

Middle Leadership and School Improvement - Studies from a Norwegian Context

Chair(s): **Lars Myhr** (Centre for Studies of Educational Practice (SEPU))

Discussant(s): **Anne Berit Emstad** (Norwegian University of Science and Technology)

“Amongst the variables associated with school effectiveness and improvement, the role of teachers and school leaders in supporting and promoting student learning is well established” (ICSEI,2024). Further, the literature has revealed that school middle leadership is an increasingly important school leadership position, with research showing the significance of middle leadership to school improvement and teacher development. Middle leaders directly and indirectly impact teacher practice, team development, school reform and professional learning. Nevertheless, teachers feel their middle leaders manage rather than lead, and thus being an ‘under-utilized leadership resource’. There is limited direct research into middle leaders' impact. Therefore, this symposium aims at contributing to the evidence base for leadership by exploring, from a Norwegian context addressed through three papers focusing on:

- The role of school middle leaders described in Norwegian white papers
- How principals' and middle leaders assess their role in school improvement
- Teachers' experiences of middle leaders' role in school improvement

The session will be organized with presentations, reflections and small-group interactions (for example: How can our research be related to other contexts and systems?), discussion and sum-up.

Presentations of the Symposium

The Role of School Middle Leaders Described in Norwegian White Papers

Knut Olav Nordseth (Mette Marit Jenssen som vikar)

Centre for Studies of Educational Practice (SEPU)

The middle leadership role is becoming increasingly important as middle leadership has a significant influence on the improvement work of the school. In the Norwegian context the principal is the top leader of the school and the middle leaders have the principal as their immediate leader. In this sense, middle leaders have a key role in improvement work as they are placed in the line between the operative level and at the same time are part of the strategic leadership level of the school.

In this part of the symposium, we will present results of a paper that describes the role of the school middle leaders in Norwegian white papers and how the role has developed the last two decades. Some key white papers were selected, and a document analysis was carried out, focusing on the concepts of middle leadership and school improvement.

Our results show that the Norwegian Government has clear expectations when it comes to leadership, professional learning and school improvement. Further, the results state that the principal is no longer alone in exercising leadership in schools

but points out the establishment of leadership teams with the principal and formal middle leaders leading the school together. The results show that there has been a clear shift in the view of school leadership over the past 25 years, from the idea of a principal who is the only leader of the school (2003-2004) to new expectations about a distributed practice with middle leaders in formal roles in the leadership team (2023).

The white papers emphasize that school leaders must create cultures acting as professional learning communities. This is in fact quite new signals from the Norwegian authorities and are as well described in the new national curriculum (2020). Traditionally, in the Norwegian school context, it has not been common for the school leaders to interfere in the teachers' work. On the other hand, our results show that there has been a development in the white papers the last two decades suggesting that a change in the role of the school leader both requires that the school leaders have the competence to lead, but also that there is acceptance among the teachers for leadership to be exercised.

Furthermore, our results show that the white papers in 2011-2012 for the first time use the term "leadership group" and in later Norwegian white papers (2016-2017) the concepts of middle leadership and middle leaders are described. This states that the principal is no longer the only one to exercise school leadership, but that the principal and middle leaders together are leading the school, which could theoretically be considered distributed leadership. Also, results show, that students' learning outcomes are emphasized to a greater extent in Norwegian white papers and the term "instructional leadership" is highlighted (2009-2010).

In summary, Norwegian white papers which we have investigated state that principals and middle leaders both are important for school improvement.

Principals' and Middle Leaders' Assessment of their Role in School Improvement

Ann Margareth Gustavsen

Centre for Studies of Educational Practice (SEPU)

Middle leaders have been given a more important position in schools through a formal role in the school leader group, both national and international. Research state that middle leaders` potential to influence school improvement is strong .In this paper we will present results on how principals and middle leaders in Norwegian compulsory school assess their leadership of school improvement, and whether gender and school leader experience appear to have any influence on the assessments.

To answer the research question, we use quantitative survey data carried out among school leaders in the autumn of 2016, 2018 and 2019 (before the corona pandemic). Together, there are 518 responses, 231 principals and 274 middle leaders. The response rate is between 94 and 98%. The criterion for being identified as a middle leader in this data material, is a leadership resource of at least 50%.

In order to examine leadership of school improvement, we have analyzed data on how much time principals and middle leaders consider they spend on educational tasks, and on analysis and follow-up of the school's data. The data also tells us to what extent each of them are satisfied with their job and whether they feel that they develop their competence, how they assess the collaboration with the school owner and the pedagogical collaboration within the school. Finally, we also investigate how they assess their pedagogical school leadership, which consists of three areas. First, whether the school leaders facilitate and participate in school improvement, second,

how often they observe and supervise their teachers and third, to what extent school leaders experience giving good support to teachers who have various challenges.

The results show that there are both differences and similarities between the assessments of principals and middle leaders, that there are few gender differences and that school leader experience has little influence on their assessments.

Teachers' Experiences of Middle Leaders' Role in School Improvement

Hilde Forfang

Centre for Studies of Educational Practice (SEPU)

It is argued that middle leaders have the potential to have an influence on school improvement particularly in teaching and learning. Studies of how middle leaders influenced their colleagues, found that they focused on both students' and teachers' learning, and used strategies such as sharing, modelling, advocating, supervising, collaborating, and learning together. Further, compared to other leaders, such as principals, the middle leaders are closer to the classroom, mostly more skilled in teaching activities, and they are more aware of the teacher culture and how to strategically deal with it.

This small-scale study was designed to investigate how primary school teachers experience the middle leaders' role in school improvement, related to a larger research and development project (R&D), formed to raise students' learning achievements in primary and lower-secondary schools in a county in Norway. The research design involved semi-structured interviews with three teachers at one of the R&D project's participating schools. Thematic analysis was used in the analysis of the interviews.

The results suggest that middle leaders are crucial both for the implementation of improvement work and for achieving good results from the work. The teachers express that it is easier to ask a school leader who is close to practice in order to get feedback, advice and coaching. The teachers also described the middle leaders as important when it comes to "being close to" the work that takes place in the professional learning communities, setting deadlines, following up the teachers and showing that they as middle leaders are in charge for the school improvement. Further, the results highlight that when school leaders are close to the processes, the teacher's experience that cooperation is strengthened and that it improves communication and interaction between teachers and school leaders about school improvement.

In summary, our results indicate that cooperation and close interaction between middle leaders and teachers is important when it comes to school improvement. At the same time, previous research points out that the middle leadership role has not been utilized to its potential.