. Table 2 represents six phases of thematic analysis.

Table 2

A six-phase approach to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Phase 1	This phase involves reading transcripts of the interviews, listening to audio recordings, and making notes on the data to highlight items potentially of interest.
Phase 2	This phase involves identifying codes and providing an interpretation about the data content.
Phase 3	This phase involves reviewing the coded data and identify areas of similarity and overlap between codes to generate themes and subthemes, exploring the relationships between themes to consider how themes work together in telling an overall story about the data, and designing a thematic map.
Phase 4	This phase involves reviewing themes in relation to coded data and research questions.
Phase 5	This phase involves selecting extracts to present and analyze and then setting out the story of each theme.
Phase 6	This phase is final and involves the production of a report providing a compelling story about data based on the analysis.

The first stage involved reading the data repeatedly to understand its context. Then, data were coded systematically, with both descriptive and analytical codes applied to identify relevant patterns related to the research questions. In the third stage, the coded data were grouped into broader themes, such as “policy mediation” or “teacher development,” reflecting key issues in HoDs' leadership roles. The fourth stage involved reviewing and refining these themes to ensure coherence and alignment with the research focus. The final themes were defined and named, with each theme illustrated by direct quotes from the data. Findings were presented thematically, supported by tables and

diagrams. Document analysis complemented the thematic analysis by examining national and school policies, providing a framework within which HoDs operate.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

The study was undertaken according to NU GSE Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research. To ensure the confidentiality of participants throughout the study, the following procedures were implemented during data collection, storage, and reporting to ensure ethical compliance:

Informed Consent: All participants aged 18 or older received detailed information about the study, including its purpose, procedures, data collection, and rights to withdraw. Participants signed an informed consent form before the interviews.

Anonymity and Confidentiality: All data were anonymized. Audio recordings and transcripts were stored securely and were accessible only to the researcher and the supervisor. Data were deleted upon the study's completion.

Participant Welfare: Participants might choose to skip any questions they find uncomfortable to protect their well-being.

Transparency in Data Use: Participants were informed about how their data would be used, stored, and reported to ensure trust and understanding.

Debriefing: A summary of the study's purpose and findings can be shared with participants after data collection.

Reporting of Results: Research findings were reported transparently, without bias, and presented in a logical, clear structure.

Potential risks in this study were minimal. Although participants were not asked any sensitive questions, they might experience discomfort discussing their own work, colleagues, and school leadership. However, they were free not to answer such questions if

they did not want to. Also, their participation in the study could not have any negative results for their work, employment, or relationships at school.

3.8 Positionality Statement

As a researcher, I occupy a dual role—both as an English teacher and as a Head of Department. This insider position allowed me to engage empathetically with participants while maintaining an objective and analytical stance throughout the research process. I was committed to exploring participants' views without bias and to presenting findings that reflect authentic experiences and challenges within the context of middle leadership.

3.9 Limitations

This study is limited by its small sample size of 10 participants and its focus on only one private and one public school in Astana. Nevertheless, the study provides in-depth, contextualized insights into the roles and experiences of Heads of Departments (HoDs), which may inform future research, policy, and practice.

Summary

This chapter outlined the qualitative embedded multiple case-study design used to explore the roles of Heads of Departments (HoDs) in one private and one public school in Astana. This approach allows for an in-depth comparison of HoDs' leadership roles, their challenges, and the perceptions of teachers and senior leaders. The study used semi-structured interviews and document analysis to collect data from nine participants, including HoDs, vice-principals, and teachers, all of whom were selected using a combination of purposive and convenience sampling strategies. The data was analyzed using a deductive thematic analysis approach, which involved generating initial codes, identifying themes, and cross-case comparisons. Ethical considerations such as informed consent, confidentiality, and participant welfare were ensured throughout the study. The chapter also addressed the researcher's positionality as an insider with dual roles as a

teacher and HoD. The limitations of the study, including its small sample size and limited geographic scope, were acknowledged.

Chapter 4: Findings

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings of the qualitative multiple case study analyzing how Heads of Departments (HoDs) in two schools in Astana – the state school and the private school-enact their roles as middle leaders and how their leadership contributes to departmental and school effectiveness.

Through the analysis of interviews with HoDs, teachers, and senior leaders, this chapter aims to contribute to the growing body of literature on middle leadership in schools, with a specific focus on Kazakhstan’s evolving educational system. The findings, which are structured around the MLiS model (De Nobile, 2018), offer a nuanced view of how leadership roles are socially constructed within specific institutional contexts and shaped by organizational culture, autonomy, and structural conditions. The themes presented in this chapter are aligned with the research questions and theoretical framework.

4.2 Thematic Analysis

Data analysis was structured around De Nobile’s (2018) MLiS model, which conceptualizes middle leaders as teachers (and non-teachers) responsible for maintaining, improving, and developing aspects of school organization. The model identifies six core roles (student-focused, administrative, organizational, supervisory, staff-development, and strategic) and contextual factors influencing school effectiveness, including principal support, school culture, professional development, knowledge of curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment, and enthusiasm.

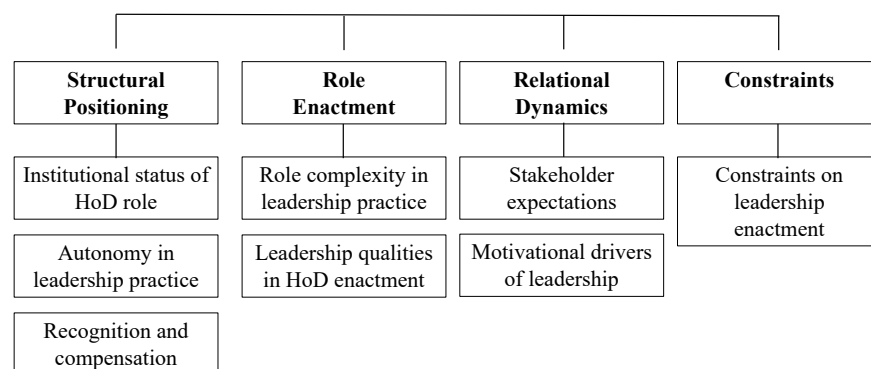
The table below presents the codes and the respective themes identified during the analysis.

Table 3*Interview codes and themes*

Examples of Codes	Theme
not a formal position	Institutional status of the HoD role
autonomy	Autonomy in middle leadership practice
recognition and job rewards	Recognition and compensation of HoD work
managing different roles	Role complexity in HoD leadership
challenges	Constraints on leadership enactment
motivation/if not me than who	Motivational drivers of HoD leadership enactment
qualities of HoD	Leadership qualities shaping HoD practice
expectations of teachers and administration	Stakeholder expectations of HoD performance

The thematic analysis resulted in four overarching domains that structure middle leadership practice: structural positioning of the role, enactment of leadership, relational dynamics, and constraints and enablers. Each domain consists of interrelated sub-themes derived from participants' accounts, reflecting how HoDs navigate their leadership roles within specific institutional contexts.

Figure 2 presents a thematic map of HoD leadership enactment, illustrating the main themes and sub-themes derived from the data analysis.

Figure 2*Thematic map of HoD leadership enactment.*

Within each theme, findings are first presented separately for each school (within-case analysis), followed by cross-case analytical comparison where appropriate. The chapter concludes with a cross-case synthesis addressing the main research question and highlighting how contextual conditions shape the enactment and impact of middle leadership.

The chapter is organized into three main sections. The first section presents a within-case analysis of the state school. The second section presents a within-case analysis of the private school. The final section provides a cross-case analysis that compares patterns across the two school contexts. Throughout the chapter, interview excerpts are presented to illustrate the themes that emerged from the data.

4.3 Characteristics of Schools

Two schools in Astana City were selected for the study: one state school and one private school. The names and identifying details of the schools are not disclosed for ethical reasons.

4.3.1 School 1

School 1 (hereafter S1) is a state secondary school located in Astana, Kazakhstan. It provides general secondary education and operates under the authority of the city Department of Education. The school follows the national curriculum established by the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan. The school provides education aligned with national standards and offers students opportunities for both academic and extracurricular development. It has more than 2200 students and approximately 250 teachers.

The leadership team consists of a school principal, several deputy directors responsible for academic and educational affairs, and Heads of Departments who coordinate subject-based methodological associations. These middle leaders are

responsible for supporting teachers, organizing departmental meetings, monitoring curriculum implementation, and facilitating professional collaboration within their departments.

Educational activities include classroom instruction aligned with national standards, participation in academic competitions and Olympiads, extracurricular activities, and school-wide cultural events. In addition to academic achievement, the school emphasizes values education and student engagement in community initiatives. Within the context of this study, S1 provides insight into how middle leadership roles are understood and enacted in a state school environment, where leadership practices are influenced by centralized educational policies, formal administrative structures, and established departmental hierarchies.

4.3.2 School 2

School 2 (S2) is a private school located in Astana. The school has more than 1000 students and approximately 70 teachers. The curriculum combines state educational programs with internationally recognized programs. The school cooperates with international institutions, providing teachers with access to digital educational platforms and methodological support. The school emphasizes project-based learning, bilingual education, and career guidance. In addition to state examinations, students may take international Advanced Placement and A-level examinations, which enable them to apply to prestigious universities. The school is equipped with modern technologies and high-tech laboratories. Creating a positive and supportive learning environment for students is one of its main priorities.

4.4 Within-Case Analysis: School 1 (State School)

4.4.1 Not a Formal Position

One of the initial questions explored whether schools had written policies defining the status, responsibilities, or autonomy of HoDs. Most participants indicated that they were unaware of such policies. All participants reported that they did not know whether a formal policy regulating the HoD role existed in their school. In the state school, the position of HoD is often taken voluntarily rather than through formal appointment. As a result, work in this role is not strictly regulated. There are no fixed criteria regarding who can become HoD or what experience they must possess. There is Order No. 583, which is based mainly on the academic and methodological work of educational organizations. It briefly defines the concept of a methodological council and the notion of a department, primarily as a general definition rather than as a clearly regulated position. Vice-Principal 1 explained, “We cannot really refer to any specific requirements when appointing a Head of Department.” Similarly, HoD3 stated: “It is not a formal position, it is an additional responsibility.”

4.4.2 Autonomy in Leadership Practice

Participants emphasized that the role of the HoD is important despite its informal nature. Vice-principals often have a large workload across different areas, and in practice, HoDs work closely with the teachers daily. HoD3 believes that the Department head, as a leader, should stand behind the team and do everything possible to support the teachers. Teachers also emphasized that HoDs do not possess the same formal authority as senior leaders. As Teacher 3 explained, “In general, HoDs do not have the same formal authority over teachers as senior leaders have. They cannot give orders in the way vice-principals can. They can only negotiate with us and reach agreements, unlike vice-principals, who have more direct administrative power.”

Participants also noted that when teachers are appointed as department heads, the responsibilities of the role are often unclear. HoDs frequently perform additional tasks without clearly defined expectations. The HoD is usually somebody who doesn't hold a top-down position. Interpersonal communication plays a vital role in building communication between teachers. Teacher 3 described the role in the following way, "She knows how to approach people gently, how to negotiate, how to persuade. These are really her strongest qualities-her interpersonal skills." HoD is also somebody who has a combination of strong communication skills, together with knowledge of methodology and digital literacy. Teacher 3 further explained:

What does she handle especially well? She manages reporting very effectively. She is an informatics teacher herself, so she is very confident with Google tools and spreadsheets, and this kind of work does not cause her any difficulty. Overall, she is a smart, kind, and calm person. She does not create conflict. You never hear her speaking badly about anyone — she is always correct and respectful. So, her strongest qualities are really her human qualities: kindness, diplomacy, and the ability to work well with people. (Teacher 3)

Teachers generally believe that an effective HoD should possess strong communication skills, flexibility, patience, and the ability to support teachers' creativity. As teacher 3 noted:

The status of this role is very specific. On the one hand, you need to negotiate with the administration and school leadership. On the other hand, you need to clearly communicate everything to the department. And all of this has to be done in a reasonable, balanced way, so that everyone understands where things are going and what exactly needs to be done. (Teacher 3)

Overall, in the state school, HoDs appeared to have limited autonomy in shaping decisions, as they often transmitted instructions from senior leaders rather than influencing them.

According to De Nobile's (2018) MLiS model, strong knowledge of curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment is vital for effective middle leadership. HoDs must possess deep instructional expertise to guide teaching practice, support professional growth, and drive school improvement.

4.4.3 Job Rewards

A lot of additional workload falls on the Head of Department. This additional workload is not regulated, and it is not paid. Work rewards in the state school are minimal, particularly in terms of financial incentives. Vice-principal in S1 says that the school compensates HoD for additional workload with extra days off. For example, during the calendar year, at the end of each term, they are given two extra days off added to their vacation as compensation. One of the HoDs also pointed out that there is no monetary reward for additional HoD responsibilities, "It is not really paid or rewarded in any way. On the contrary, sometimes it even feels like punishment. If a report is not submitted on time, the administration can publicly say at a staff meeting, "This Head of Department failed to submit this report." Despite the lack of monetary rewards, HoDs remain intrinsically motivated, driven by a sense of duty and commitment to improving their departments. This aligns with De Nobile's (2018) MLiS model, which highlights that personal commitment and passion for the role are essential for middle leadership effectiveness.

4.4.4 Case-Specific Findings Related to Research Question 1: Managing Different Roles

HoDs are responsible for multiple roles within their departments, including managing departmental meetings, addressing various problems within their subject area,

and overseeing the implementation of certain school-wide procedures. In addition to this, they coordinate with teachers to moderate lessons and ensure consistency in teaching practices. HoDs also play a significant role in communication with the senior leadership, bridging the link between teachers and administration.

4.4.4.1 Student-Focused Role

The student-focused role refers to occasions when middle leaders deal directly with students and their issues (academic and personal) (De Nobile, 2018). Busher (2005) and De Nobile (2018) described middle leaders in several contexts who monitored student performance and liaised with parents about students' academic progress, student welfare, behavioral concerns, and maintained links between school and home. This role requires middle leaders to influence teaching and learning practices in ways that directly impact student outcomes.

In the state school, the student-focused role was described as structured and formal. HoDs in this school are involved in motivating students to participate in various academic competitions, especially Olympiads. These events serve as motivational tools for both teachers and students. As Vice-Principal 1 said, "This actually motivates them additionally: they compete for leadership, for measurable results, engaging in a kind of informal competition that produces outcomes. They show almost the same level of effectiveness both in terms of teachers' professional performance and students' achievements."

Besides motivating students for competitions, HoDs are involved in the student adaptation process. They observe students during lessons, identify those who may be struggling, and report their observations to senior leaders, ensuring necessary support is provided.

4.4.4.2 Administrative Role

The administrative role is a key aspect of HoDs' daily work. According to De Nobile (2018), this role involves coordinating tasks, managing resources, and ensuring that departmental work aligns with overall school expectations.

In S1, the administrative role was described as procedural and highly focused on reporting and coordination. Teachers repeatedly emphasized that the HoD acted as a link between administration and staff. Also, when some teachers are ill, HoDs schedule substitutions. "Since she knows all the teachers well, she can approach us in a more friendly and flexible way." (Teacher 3)

4.4.4.3 Organizational Role

In De Nobile's (2018) MLiS model, the organizational role refers to how middle leaders deal with the organization of people. Key tasks include the negotiation and drawing up of rosters and timetables. It also involves planning and implementing programs, events, and collaborative processes that support the school's functioning.

In both schools, HoDs spoke about their significant organizational responsibilities, including managing events and activities. In S1, the role was described as more structured and compliance oriented. HoDs focus on planning events, coordinating departmental tasks, and ensuring adherence to predefined frameworks and schedules. HoD3 described their responsibilities as follows:

There is a lot of work, especially at the beginning of the academic year. This includes planning and organizing the department's work schedule and activities.

Even though HoDs are not formal leaders, the importance of their job is significant.

In reality, we are the ones who move the teaching staff forward, who keep the process going—especially when new teachers join the school. Yes, very often we

have to take responsibility and “push” things forward ourselves, particularly when newcomers appear. (HoD3, S1)

Before significant events like “subject weeks” or “decades”, HoDs coordinate with the teachers to ensure proper planning and organization:

Before big events like a decade or a subject week, HoDs meet with the teachers for collaborative planning. They discuss who will open and close the subject week, and who will conduct demo lessons. So, for the entire subject week, she acts as the coordinator and oversees all of this work. (Teacher 3, S1)

4.4.4.4 Supervisory Role

The supervisory role sees middle leaders being engaged in monitoring and evaluating the performance of other staff. In De Nobile’s (2018) MLiS model, the supervisory role focuses on monitoring teaching quality, observing lessons, giving feedback, and supporting instructional improvement.

In S1, HoDs are responsible for supervising teachers who apply for the teacher-moderator certification. They work with senior leaders to review teachers’ performance, provide methodological support, and conduct individual consultations for teachers struggling with the attestation process. HoD3 described their supervisory responsibilities, “I cannot follow each teacher step by step all the time, of course, but when specific issues arise, individual consultations are provided.” Additionally, HoDs are involved in lesson observations, particularly for new teachers, as they help them adapt and improve their teaching methods.

4.4.4.5 Staff-development Role

In De Nobile’s (2018) MLiS model, the staff-development role focuses on building teachers’ capacity through mentoring, coaching, dialogue, and structured professional

learning. Unlike supervision, which evaluates performance, this role is about growth and long-term improvement.

In S1, staff development is more closely tied to certification procedures and overseen by a dedicated vice-principal responsible for teachers' professional development. Although HoDs supervise novice teachers and provide lesson observations, staff development is not their primary responsibility.

4.4.4.6 Strategic Role

De Nobile (2018) identifies the strategic role as one that involves contributing to the school's long-term direction through vision-building, goal setting, and participation in decision-making. This role requires middle leaders to persuade and motivate their staff to work towards the goals and cooperate to achieve the desired results.

In S1, HoDs contribute to strategic work, particularly through analytical activities such as submitting department reports, conducting a SWOT analysis, and reviewing student performance data. Teacher 3 stated, "She clearly identifies areas where we may have underperformed — for example, where a topic was not explained well enough, where students struggled, or, on the contrary, where tasks could have been made more challenging."

However, while HoDs are involved in planning events and submitting reports, there was little evidence that they participated in broader strategic forums or contributed to vision-building processes at the school level. Strategic direction seemed to be primarily centralized within senior leadership.

4.4.5 Case-Specific Findings Related to Research Question 2: Relationships with teachers and administration

In the S1 department, department heads hold an informal leadership role. Despite being in a leadership position, they maintain a cooperative and supportive relationship with

teachers, acting more as team coordinators rather than authoritative leaders. As Teacher 3 mentioned, “HoD is not really a boss for us, more a coordinator. She communicates in a supportive, friendly way rather than through authority.”

4.4.6 Case-Specific Findings Related to Research Question 3: Challenges and Opportunities

One of the issues reported by HoDs was a lack of time to meet deadlines. HoD3 explained, “There are moments when certain information needs to be submitted by a specific deadline, and you constantly have to stay on top of everything and keep your finger on the pulse.”

Additionally, the traditional top-down communication system in the state school sometimes results in teachers underestimating the HoD’s role. HoDs often take responsibility for tasks on their own, which leads to increased workload and stress. Besides, Vice-Principal 2 says that another problem that exists in state schools is the lack of academic freedom, the official language of communication inside the school, and bureaucracy. Department Heads in state schools have to complete numerous reports. Another issue that Vice-Principal 2 sees in state schools is the attempt to digitize things that should not be digitized, namely, reporting. Excessive reporting, as it exists in state schools, creates serious distortions. Vice-Principal 2 said:

Teachers are asked in advance how many top-performing students there are, even though the academic year has not yet ended. It is impossible to know whether a student will graduate with honors or distinction before the year is over. Requiring such data in advance leads to artificial outcomes-teachers feel pressured to assign high grades at the end of the year simply because figures were already submitted months earlier. This is highly problematic. (Vice-Principal 2)

4.4.6.1 Motivation and Enthusiasm

Despite the heavy workload and lack of financial compensation, HoDs in S1 remain motivated primarily by intrinsic factors. As HoD3 stated, “Well, someone must do this work. And there is also the awareness that what you do moves the team forward and contributes to its development.”

In S1, the only thing HoDs usually get is a few additional days added to their vacation. So, basically, the HoD’s leadership role is done purely out of enthusiasm. HoDs are typically motivated by personal commitment and the desire to see their departments succeed, often working out of enthusiasm rather than for financial gain.

De Nobile (2018) highlights that enthusiasm is crucial for middle leadership effectiveness. Despite limited formal rewards, HoDs’ intrinsic motivation plays a significant role in their ability to drive departmental improvement.

4.5 Within-Case Analysis: School 2 (Private School)

In School 2 (S2), HoDs play a similar role to that in a state school (S1). Their responsibilities include overseeing the implementation of the curriculum, ensuring the timely completion of journals, and submitting reports. However, in S2, HoDs are not only coordinators but also methodological leaders who work closely with senior leadership. They collaborate with an appointed senior leader whose aim is to develop HoDs as trainers in teacher professional development. Together with the vice-principal, HoDs develop a shared understanding of the expected outcomes and the purpose of the departmental work. Their responsibilities also include lesson observations, classroom visits, mentoring conversations, and sharing relevant professional information with teachers.

Department Heads in S2 are also responsible for disseminating important information, participating in the recruitment process, conducting lesson observations, and providing feedback to teachers. They also provide clear guidance regarding curriculum

implementation and program development. As S2 implements its own specialized program alongside the national curriculum, HoDs play a key role in supporting teachers in designing and implementing the program.

4.5.1 Not a Formal Position

Vice-Principal 2 indicated that a regulatory document describing the HoD position may exist in the school, although he was not certain. He suggested that such documentation might take the form of a job description. However, he also expressed the view that excessive formalization could lead to bureaucratic constraints. Vice-Principal 2 stated, “I think that having regulatory documents and formal job descriptions is, of course, a good thing. But the more control you introduce, the more it turns into bureaucracy. There should be minimal requirements, and work should be built based on those minimal requirements.” Similarly, HoD2 reported that she was unsure whether her leadership role was formally specified in her employment contract or job description. Although there was an official order appointing her as HoD, the role itself was not explicitly written in her labor contract. She also explained that she accepted the position voluntarily after the previous department head recommended her.

Unlike state schools, S2 operates not only within national requirements but also seeks international accreditation to obtain international recognition. According to Vice-Principal 2, international organizations such as Cambridge or CIS evaluate schools primarily through evidence of practice rather than strict adherence to formal regulatory documents. Vice-Principal 2 explained:

I think, in our context, the mentality has not fully changed yet. If we require very rigid, clearly prescribed job descriptions, then people who work under those descriptions will do only what is written there, and nothing more. They will not

develop further and will not make additional efforts. That is precisely why, in our case, job descriptions are not very strictly defined. (Vice-Principal 2, S2)

He further illustrated this idea through a comparison, “A child who only follows the curriculum can function well within set boundaries, but a gifted child can make decisions in any situation.”

4.5.2 Autonomy in Leadership Practice

Most Heads of Department in S2 have previous experience working in Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools (NIS) or international educational environments. As a result, they already possess experience with professional standards and expectations associated with leadership roles in schools.

Vice-Principal 2 emphasized that an effective HoD should be methodologically competent and proactive. By proactive, he meant that HoDs should test initiatives in practice before evaluating them, rather than rejecting new strategies prematurely.

Emotional intelligence was also identified as an essential characteristic.

According to HoD2, a Head of Department is primarily someone who provides methodological support to teachers. The role involves bringing the team together, offering ideas, listening to colleagues, and communicating clearly. HoD2 said, “Department heads should be helpers to teachers, not a punitive figure; in other words, it is someone who can listen and lead.”

Participants who had previously worked in NIS schools described that experience as particularly valuable. HoD2 explained:

NIS is a large and demanding school. You work from morning until evening, and you are expected to demonstrate high-quality lessons, show strong learning outcomes, implement projects, and prepare students for Olympiads. It is a very intensive environment. After working at NIS, working in any other school becomes

much easier, because you already have that level of professional discipline and experience. (HoD2)

HoD2 also noted that she became a department head only after gaining substantial experience in teaching and leadership. The school also organized informal seminars outside the school environment where participants discussed various issues, including the profile and expectations of HoDs. She described herself as someone with a strong sense of responsibility and punctuality and emphasized her strong methodological knowledge and experience in classroom management. Over time, she also developed the ability to provide clear and constructive feedback. She regularly attends professional development events and webinars and reads a lot about teacher well-being and classroom management.

Teacher 3 described her previous HoD as a highly motivating leader who provided support not only in professional matters but also in personal situations. Teacher 3 said:

Our HoD did everything: lesson observations, feedback, training, and organizing workshops. She did far beyond her formal duties. She was genuinely interested in the department, development, and teachers themselves. She could see a certain strength in each person and then guide them. What she did best was motivating teachers to grow as strong professionals. And on top of that, there were also heart-to-heart conversations and moral and psychological support. She cared a lot about teachers' well-being. She was genuinely like a mother to us. We could all come to her to talk, even to complain or "have a cry. She could notice you somewhere in the corridor, call you over, and say, "You look sad, come on, let's talk," and she would just sit and talk with you. (Teacher 3, S2)

Participants emphasized that an effective HoD should possess both administrative competence and strong interpersonal communication skills. The ability to negotiate, motivate colleagues, and build constructive dialogue was considered essential. They also

agreed that a department head should be someone more experienced with a stronger professional background and some leadership experience in taking responsibility or leading others.

4.5.3 Job Rewards

In contrast to the state school, HoDs in S2 receive financial compensation for their leadership responsibilities. Vice-Principal 2 explained, “This role in our school is additionally paid. HoDs also have a reduced teaching load, 12 hours per week. Besides, for those who performed particularly well, there are financial incentives and other rewards like diplomas and certificates.” HoD2 confirmed that HoDs receive additional payment for their leadership role. In addition to financial incentives, public recognition also plays an important motivational role. Teachers who participate in successful projects or events may be invited to the stage during school assemblies and acknowledged publicly in front of the whole school community. According to HoD2, this type of recognition is particularly meaningful when students also witness teachers being recognized for their achievements. Furthermore, teachers receive quarterly bonuses, which serve as an additional motivator.

4.5.4 Case-Specific Findings Related to Research Question 1: Managing Different Roles

Although participants reported that no formal document clearly described HoDs’ responsibilities, the role is widely understood within the school community. HoDs typically continue teaching while simultaneously performing leadership responsibilities related to managing their departments. Their teaching load is slightly reduced compared to other teachers to allow time for leadership duties. The position is formally recognized within the school structure as Head of Department rather than as an informal additional responsibility.

4.5.4.1 Student-Focused Role

S2 places considerable emphasis on research and inquiry-based learning. In the primary section, students conduct investigations and present their projects during a Science Fair held twice a year. In secondary school (Grades 7-11), students participate in another research initiative called Innovate. Department heads play a significant role in organizing these events and supporting students during the research process. Besides, HoD2 explained that HoDs also act as mediators in cases of misunderstanding between students and teachers, often serving as a link between teachers and parents. She said, “When conflicts emerge, we supported teachers from different directions at the same time. I believe that this collective approach is exactly why such work produces positive results”.

4.5.4.2 Administrative Role

HoD2 indicated that reporting requirements in S2 are relatively limited. Instead of extensive reporting, greater emphasis is placed on lesson analysis and professional dialogue. For example, during lesson observations, HoDs use observation sheets to provide structured feedback to teachers. In addition, HoDs play an important role in recruiting new teachers. Candidates often conduct demonstration lessons that are observed by department heads, subject teachers, and senior leaders to ensure balanced evaluation.

4.5.4.3 Organizational Role

HoDs in S2 are actively involved in organizing school events and professional activities. HoD2 described organizing numerous events for both teachers and students. For example, she recently initiated a competition for early-career teachers. HoDs also organize pedagogical discussions and meetings that allow teachers to collaboratively address challenges.

4.5.4.4 Supervisory Role

Department heads also support teachers during the attestation process. In addition to the working group that uploads materials to platforms such as Ustaz or eGov, HoDs review teachers' portfolios and assess whether they meet the required standards. Vice-Principal 2 explained, "For instance, under Order No. 83, the moderator level is awarded at the school level. HoDs review all the evidence included in the portfolio, and only after that do the materials come to us for further consideration."

Lesson observation is another important component of the supervisory role. Vice-Principal 2 said:

During a lesson observation, the teacher already has a defined professional development goal. The Head of Department simply observes how that goal is being addressed in the lesson. For instance, if the professional development goal is to develop students' critical thinking through open-ended questions, then the focus of observation is whether the teacher uses such open-ended questions during a 40-minute lesson. (Vice-principal 2)

HoD3 emphasized that her main goal during lesson observations is to provide methodological support rather than criticism, recognizing that lesson observation can be stressful for teachers.

4.5.4.5 Staff-Development Role

Staff development in S2 is implemented through collaboration between HoDs and senior leaders. When HoDs identify teachers who require methodological support, they organize face-to-face meetings together with the vice-principal to help teachers identify professional development goals. Senior leaders first conduct training sessions for HoDs to ensure a shared understanding of departmental goals and expectations. HoDs then conduct training sessions for their departments. HoD2 emphasized that professional development

ultimately depends on teachers' internal motivation. According to her, meaningful professional growth occurs only when teachers themselves recognize the value of development.

4.5.4.6 Strategic Role

HoDs in S2 also participate in analytical and strategic activities related to assessment and curriculum development. Vice-Principal 2, who specializes in assessment, works together with department heads to analyze expected student learning outcomes and determine whether assessment tools align with these outcomes. They review examination results and identify areas where students demonstrate weaker performance. Vice-Principal 2 described one initiative developed through this analytical work:

One math teacher approached the issue differently. ...Using artificial intelligence, he developed an assessment tool. Later, we found a sponsor, and this tool evolved into a full application. During lessons, the AI now assigns tasks to students based on the topic; students solve the tasks and immediately receive targeted, constructive feedback aligned with a marking scheme. (Vice-Principal 2, S2)

This initiative later evolved into a larger digital application supported by external sponsors.

4.5.5 Case-Specific Findings Related to Research Question 2: Relationships with Teachers and Administration

In S2, senior leaders work closely with department heads. Discussions typically focus on methodological issues, research questions, and urgent challenges. Weekly meetings are held with an extended administrative board where HoDs report on completed work and present one problem along with a proposed solution. Vice-Principal 2 explained, "In this case, a private school approaches situations more flexibly. And, in my opinion, this gives very good results."

The school also maintains a tradition of annual strategic retreats. At the end of each academic year, the extended leadership team (department heads and senior leaders) travel for two or three days to plan priorities for the next academic year. HoD3 said, “This kind of planning happens every year, and I really appreciate that the administration always listens to teachers during this process. In practice, that means listening to every teacher and every department.”

Teachers also described relationships with HoDs as supportive and collaborative. Teacher 3 stated, “There is no ‘top-down’ style of communication. We understand that she is the Head of Department, but at the same time, the interaction is always respectful and based on equality. Teachers’ voices are genuinely heard.”

4.5.6 Case-Specific Findings Related to Research Question 3: Challenges and Opportunities.

One of the challenges, described by Vice-Principal 2, is the recruitment of qualified teachers during the academic year. Teachers sometimes resign due to personal circumstances such as relocation or maternity leave, creating difficulties for department heads. Vice-Principal 2 explained, “One of our priorities is to find a strong specialist. This is extremely difficult... recruiting suitable teachers during the year remains a serious challenge.” If suitable teachers cannot be recruited, HoDs may need to cover lessons themselves or provide extensive methodological support to less experienced teachers.

Another issue arises when HoDs are required to provide methodological support to teachers who lack experience. Some teachers, however, were not fully engaged and lacked motivation to improve. This lack of engagement has posed challenges for HoDs, who must balance supporting teachers with ensuring that lessons and departmental tasks are completed on time. HoD2 also recalled a specific challenge she encountered, "The only

difficulty I remember is a drop in teachers' activity at the end of the semester when a lot of work had to be submitted."

Teacher 3, from the Linguistic Department, which consists of about 30 teachers teaching various languages (Kazakh, Russian, and English), also highlighted a subject-specific challenge. Since the HoD in the Linguistic Department is a Kazakh language teacher with limited proficiency in English, many issues concerning English language teaching were managed by the English teachers themselves. Teacher 1 stated, "We don't get enough support from her because she doesn't have enough subject-specific expertise, for example, in organizing international English exams. Her support is limited to only sharing information." This lack of expertise in specific areas created a gap in support, especially for subject-specific challenges like organizing international English exams.

Despite these challenges, participants emphasized that the overall system in S2 functions effectively because many teachers have worked in the school since the beginning. This stability has contributed to the development of a collaborative professional culture established by previous department leadership who set a strong foundation for teamwork, which allows issues to be resolved quickly and enables teachers to work effectively together.

4.5.6.1 Motivation and Enthusiasm

Due to the reduced workload of teaching hours (eight hours per week), HoDs have enough time to dedicate effort to the departmental work and interaction with teachers and senior leaders. Besides, departmental leadership is additionally paid.

HoD2 believes that S2 has a very stable and healthy psychological climate. These healthy relationships with school leadership encourage teachers and department heads to propose ideas, improve the school, and actively participate in school life.

4.6 Cross-Case Analysis: Comparing the Roles of HoDs in a State and Private Schools

This cross-case analysis examines patterns, similarities, and differences in how HoDs in a state school (S1) and a private school (S2) understand and enact their leadership roles, challenges they face, and the impact of their leadership on the department and school effectiveness. Drawing on the within-case analyses and De Nobile's (2018) MLiS model, the comparison is organized around the research questions and key themes that emerged across both settings.

4.6.1 The HoD Role: Between Informal Expectations and Multiple Responsibilities

Despite their different institutional contexts, both schools share a notable absence of formally codified role descriptions for HoDs. In S1, participants consistently reported that no regulatory document defined the position, describing it as "not a formal position" but rather "an additional responsibility." (HoD3) In S2, while an official appointment order was in place, HoDs remained uncertain whether their leadership responsibilities were explicitly set out in their employment contracts. Interestingly, the Vice-Principal in S2 endorsed this ambiguity, arguing that excessive formalization could lead to bureaucratic constraints. He said, "If we require very rigid, clearly prescribed job descriptions, then people who work under those descriptions will do only what is written there—and nothing more." This shared informality suggests that the HoD role in Kazakhstani schools operates within a flexible space in which role enactment depends more on individual initiative than on prescribed duties.

When it comes to actual responsibilities, HoDs in both schools enact similar role dimensions. The supervisory role-involving lesson observations, feedback, and teacher support certification-was evident in both settings, with S1 HoDs supervising teachers applying for moderator certification and S2 HoDs using observation sheets to provide structured feedback. The organizational role-coordinating events, such as subject weeks or

science fairs, were also present in both schools. Additionally, HoDs in both settings served as critical communication links between teachers and senior leadership. These shared functions suggest that the core expectations of middle leadership transcend institutional type.

Both schools also identified similar core competencies for effective HoDs. Interpersonal communication skills emerged as paramount across settings. In S1, Teacher 2 emphasized that an effective HoD "knows how to approach people gently, how to negotiate, how to persuade," while in S2, HoD1 described the role as requiring someone who "can listen and lead" and serve as "a helper to the teacher, not a punitive figure." Methodological competence was equally valued in both contexts, reflecting the fundamentally relational nature of middle leadership regardless of institutional resources.

4.6.2 Structural Recognition and Autonomy: Two Different Worlds

The most pronounced difference between schools concerns the structural recognition of the HoD role. In S1, the position carries no formal status, no financial compensation, and no reduction in teaching load. HoDs receive only "two extra days off added to their vacation" (Vice-Principal 1) as recognition, with one participant describing the role as sometimes feeling "like punishment" (HoD1). In contrast, S2 institutionalizes the position through reduced teaching hours (12 hours weekly), additional payment, and bonuses for exceptional performance. This structural recognition enables HoDs to dedicate time to leadership responsibilities without being overwhelmed by dual demands.

The degree of HoD autonomy also differs substantially. In S1, HoDs primarily transmit instructions from senior leaders rather than influencing decisions. Their strategic contribution is limited to analytical activities such as submitting reports and conducting SWOT analyses, with little evidence of participation in broader vision-building processes. In S2, however, HoDs participate actively in strategic planning through annual retreats

where "the administration always listens to teachers" (HoD2) and weekly extended administrative board meetings where HoDs present problems alongside proposed solutions.

Staff development practices reveal similar contextual differences. In S1, professional development is primarily managed by a dedicated vice-principal, with HoDs playing a supportive but secondary role tied to certification procedures. In S2, a deliberate cascade model operates: senior leaders train HoDs as trainers, who then conduct professional development sessions within their departments. This systematic approach builds leadership capacity through intentional development rather than incidental support.

4.6.3 Organizational Culture and Professional Background

The schools exhibit contrasting organizational cultures that shape HoD practice. S1 operates within a traditional top-down communication structure characterized by bureaucracy, excessive reporting requirements, and limited academic freedom. In S2, communication was described as more flexible and collaborative, with "no 'top-down' style" (Teacher 2) and relationships based on "respectful equality." The private school's pursuit of international accreditation has influenced this culture, shifting emphasis from regulatory compliance toward "evidence of practice" (Vice-Principal 2). These cultural differences fundamentally affect how HoDs experience their roles: in S1, as an additional burden within a compliance-oriented system; in S2, as integral participation within a development-oriented community.

The professional backgrounds of HoDs also differ markedly. In S1, the position is "often taken voluntarily rather than through formal appointment," with no fixed criteria regarding experience. In S2, most HoDs bring prior experience from Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools or international educational environments, providing them with established professional standards and leadership expectations. HoD2 explained that "after

working at NIS, working in any other school becomes much easier, because you already have that level of professional discipline and experience." This difference in institutional memory shapes the professional capital available within each school's middle leadership tier.

4.6.4 Challenges and Opportunities Across Contexts

Both schools face challenges related to teacher engagement and support, though these manifest differently. In S1, HoDs struggle with limited teacher autonomy, resistance to top-down directives, and a bureaucratic structure that creates additional stress. The lack of resources and formal recognition compounds these difficulties. In S2, challenges include staff turnover, recruitment of qualified teachers during the academic year, and the burden of mentoring disengaged newcomers. Subject-specific gaps also emerge, as when the linguistic department HoD's limited English proficiency created support challenges for English teachers.

Despite these challenges, HoDs in both schools demonstrate strong intrinsic motivation. In S1, where financial rewards are absent, HoD3 explained, "Well, someone has to do this work. And there is also the awareness that what you do actually moves the team forward." In S2, while financial compensation exists, HoD2 emphasized that meaningful professional growth ultimately depends on teachers' internal motivation. This shared intrinsic orientation aligns with De Nobile's (2018) assertion that personal commitment and passion are essential for middle leadership effectiveness.

Summary

This chapter presented the findings from the qualitative study, which explored the roles and leadership practices of HoDs in a state and private school in Astana. The first part of the chapter provided a within-case analysis of each school, highlighting how HoDs understand and enact their roles, the challenges they face, and the factors that influence

their effectiveness. The second part presented a cross-case analysis that identified overarching patterns, similarities, and differences between the two schools.

The cross-case analysis reveals that while HoDs in both state and private schools play a critical role in departmental management and teacher development, the extent to which they can exercise their leadership roles is shaped by each school's organizational context.

Chapter 5: Discussion

5.1 Chapter Overview

The previous chapter presented the findings obtained from the qualitative multiple case study research, which focused on investigating the HoD's roles in state and private schools in Astana. This chapter interprets the key findings of the study in relation to the research questions, the Middle Leadership in Schools (MLiS) model (De Nobile, 2018), and the existing literature on middle leadership, and discusses strengths and limitations of the study. It allows for a coherent integration of empirical findings with theoretical and scholarly perspectives, demonstrating how the study contributes to understanding middle leadership in the Kazakhstani context.

5.2 Discussion in Relation to Literature

The findings of this study strongly align with existing literature on middle leadership, particularly in relation to role complexity, policy translation, influence on teachers and students, and school effectiveness, and expectations from different stakeholders. Consistent with De Nobile's (2018) MLiS model, HoDs in both schools performed a combination of managing roles (administrative, organizational, student-focused) and leading roles (supervisory, staff development, strategic). This supports the argument that middle leadership is inherently multifaceted and hybrid, requiring both managerial and instructional competencies (Fleming, 2014).

The study also confirms that HoDs act as policy translators, bridging the gap between senior leadership and classroom practice (Skerritt et al., 2021). In both schools, HoDs were responsible for communicating expectations, coordinating departmental work, and aligning teaching practices with institutional goals. However, the extent to which they could interpret and adapt policy varied depending on the school context. In the state school, HoDs' work reflected a more compliance-oriented model, consistent with research

highlighting the influence of centralized systems and bureaucratic structures in Kazakhstan (Qanay & Courtney, 2024). Their role was largely administrative and focused on reporting, which limited their ability to engage in instructional leadership. In contrast, the private school demonstrated features of distributed leadership and Leading from the Middle (LfM)(Hargreaves & Shirley, 2020). HoDs were actively involved in teacher development, curriculum design, and strategic planning. This supports the idea that when middle leaders are given autonomy and institutional support, they can function as key agents of school improvement.

The findings also reinforce the importance of relational trust and leadership identity. Participants emphasized that effective HoDs rely on interpersonal skills, emotional intelligence, and professional credibility rather than formal authority. This aligns with Edwards-Groves et al. (2016), who argue that trust is central to middle leadership effectiveness, and DeRue and Ashford (2010), who highlight the socially constructed nature of leadership identity. The study confirms challenges identified in the literature, including role ambiguity, workload, and lack of recognition (Badanova, 2024; Leithwood, 2016). These issues were particularly evident in the state school, where HoDs operated without formal recognition or compensation.

The findings of this study reveal several important patterns across the two school contexts. First, HoDs in both schools perform a wide range of leadership roles, including coordination, communication, supervision, and teacher support. Second, the organizational context plays a critical role in shaping how these roles are enacted. In the state school, HoD leadership is informal, compliance-driven, and constrained by bureaucratic structures. In the private school, HoD leadership is more structured, supported, and development-oriented. Third, relational leadership is central in both contexts. HoDs rely heavily on communication, trust, and interpersonal relationships to influence teachers and

manage departmental work. Fourth, HoDs face multiple challenges, including workload, time constraints, teacher motivation, and recruitment issues. Finally, despite structural differences, HoDs in both schools demonstrate a strong sense of professional commitment and intrinsic motivation, highlighting the importance of personal agency in middle leadership.

5.3 Implications of the Key Findings

One of the most significant findings of this study is the contrast between bureaucratic and developmental models of middle leadership. In the state school, the informal and uncompensated nature of the HoD role limits its effectiveness as a leadership position. HoDs function primarily as coordinators who ensure compliance with administrative requirements. This finding reflects a broader systemic issue in centralized educational systems, where leadership is concentrated at the top, and middle leaders have limited autonomy. In contrast, the private school demonstrates how middle leadership can function as a strategic and developmental force when supported by institutional structures. HoDs in this context are not only coordinators but also instructional leaders, mentors, and contributors to school improvement. Their involvement in professional development, curriculum design, and strategic planning illustrates the potential of middle leadership when aligned with distributed leadership principles.

Another important finding is the role of intrinsic motivation. In the state school, HoDs continue to perform their responsibilities despite the lack of financial incentives or formal recognition. This suggests that middle leadership is sustained not only by structural factors but also by personal commitment and professional values. However, relying solely on intrinsic motivation may not be sustainable in the long term and could lead to burnout.

The study also highlights the importance of relational trust. In both schools, effective HoDs were described as supportive, approachable, and collaborative. This

suggests that middle leadership effectiveness depends not only on formal structures but also on the ability to build strong professional relationships.

Finally, the findings emphasize that middle leadership is context dependent. The same role can be enacted differently depending on organizational culture, leadership practices, and institutional priorities. This reinforces the idea that leadership cannot be fully understood without considering its context.

5.3.1 Enactment of Middle Leadership Across Public and Private School Contexts

In both the public and private school contexts, Heads of Departments (HoDs) share a common understanding of their role as intermediaries between senior leadership and teachers, acting as bridges between policy and practice (Edwards-Groves et al., 2016; Skerrett et al., 2021). They coordinate departmental work, communicate expectations, and support instructional processes. However, the way this role is enacted varies significantly between the two schools.

In the state school, leadership enactment is primarily compliance-oriented and administrative. HoDs focus on reporting, coordination, and implementing directives from senior leadership rather than initiating change. This reflects a bureaucratic model of leadership, shaped by centralized governance and limited autonomy. In contrast, leadership in the private school is more developmental and instructional. HoDs in the private school engage in lesson observations, mentoring, curriculum development, and assessment practices. Their role extends beyond coordination to actively influencing teaching quality and professional learning.

The degree of autonomy significantly differentiates the role enactment between the two schools. In the state school, HoDs have limited decision-making power, while in the private school, they are more involved in strategic discussions and innovation processes, providing them with greater influence over school development. Additionally, although

middle leadership in both contexts remains somewhat informal, particularly regarding job descriptions, the private school complements this informality with strong professional expectations and institutional support. This institutional backing enhances the effectiveness of leadership in the private school setting.

These differences highlight that while the functional roles of HoDs in both schools are similar, their enactment is highly context-dependent, shaped by organizational structures, leadership culture, and levels of autonomy.

5.3.2 Perceptions of HoD Roles and Leadership Effectiveness by Teachers and Senior Leaders

Perceptions of Heads of Departments (HoDs) across both schools emphasize the relational, rather than positional, dimensions of leadership. Teachers in both schools primarily view HoDs as coordinators and supporters, rather than authoritative figures, reflecting the hybrid identity of middle leaders who navigate both peer and leadership roles. The importance of interpersonal skills and relational trust is consistently highlighted as a key indicator of leadership effectiveness. Participants pointed to qualities such as communication, empathy, and the ability to negotiate and motivate colleagues—traits that align with literature emphasizing relational trust as central to middle leadership (Edwards-Groves et al., 2016).

In the state school, HoDs are perceived as having limited authority and influence. While teachers recognize their role, they do not associate it with strong leadership power, as decision-making remains centralized within senior leadership. Conversely, in the private school, HoDs are perceived more as mentors and instructional leaders. Teachers value their feedback, guidance, and active involvement in professional development. Senior leaders in the private school view HoDs as strategic partners, involving them in planning,

decision-making, and teacher development processes. In contrast, senior leaders in the state school primarily view HoDs as implementers of administrative tasks.

These perceptions suggest that leadership effectiveness is socially constructed through relationships and recognition, rather than through formal authority alone. The extent to which HoDs are perceived as leaders depends on how their role is positioned within the school structure.

5.3.3 Challenges and Opportunities in Departmental Leadership and School Improvement

The findings reveal a combination of structural, professional, and relational challenges, alongside significant leadership opportunities. A major challenge in both schools is the workload and time constraints faced by Heads of Departments (HoDs), who must balance teaching responsibilities with leadership duties. This dual role limits their ability to fully engage in instructional leadership. In addition, role ambiguity remains a significant issue, particularly in the state school where the HoD position is informal and lacks clear expectations. This creates uncertainty and places more reliance on individual initiative.

In the state school, the lack of financial recognition and institutional support emerges as a key challenge. HoDs perform additional responsibilities without compensation, which may impact their motivation and the long-term sustainability of the role. Bureaucratic demands and excessive reporting further constrain leadership practice, as the administrative workload reduces opportunities for professional development and instructional improvement.

In contrast, the private school presents a different challenge: recruiting qualified teachers during the academic year, particularly when teachers resign due to personal issues. HoDs often need to provide additional methodological support or cover lessons,

further increasing their already heavy workloads. Despite these challenges, teacher motivation and engagement remain a cross-context issue, with some teachers showing limited willingness to participate in professional development or departmental initiatives.

However, leadership opportunities are more evident in the private school, where HoDs are involved in professional development, innovation, and strategic planning. These opportunities enable them to act as change agents within the school. Additionally, intrinsic motivation stands out as a key enabling factor in both contexts. Despite the challenges they face, HoDs demonstrate strong professional commitment and a sense of responsibility for their departments.

Overall, these findings suggest that while HoDs face significant structural constraints, particularly in the state school, they also have the potential to contribute meaningfully to school improvement when supported by the right organizational conditions.

5.4 Strengths and Limitations of the Study

5.4.1 Strengths of the Study

The strengths of this study lie in its comparative, cross-case design that illuminates the contrasting realities of middle leadership in two distinct school settings. The use of semi-structured interviews allowed for a nuanced understanding of experiences, perceptions, and challenges faced by Hods, providing rich insights into the complexities of their roles. The research provides valuable insights into the role of HoDs within the specific context of Kazakhstan, a topic that is under-researched in the Kazakhstani education system. By focusing on both public and private schools, the study illuminates how institutional conditions shape HoD's roles and leadership practices. Additionally, the qualitative embedded multiple-case study design allowed for an in-depth exploration of HoD leadership experiences, revealing both the commonalities and differences between

the two school settings. The research contributes to the limited body of knowledge on middle leadership in Kazakhstan, shedding light on the complexities of HoD leadership and its impact on departmental and school effectiveness in a centralized educational system.

5.4.2 Limitations of the Study

While the study contributes valuable insights, several limitations must be acknowledged. The research was conducted in only two schools in Astana, which may limit the depth of understanding of middle leadership across different school contexts. A broader sample of schools with varied structures and cultures could provide more comprehensive insights. Additionally, only three Heads of Departments (HoDs) participated, which restricted the range of experiences captured. Expanding the number of HoD participants would offer a richer and more diverse perspective on middle leadership. While the inclusion of teachers and vice-principals provided valuable contributions, focusing more on a larger sample of HoDs would have deepened the understanding of leadership roles within the schools.

The study also had limited access to official normative documents such as job descriptions, handbooks, and school policies, which could have clarified the formal expectations for HoDs. The absence of these documents hindered a full understanding of the official roles and highlighted the informal and unclear nature of the HoD position in both schools. This lack of formal documentation suggests that HoDs often fulfill their roles based on the needs of senior leaders or personal discretion rather than following clear, structured guidelines. Lastly, the reliance on self-reported data from interviews introduces potential biases, as participants may have responded in ways that align with social desirability or personal perceptions. Incorporating additional data sources, such as

observations and document analysis, could strengthen the findings and improve the reliability of the results.

Summary

This chapter interpreted the study's findings, linking them to the research questions, the Middle Leadership in Schools (MLiS) model, and existing literature. It reveals that HoDs in both public and private schools serve as intermediaries between senior leadership and teachers but enact their roles differently. In the state school, HoDs primarily focus on administrative tasks with limited autonomy, while in the private school, they play a more active role in instructional leadership and school development. The study highlighted the importance of relational trust, leadership identity, and intrinsic motivation for effective middle leadership. It also identified significant challenges, including workload, role ambiguity, and lack of support, particularly in the state school. The findings emphasized that middle leadership is context-dependent, shaped by organizational structures and leadership culture. The study's strengths included its comparative design, while limitations included the small sample size and limited access to official documents. These insights contribute to understanding middle leadership in Kazakhstan and suggest areas for improvement in support and role definition for HoDs.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative embedded multiple case study was to explore the role of HoDs in middle leadership positions in two different contexts – one public and one private school in Astana, focusing on how they enact their roles and the impact they have on departmental and school effectiveness. Through an in-depth qualitative analysis, using semi-structured interviews with Hods, teachers, and senior leaders, this study uncovered critical insights about middle leadership in the Kazakhstani context. The findings revealed distinct differences in the way HoDs in public and private schools understand and perform their roles, largely shaped by structural conditions and organizational cultures.

6.1 Revisiting the Research Questions

6.1.1 How do middle leaders in private and public schools understand and enact their leadership roles within their respective school contexts?

In the public-case study school, HoDs understand their roles primarily as administrative coordinators, focusing on compliance with senior leadership directives and ensuring reporting and task completion. Their roles are often informal, and role ambiguity is relevant, with no clear formal documentation outlining expectations. In contrast, in the private-case study school, HoDs are seen as methodological leaders with more autonomy and some formally recognized responsibilities, including mentorship, curriculum development, and teacher professional development. The difference highlights the varying levels of structural support and institutional autonomy that shape the enactment of HoD roles in the two schools.

6.1.2 How do teachers and senior leaders perceive the roles and effectiveness of Heads of Departments in the public and private school environments?

In the state school, teachers view HoDs as coordinators who help facilitate communication between teachers and senior leaders, but they lack formal authority. HoDs

are seen as supportive, yet their leadership power is limited. In the private school, teachers perceive HoDs as mentors and instructional leaders, appreciating their involvement in professional development and curriculum design. Senior leaders in S2 recognize HoDs as strategic partners, involving them in decision-making and long-term planning. These perceptions highlight the informal, compliance-driven role in the state school and the more developmental, strategic role in the private school.

6.1.3 What challenges and opportunities do Heads of Departments face in leading their departments and contributing to school-wide improvement?

Both schools face similar challenges, including workload, time constraints, and role ambiguity. In S1, HoDs experience bureaucratic constraints, excessive reporting, and a lack of formal recognition, which limits their ability to engage in instructional leadership. While HoDs in S1 receive no financial compensation for their additional responsibilities, they are offered three extra days off as recognition. In contrast, in S2, HoDs are compensated for their leadership roles and are provided with a reduced teaching load, enabling them to dedicate more time to leadership tasks. Despite the lack of financial rewards in S1, HoDs in both schools demonstrate strong intrinsic motivation, driven by a sense of duty, commitment, and the desire to improve their departments and support teachers. In S2, while HoDs face challenges with teacher recruitment and staff turnover, they benefit from a supportive environment that enables engagement in strategic planning, teacher development, and innovation. The autonomy and institutional support in S2 provide greater opportunities for HoDs to contribute to school-wide improvement, whereas the lack of formal recognition in S1 limits their ability to drive meaningful change. The autonomy and institutional support in S2 provide greater opportunities for HoDs to contribute to school-wide improvement, whereas the lack of formal recognition in S1 limits their potential to drive change.

6.2 Recommendations for future research

Future research could extend this study in several important ways. First, a broader sampling strategy would strengthen the understanding of middle leadership across Kazakhstan. Including a larger number of schools and Heads of Departments from different regions, as well as from rural schools, Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools, and other specialized educational settings, would help determine whether the patterns identified in this study are context-specific or more widely representative of the Kazakhstani educational system.

Second, future studies could strengthen methodological rigor by using a wider range of data sources. In addition to interviews, researchers could incorporate classroom observations, document analysis, and survey data. Document analysis of job descriptions, departmental plans, school policies, and other normative documents would help clarify the formal expectations placed on HoDs, while observations would provide direct insight into how middle leadership is enacted in practice. Combining these methods would allow for a more comprehensive and valid understanding of middle leadership dynamics in action.

Third, longitudinal research would be especially valuable. Following HoDs over time could show how their roles evolve and how their leadership influences teacher professional growth, departmental culture, and student outcomes in the longer term. This would move beyond participants' perceptions and provide a stronger understanding of the sustained effects of middle leadership.

Fourth, future studies could explore more deeply the role of HoDs as policy translators and cultural brokers within Kazakhstani schools. Such research would be particularly relevant in contexts where institutional expectations, reform agendas, and professional cultures intersect, as this may reveal how HoDs mediate between formal policy and everyday school practice.

Finally, more research is needed on leadership preparation and professional development for HoDs. The findings of this study suggest that effective middle leadership depends not only on personal commitment and relational capacity but also on the extent to which schools and educational systems intentionally prepare, support, and develop these leaders.

6.3 Final Reflections

Conducting this research has been an insightful and rewarding journey. I have gained a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities faced by middle leaders in Kazakhstan, particularly in navigating the complexity of their roles within different school contexts. The process of data collection, analysis, and interpretation has also reinforced the importance of contextual factors – such as institutional culture, leadership support, and structural autonomy – in shaping the effectiveness of middle leadership.

The results of the study have significantly deepened my appreciation for the role of HoDs as not only administrative coordinators but also influential leaders capable of driving meaningful school improvement. The research has reinforced my personal commitment to the role of a department head, highlighting the importance of leadership in fostering collaboration, supporting teacher development, and contributing to the overall effectiveness of a school. The findings have also inspired me to continue my journey as an educator, head of department, and researcher, with a renewed focus on the development and support of middle leaders in educational settings.

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Appendices

Appendix A: AI Declaration Form



Thesis Title: Middle Leadership and School Effectiveness: The Role of Heads of Departments in Private and Public Schools in Astana.

Declaration of the Use of Generative AI

I hereby declare that I have read and understood NUGSE's policy concerning appropriate use of AI and composed this work independently (please check one):

☒ with the use of artificial intelligence tools, or

(If you have used AI tools as defined in the GSE policy document, please complete the rest of this form.)

During the preparation of this thesis/examination, I used ChatGPT, Chat.deepseek.com, Grammarly to proofread, check for errors, and edit my text, and paraphrase sentences.

I also declare that I

☒ am aware of the capabilities and limitations of AI tool(s),

☒ have verified that the content generated by AI systems and adopted by me is factually correct,

☒ am aware that as the author of this thesis I bear full responsibility for the statements and assertions made in it,

☒ have submitted complete and accurate information about my use of AI tools in this work, and

☒ acknowledge that there may be disciplinary consequences if I have not followed NUGSE's guidelines regarding appropriate AI use.

Name: Banshchikova K. Oksana

Signature:

Date: April 27, 2026

Appendix B: Informed Consent Form

Middle Leadership and School Effectiveness: The Role of Heads of Departments in Private and Public Schools in Astana.

Researcher Information:

Oksana Banshchikova Kala, Master's Student, Nazarbayev University.

Email: o.banshchikova@nu.edu.kz

DESCRIPTION: You are invited to participate in a research study that explores how department heads (HoDs) interpret and implement their leadership roles and school policies, and how their leadership roles influence the school's overall effectiveness.

PROCEDURES: If you decide to participate in this study, I will arrange a convenient time for you to meet in person for an individual interview. During the interview, you will be asked to share your thoughts about your perceptions, experiences, views, and reflections on the head of departments' leadership role. The interview will take approximately 60 minutes. It will be audio-recorded with your permission. After the audio recording is written down (transcribed), the audio recording will be deleted. If you disagree to be audio-recorded, you will still (or will not) be able to participate. The researcher will then take handwritten notes.

All data, including interview transcriptions and documents, will be securely stored in a password-protected file to ensure your confidentiality. After transcription, audio files will be deleted to further protect confidentiality.

RISKS AND BENEFITS: The risks associated with the study are minimal. Although you will not be asked any sensitive questions, you may feel a little discomfort in talking about your own work, your colleagues, and school leadership. However, you are free not to answer such questions if you do not want to. Also, your participation in the study will not have any negative results for your work, your employment, or your relationships at your school. You may not benefit directly from the study, but this study may provide an opportunity to share your perspectives on the head of department's leadership role and how their leadership roles influence the school's overall effectiveness.

COMPENSATION: No tangible compensation will be given. A copy of the research results will be available at the conclusion of the study.

CONFIDENTIALITY AND PRIVACY: Any information that is obtained during this study will be kept confidential to the full extent possible. All efforts, within reason, will be made to keep the information received from you highly confidential. The information collected from you through the interview will be stored in password-protected files on my personal computer. All hard copies of data will be kept in a locked cabinet accessible to me and my research advisors only. The MSc research committee will NOT discuss anything about the interview with anyone in and outside the school, and you will be requested to do the same. Any data analyzed by the researcher will be de-identified to protect the anonymity of the participants and the confidentiality of the data.

PARTICIPANT'S RIGHTS: If you have read this form and would like to participate in this study, please understand your participation is voluntary and you have the choice to withdraw your consent or discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. The alternative is not to participate. You can also refuse to answer any questions that you do not want to answer or stop the interview anytime, and no negative consequences will result.

POINTS OF CONTACT: In case any questions or comments arise regarding this study, please contact me, Oksana Banshchikova Kala, at +7 702 7825678, o.banshchikova@nu.edu.kz, or the Master's Thesis Supervisor, Professor Kairat Kurakbayev, at kkurakbayev@nu.edu.kz. If you are not satisfied with how this study is being conducted, or if you have any concerns, complaints, or general questions about the research or your rights as a participant, please contact the NUGSE Research Committee at gse.irec@nu.edu.kz.

STATEMENT OF CONSENT

Please check all that apply, and sign this consent form if you agree to voluntarily participate in this study.

I, _____,

Have carefully read the information provided. I understand that my participation in this study is voluntary. I can, at any time and without giving any reasons, withdraw my consent, and this will not have any negative consequences for me personally or for my school.

I understand that the information collected during this study will be treated confidentially.

Therefore:

☐ I agree to participate in this study at my own free will.

☐ I give permission for the interview to be audio recorded.

☐ I give permission for the interview data to be included in the research report, publications, and presentations resulting from this study, but without using my personal and my school's actual name:

☐ I understand that if I have any concerns, I can contact Oksana Banshchikova Kala at +77027825678 or o.banshchikova@nu.edu.kz.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Researcher:

Signed _____ Date _____

The extra copy of this signed and dated consent form is for you to keep.

Appendix C: Interview protocols

Middle Leadership and School Effectiveness: The Role of Heads of Departments in Private and Public Schools in Astana.

Researcher Information:

Oksana Banshchikova Kala, Master's Student, Nazarbayev University.

Email: o.banshchikova@nu.edu.kz

Date:

Participant Code:

School Code:

Interview components:

- Greeting the participants and thanking them for their cooperation and collaboration
- Informing the issues of confidentiality, risks, and benefits
- Informing the duration
- Informing how the interview will be conducted, including audio recording
- Giving the hard copy of the consent form
- Asking if the participants have any questions
- Interview itself
- Saying goodbye

Main Research Question:

How do Heads of Departments (HoDs) in one private and one public school in Astana enact their roles as middle leaders, and what impact does their leadership have on departmental and school effectiveness?

Sub-questions:

4. How do middle leaders in private and public schools understand and enact their leadership roles within their respective school contexts?
5. How do teachers and senior leaders perceive the roles and effectiveness of Heads of Departments in the public and private school environments?
6. What challenges and opportunities do Heads of Departments face in leading their departments and contributing to school-wide improvement?

Interview Questions

Interview protocol with Heads of Departments:

General Leadership and Challenges:

1. What do you teach? How long have you been working as a teacher? How long have you been teaching in this school? What is your load (teaching hours)?
2. How long have you been working as a HoD? Was it a voluntary duty, or were you assigned by the school's senior leaders?

3. How many teachers are there in your department? What subject teachers are included in your department?
4. Can you describe your current role as Head of Department and what it involves on a day-to-day basis? What are your responsibilities as HoD?
5. What do you like about your job as HoD? What challenges do you come across?
6. Do you consider yourself a leader? In what ways do you feel your leadership role contributes to the effectiveness of your department and the school as a whole? Can you recall a case when you did something that contributed to the department or school? (or you offered something new or took the initiative to solve an issue)

Section 1. Students-Focused Role

1. How do you support students in your department? What are your strategies as HoD for managing student behavior and academic progress?
2. How do you balance your teaching responsibilities with your leadership role in supporting student development?

Section 2. Administrative Role

1. What are the key administrative tasks you handle in your role as HoD, and how do you ensure these tasks are completed effectively?
2. Can you describe a typical situation when you act as a bridge or link between senior leaders and teachers in your department?
3. How do you think senior leaders perceive your role as HoD? How do your colleagues and teachers in your department perceive your leadership?
4. Do you participate in discussing school issues? Are you involved in decision-making?

Section 3. Organizational Role

1. How do you organize and manage departmental activities to ensure that the department is functioning smoothly?
2. How do you ensure that your department aligns with the school's overall goals and objectives?

Section 4. Supervisory Role

1. How do you evaluate the performance of your team members (teachers)? What methods do you use for providing feedback and support?
2. How do you manage relationships with teachers who may resist feedback or change? How do you handle conflicts or disagreements within your department?
3. How do you think your role as HoD contributes to overall school improvement?

Section 5. Staff Development Role

1. What kind of training or professional development did you have before or after you became HoD?
2. How do you contribute to the professional development of your department members?

3. What strategies do you use to mentor and support new teachers or less experienced staff in your department?

Section 6. Strategic Role

1. How do you set departmental goals and motivate your team to achieve them?
2. How do you involve your department in decision-making processes and ensure their voices are heard in discussions about school improvement?

Interview protocol with Senior Leadership Representative (Vice-Principal):

General Questions:

1. What is your position at school?
2. How many departments and HoDs are there in your school? Are HoDs usually assigned to their position, or do they volunteer?
3. How often do you collaborate with HoDs? What are the usual issues you discuss?
4. How do you see HoDs acting as a bridge or link between senior leaders and teachers? What level of autonomy do they have in your school?

Section 1. Support and Leadership Development

1. How do you support HoDs in their roles and ensure that they have the necessary resources to be effective leaders?
2. What role do you think HoDs play in fostering a professional learning culture within their departments?

Section 2. Role Clarity and Expectations

1. How would you describe the role of HoDs in your school? How many departments are there? In your opinion, what are the three most critical functions or responsibilities of HoDs in your school?
2. How do you communicate the expectations for HoDs, and how do you ensure these expectations align with the broader goals of the school?
3. How do you ensure that HoDs' roles remain clear and that they are equipped to manage both their leadership and teaching responsibilities?

Section 3. Leadership and Professional Development

1. How do you view the professional development of HoDs? What kind of support or training do HoDs have to perform their roles more effectively?
2. How do you measure the success of HoDs in leading their departments and supporting school improvement?

Section 4. Challenges and Opportunities

1. How would you describe the leadership style of HoDs in your school? What knowledge, skills, and dispositions are most important for success in this role?
2. What challenges have you noticed that HoDs face enacting their leadership responsibilities?
3. How do you think HoDs could be better supported in overcoming these challenges?

Section 5. Relational Dynamics

1. How do you perceive the relationship between HoDs and teachers? What role does trust play in this relationship?
2. How do HoDs manage relationships with senior leaders, and how can this relationship be strengthened?

Interview protocol with Teachers:

General questions:

1. Can you tell me about your teaching role, your subject area, and how long you have been teaching in your department? How many teachers are there in your department?
2. In your day-to-day work, how would you describe the primary role of your HoD? What do you see as the main responsibilities?
3. How would you describe the culture and atmosphere in your department?
4. How do you perceive the HoD's leadership in terms of balancing their teaching and leadership responsibilities?
5. How does the HoD manage relationships within the department, especially in challenging situations?
6. From your perspective, what is the most positive impact your HoD has on teacher morale and student learning? What do you think the HoD could improve on to enhance the effectiveness of the department? What is one thing they do exceptionally well, and what is one area where they could improve?

Section 1. Students-Focused Role

1. How do you perceive the HoD's role in supporting student development within the department?
2. In what ways has the HoD helped create a positive learning environment for students in your department?

Section 2. Administrative and Organizational Role

1. How does the HoD support the smooth running of the department in terms of planning and organization?
2. How do you feel about the administrative tasks delegated to you by the HoD? Are they manageable?

Section 3. Supervisory Role

1. How does the HoD provide feedback on your teaching practices? Do you feel the feedback is constructive and helpful for your professional growth?
2. In what ways does the HoD ensure that you are supported in your teaching practices and encouraged to improve? How accessible and approachable is your HoD when you need guidance or support?
3. In case you face a problem or difficulty at school, who would be the first person you address?

Section 4. Staff Development Role

1. How does the HoD contribute to your professional development? Do you feel supported in your growth as a teacher?
2. Are there specific professional development opportunities provided by the HoD that you find particularly helpful?

Strategic Role

1. How are you involved in setting departmental goals or decisions? How does the HoD ensure that you have a say in department activities?