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Learning to Lead: The leadership learning of secondary school middle leaders in Scotland

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Declaration of Authenticity and Author's Rights

This thesis is the result of the author's original research. It has been composed by the author and has not been previously submitted for examination which has led to the award of a degree.

Signed: KM Kerrigan

Date: July 2025

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Abstract

There is increasing recognition of the crucial role that middle leaders play in delivering improvements to learning and teaching. However, for many, middle leadership is their first experience of leadership, and opportunities for leadership preparation may be limited. Scholarly interest in leadership preparation, and programmes for developing leadership capacities have traditionally focussed upon those preparing for headship rather than middle leadership. This study seeks to explore the experiences and perspectives of middle leaders regarding their leadership development, with a view to identifying approaches that are effective for preparing and developing the leadership capacities of middle leaders in Scotland's secondary schools.

Drawing from a sample of Scottish secondary school middle leaders with varied levels of leadership experience, this study explores their unique perspectives and experiences of leadership learning to identify strategies and approaches that are available and helpful within Scotland. Qualitative data were gathered through online semi-structured interviews which were analysed using a process of thematic analysis. Findings reveal the existence of distinct stages of middle leadership development each of which have differing leadership learning needs. This supports finding of previous studies which argue the need for an individualised approach to middle leadership development. The study identifies a range of leadership development opportunities within the Scottish context which are identified as helpful and also finds that the quality of these opportunities and access to them depends upon context. Further work is recommended to ensure consistency of access to quality middle leader development across various settings, and to enhance understandings of the developmental benefits of national approaches such as Professional Review and Development and coaching to ensure that their potential is fully realised in practice.

It is hoped that the findings of this study will add to the relatively limited body of literature regarding the leadership development needs of school middle- level leaders, will help address a paucity of empirical research into middle leadership within the Scottish context, and will be used to inform the practice of learning providers and thus enhance opportunities for middle leadership learning.

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Glossary of Terms

The following table defines how specific terms are understood within Scotland's schools.

Term	Definition
Depute head teacher (DHT)	A school leader, second most senior to the head teacher. Scotland's secondary schools may have more than one DHT.
Faculty	A group of teaching subjects led by one leader. Occasionally a faculty may comprise only of one subject along with a whole-school responsibility (e.g. English and literacy).
Faculty head	A middle leader post with responsibility for leading a faculty.
Head teacher	The most senior leader in a school, also known as the School Principal in some countries.
Principal teacher (PT)	The title of a middle-level leader post in Scotland's schools.
The General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTCS)	The independent regulator for teachers in Scotland.
The Scottish College for Educational Leadership (SCEL)	Formerly an agency of the Scottish Government who were responsible for the provision of professional learning for school leaders of all levels.
The Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA)	The national awarding body for school qualifications in Scotland.

Abbreviations

DHT	Depute head teacher
FH	Faculty head
PT	Principal teacher
Point 1 PT	An entry level PT role, at the lowest level of middle leader responsibility. May be a temporary or permanent post.
PT/FH	An abbreviation used in this study to refer to a collective group of middle leaders working in PT or FH roles.
GTCS	The General Teaching Council for Scotland
SCEL	The Scottish College for Educational Leadership
SQA	The Scottish Qualifications Authority

Chapter 1: The Context and Purpose of the Study

1.1 Background to the study

In recent years, governments have come to recognise that a highly educated population is a key factor in determining economic success (Donaldson, 2010; Menter & Hulme, 2012; Watson & Michael, 2016). In countries that are stable and peaceful, the effective leadership of schools is identified as central to ensuring success in education (Bush, 2008; Leithwood et al., 2008). It is also acknowledged that an increasingly complex and fast-paced socio-political context requires school leaders to embrace an evolving and expanding range of responsibilities. Therefore, an approach that distributes leadership across multiple individuals in schools is thought to be more sustainable than one where a single leader or team has responsibility for all aspects of school management and administration (De Nobile, 2018; Gronn, 2013; Gurr & Drysdale, 2013; Spillane, 2005).

It has long been argued that the impact of leadership is second only to that of classroom teaching in influencing learning (Leithwood et al., 2008; Muijs et al., 2014). Within this context the leadership of learning in schools is often delegated to middle leaders, many of whom combine a significant teaching commitment with middle leadership and management responsibilities (Brundrett & Terrell, 2004; De Nobile, 2018; Lipscombe et al., 2021). Often embedded within their teams, their close proximity to learning and teaching equips middle leaders with insights that can inform and improve practice and ultimately enhance the learning experiences of children and young people (Harris & Jones, 2017; Lipscombe et al., 2021). However, leadership at the middle level presents specific challenges such as maintaining collaborative, collegial relationships with individuals and teams whilst also holding teachers accountable for their work, or navigating the challenges presented by dual loyalties to colleagues and school leaders (Bennett et al., 2007). These challenges are daunting for all middle leaders, particularly those who are new to leadership and have limited knowledge, skills, or experience to inform their approach (Irvine & Brundrett, 2019), and emphasises the need for professional learning in leadership for those working at all levels of leadership within schools.

It has long been argued that teaching and leading are different skills, yet middle leader appointments have traditionally been made on the basis of pedagogical expertise, with leadership knowledge and skills largely developed through experience in the role (Adey & Jones, 1998; Irvine & Brundrett, 2019). Limited knowledge, skills and experience in leadership and management can cause some beginning middle leaders to "flounder" (Adey & Jones, 1998, p. 134; Irvine & Brundrett, 2016; Irvine & Brundrett, 2019). Ongoing limitations in the professional development available to middle leaders is identified by Lipscombe et al. (2021, p. 14) who argue that the opportunities available are "not yet sufficient to equip school middle leaders for the complexity of their roles". The benefits of preparing head teachers (school principals) for their role is championed by many scholars and is also reflected in the availability of courses and programmes for school leader preparation such as Scotland's mandatory 'Into Headship' programme (Education Scotland, 2024b). The potentially positive impact of middle leaders upon pupil outcomes and school improvement is also acknowledged (De Nobile, 2018; Gronn, 2013; Harris & Jones, 2017; Lipscombe et al., 2021) and is thought to be particularly successful when enacted in collaboration with head teachers (Tang et al., 2022). The fact that, for many teachers, a middle leader role is the first experience of leading, underscores the need to develop leadership knowledge, skills and experience and thus help ensure that positive impacts are realised by the individual and the school.

1.2 Context of the study

Scotland is a devolved nation within the United Kingdom. The Scottish Government's responsibility for education builds upon long-established protocols in which Scotland's education system has always been distinct from that of other nations. This is reflected in all aspects of the education system including policy, national development priorities, curriculum, and assessment. Like other developed nations, Scottish policy is influenced by international agendas and by organisations such as The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

With a long-standing tradition of department heads (known as Principal Teachers) the leadership of curricular areas in Scotland's secondary schools has been delegated to middle

leaders for many years. An agreement with teacher unions (Scottish Executive Education Department, 2001) resulted in the introduction of principal teacher roles in primary schools where they previously had not existed, and in the streamlining of management structures in secondary schools in which some middle leader posts such as assistant head of department and assistant head teacher were removed. These posts could be viewed as entry level posts to middle and senior leadership respectively. Whilst adhering to national expectations, head teachers have the capacity to shape staffing and management structures to suit the needs of individual schools using procedures for devolved school management (Scottish Government, 2019). This has contributed to the creation of faculty head posts in which one middle leader might assume responsibility for several discreet subject areas.

The publication of the highly influential *Teaching Scotland's Future* report (Donaldson, 2010) set in motion significant changes to initial teacher education, teacher professional learning and (school) leadership learning in Scotland. Identifying an inconsistent and uncoordinated approach to leadership preparation across Scotland, the report proposed fifty recommendations which Hamilton et al. (2018, p. 79) argue "positioned leadership as an element of career-long professional learning". The report resulted in a number of developments that have particular significance to middle leadership preparation including:

- The articulation of a leadership pathway (pedagogical, middle leader, head teacher and system leader) which recognises that leadership is enacted at various levels in schools and wider education communities, clearly distinguishes between specific leadership levels such as teacher and middle leader and defines the notion of system leadership in Scotland (Scottish Government, 2012).
- The development of an extended suite of professional standards, in which *The Standards for Leadership and Management* (General Teaching Council Scotland, 2012b), for the first time, included a Standard for Middle Leadership.
- The establishment of a national organisation responsible for the leadership development leaders at all levels of the identified leadership pathway entitled the Scottish College for Educational Leadership (SCEL). This work is now undertaken by Education Scotland (Education Scotland, 2024c).

- An increase in the provision of professional learning courses and programmes in leadership for teacher leaders and middle leaders, where previously provision had focussed largely upon head teachers. The term “award-bearing” as defined by Kennedy (2005, p. 238; 2014) refers to the completion of a course or programme of study which is normally delivered and validated by a university. This term and the term “accredited” are used throughout this thesis to refer to university courses and programmes that result in a university qualification.

The current Standard for Middle Leadership (General Teaching Council Scotland, 2021b) outlines national expectations of middle leaders expressed through a range of statements of the values, knowledge, interpersonal skills, abilities, and professional actions required of them. This is a revised and updated version to that previously discussed (General Teaching Council Scotland, 2012b) in which the *Standard for Middle Leadership* (General Teaching Council Scotland, 2021b), and *Standard for Headship* (General Teaching Council Scotland, 2021a) have been distilled into separate standards, thus signalling the distinct contribution made by middle leaders in Scotland’s schools.

The leadership of learning and teaching is central to the responsibilities ascribed to middle leaders in Scotland (General Teaching Council Scotland, 2021b) and it is expected that middle leaders will ensure a positive culture in which staff and pupils can learn. Their work is informed by a national curriculum; *Curriculum for Excellence* (Education Scotland) which accounts for almost all curricular provision in Scotland’s schools. Accreditation for pupil learning is awarded by a government agency; The Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA). Values of equity, inclusion and social justice align with international conventions such as *The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (United Nations, 1989). They permeate the aforementioned professional standards and are also reflected in policies such as *Getting it Right for Every Child* (Scottish Government, 2022a) and national initiatives such as *The Scottish Attainment Challenge* (Scottish Government, 2022b). It is hoped that these values will influence all aspects of school practice.

Building upon a contractual requirement that Scotland’s teachers engage in thirty five hours of professional development each year (Scottish Executive Education Department, 2001), a

process of Professional Review and Development (PRD)(General Teaching Council Scotland, 2019) aims to impact positively upon the professional development of all teachers. The annual process of PRD seeks to empower teachers to take ownership of their professional learning through self-evaluation of their practice using a relevant professional standard, and reflection upon their areas for professional development. To an extent, it therefore aims to support the assertions of scholars who champion the importance of agency in professional learning, in which reflection and active learning are deemed to be central to delivering professional growth (Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002; Opver & Pedder, 2011). As line managers leading the professional learning of colleagues, it is anticipated that middle leaders will play a central role in the PRD process. The annual PRD meeting with a line manager is designed to support individuals to reflect upon identified areas for development and plan how these will be addressed. Another component of this process, known as Professional Update (PU) (General Teaching Council Scotland, 2024) is a five-yearly process of re-accreditation with the General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTCS). As GTCS registration is a mandatory requirement for all who wish to teach in Scottish state schools, the PRD process also serves as a mechanism for regulation of the profession, in which middle leaders therefore play a key role. The expectation that national professional standards will inform self-evaluation and reflection, and the requirement to engage with the PRD process in order to maintain professional accreditation, positions PRD as both developmental and a bureaucratic requirement. However, in one of the few studies which explore PU in Scotland's schools Adams and Mann (2021) found that teachers view the process primarily as bureaucratic.

1.3 Introduction to the researcher

I am an experienced educator currently working as a teacher educator in a Scottish university. Since beginning this post almost eight years ago, I have worked primarily within the field of educational leadership, developing, leading, and teaching award-bearing courses, with a particular focus upon school middle leadership. Prior to joining the university, I held the role of development officer for the previously mentioned national organisation responsible for the leadership development of teachers and school leaders (SCEL). These roles were built upon a foundation of over twenty years of experience as a

secondary school middle leader in Scotland's schools. During this time, I held middle leadership roles in pastoral care (Support for Learning) and curriculum (Home Economics) and had some experience of leading at senior level as an acting depute-head teacher.

Reflecting upon my experience as a secondary school middle leader, I realise that there were few if any formal opportunities to develop my knowledge and skills in leadership. I can also identify ways in which my leadership practice could have been enhanced if I had been equipped at an earlier stage with some of the knowledge and skills that I ultimately gained through experience and further study in the field, for example, a research-informed awareness of the benefits of a collaborative approach to middle leadership could have enhanced my confidence as I strived to nurture a collaborative ethos within my areas of responsibility. Despite the increase in opportunities for middle leadership learning across Scotland which followed the publication of Teaching Scotland's Future (Donaldson, 2010), there have been no studies that explore the perspectives and experiences of middle leaders regarding the development of their leadership capacities. My motivations for exploring the professional learning of middle leaders are therefore personal and professional. The personal ambition is to make a positive contribution to the working life and practice of middle leaders in schools. As an educator in the field, I also have a professional interest in findings that can be used to inform and enhance teaching provision, and in identifying other learning experiences that can develop the leadership capacity of middle leaders. As an early career academic, I aim to contribute to the limited body of knowledge in this field and to share knowledge with local and national bodies who influence practice in professional and leadership learning in Scotland.

1. 4 Justification for the study

This study is built upon the premise that middle leaders can have a "pivotal" impact upon learning (Harris & Jones, 2017, p. 214; Leithwood, 2016; Leithwood et al., 2008; Tang et al., 2022) and therefore have an opportunity to make a positive contribution to the life opportunities of children and young people. They do this by shaping positive learning cultures in which both pupils and teachers can learn and develop (Tang et al., 2022) and through the many day-to day interactions associated with this important work. They often

maintain a significant teaching responsibility alongside their leadership and management role.

A subset of literature within the wider field of educational leadership, some scholars previously highlighted the relatively small body of literature in middle leadership questioning whether it can be referred to as a research field (Harris et al., 2019). However, the more recent comments of Gurr (2024, p. 1), suggests that middle leadership continues to grow as field in a "parallel research stream" to school that of leadership, and that there is now a "considerable" body of research literature that explores the leadership of others in school communities such as middle and teacher leaders. Despite a growing research base, some areas for further work remain. De Nobile (2018) proposes an evolving theory of middle leadership to address the dearth of theoretical work in this area. In their review of literature Lipscombe et al.,(2021) highlight the limited body of research related to the professional learning of middle leaders and those aspiring to the role.

It is hoped that this study will add to knowledge in the field of middle leadership with a specific focus upon exploring the approaches and experiences that middle leaders have found helpful in developing the knowledge and skills they require to fulfil their leadership role.

1.4.1 Defining middle leadership

Definitions of middle leadership vary. Lipscombe et al. (2021) explore various approaches to defining the concept, observing that some draw from definitions of teacher leadership, where teachers lead through influence rather than positional authority. For the purposes of this study middle leaders are defined as those with a formal leadership role who operate between head teachers and teaching staff (De Nobile, 2018; Grootenboer, 2018; Lipscombe et al., 2021) and have positional authority with accountability for an aspect of school practice (Forde & Kerrigan, 2023). Within the Scottish context formal middle leader roles might have titles such as principal teacher or faculty head.

The highly contextualised nature of middle leadership, which is explored later in this study, is thought to present difficulties for defining the role. De Nobile's theoretical model (2018)

proposes an overarching approach capturing multiple dimensions of middle leadership, the roles and responsibilities associated with middle leader work, the inputs required to enable middle leaders to fulfil their role effectively and the desired outputs of successful middle leadership. Addressing the limited and evolving nature of the knowledge base, he cautions that this model seeks to provide a basis for further research rather than a definitive definition of middle leadership. He argues the need for further research in the types of professional learning most relevant to middle leadership in specific contexts.

Building upon the knowledge and skills that Scottish middle leaders believe are important to their leadership within the Scottish context, this study seeks to identify the types of professional learning that they have found helpful in developing their middle leadership capacities.

1.4.2 Professional learning in leadership

Academic interest in the development of effective leaders in education appears to focus largely upon the needs of Head teachers. Reviewing the literature on leadership development in education, Daniëls et al. (2019, p. 119) proposed that research on how effective educational leadership skills are developed is still "in its infancy", with most studies focusing upon approaches to formal training or specific skills such as mentoring rather than the preferences or learning needs of the individual. In his model for the leadership preparation and induction of head teachers (school principals) Bush (2018, p. 69) proposes a "careful longitudinal process" which includes talent identification, relevant leadership preparation, professional induction and ongoing development. This longitudinal approach is reflected in the Scottish ambition to build leadership capacity throughout the teaching career (Donaldson, 2010; Scottish Government, 2012). A longitudinal approach to developing head teachers and the enactment of leadership at various levels within schools reinforces the need to continue to expand the research base to ensure that the needs of school leaders who are working at levels other than head teacher are more robustly represented. Middle leadership is central to the successful delivery and improvement of teaching and learning in schools and is a possible initial step to headship. However the acknowledged challenges of transitioning from teacher to middle leader (Adey & Jones, 1998; Irvine & Brundrett, 2016; Irvine & Brundrett, 2019) and of leading at this level (Bennett et al., 2003; 2007) reinforce the need for further investigation of the leadership

learning needs of those working at middle leader level. This study proposes to contribute to this area by exploring the individual perspectives and experiences of middle leaders, with the aim of identifying individual learning needs and approaches that support their acquisition of leadership knowledge and skills.

The perceived difference between teaching and leading has previously fuelled calls to equip middle leaders with the knowledge skills required to lead (Adey & Jones, 1998; Brown et al., 2002). However, the evolving nature of middle leadership from managing a specific area of responsibility (such as a department), to a much broader concept of leadership in which the work of the middle leader contributes significantly to school improvement (Forde et al., 2018; Harris & Jones, 2017) highlights again the importance of exploring middle leadership learning in specific contexts at specific points in time. It is hoped that this study will offer insights into the leadership learning of middle leaders within the Scottish context.

In their systematic review of literature relating to middle leadership in schools Lipscombe et al. (2021) identify tensions around the key role played by middle leaders in facilitating the professional learning of others, and the relative lack of available and relative learning opportunities for them. Indeed, they identify a reliance upon learning whilst in post akin to an apprenticeship model of learning. Aligned with the assertions of De Nobile (2018), they argue for ongoing professional learning opportunities for middle leaders that are relevant to context and to the individual.

Through analysing the perspectives and experiences of middle leaders, it is hoped that this study will further develop understandings of the leadership learning needs of middle leaders and the strategies and approaches that they find helpful in addressing these needs. The significant contribution expected of middle leaders in relation to school improvement and in ensuring positive outcomes for young people, highlights the importance of this task. The findings of this study could potentially inform the practice of those involved in educating and developing middle leaders. In some cases, this will involve enriching and sustaining the middle leadership practice of those who wish to remain in post. In other cases, individuals will potentially build upon their leadership learning at this stage to assume senior leader roles and may ultimately form the next generation of school leaders.

1.4.3 Contribution of this study

This study seeks to explore the leadership learning of middle leaders, as such the focus of this study differs from studies such as De Nobile (2018) and Lipscombe et al. (2021) who adopt a more generic approach, with a strong focus upon middle leadership practice, roles and responsibilities. Empirical studies that specifically explore the leadership learning of middle leaders are few. Within this limited body of literature, many studies such as Adey (1998), Bassett (2016), Cardno and Bassett (2015) Glover et al. (1998), Gurr and Drysdale (2013) and Rhodes et al. (2008) draw from the perspectives of several stakeholders such as middle leaders, teacher colleagues, senior leaders, or school governors. The findings of these studies therefore capture a collective view based upon the expectations that others hold in relation to middle leader roles, and the knowledge, skills and abilities required to fulfil these roles. This study seeks to explore the perspectives of middle leaders to surface individual leadership learning needs and preferences and thus address a paucity of research in this growing area of educational leadership. The study will thus contribute to the limited but growing body of research within the field of middle leadership. De Nobile (2018) argues the need to explore the types of professional learning most relevant to specific contexts. This study of the leadership learning of middle leaders appears to be the only such empirical study undertaken within the Scottish context and will therefore contribute a unique Scottish perspective to this field.

1.5 Research question and objectives

The overarching research question is: Which experiences and activities do middle leaders identify as successful in developing their leadership capacity?

The specific objectives of the investigation are to

1. Explore the experiences and perspectives of middle leaders regarding their development needs in relation to their leadership.
2. Explore the experiences and perspectives of middle leaders regarding the leadership development opportunities available to them in Scotland.

1.6 Organisation of the thesis

This first chapter introduces the context and purpose of the thesis, providing a personal, professional, and scholarly rationale for the study. An overview of relevant features of the Scottish education context is presented. Discussion also draws from relevant scholarly literature to define middle leadership, consider its significance to school improvement and the development of the leadership capacities required to fulfil their role. The chapter then identifies the research question, specific objectives, and the contribution that the thesis makes to knowledge in this field. Finally, an overview of the organisational structure of the thesis is presented.

The second chapter provides an overview of the literature relevant to the research questions. The aim of this chapter is to critically explore what is known about the leadership learning of middle leaders. Discussion draws from relevant research and theory to provide a theoretical and research grounding for considering the leadership learning of middle leaders within Scotland's schools. The chapter concludes by proposing a gap in research in the building of leadership capacity in secondary school middle leaders in Scotland.

Chapter three outlines the ontological grounding for the study and the rationale for the qualitative research methodology. Discussion then focusses upon approaches to data collection and analysis. The ethical implications of the study and the ways in which any issues were addressed are also considered.

Chapters four and five present and discuss findings identified from the process of thematic analysis of the data. Two themes are identified as significant to building the leadership of middle leaders: context and experience. Chapter four explores and discusses findings related to context. Chapter five focusses upon experience.

Chapter six, the final chapter in the study, reflects upon the significance of the study to the field of educational leadership. It outlines the contributions made to knowledge and suggests recommendations for further research and practice. Strengths and limitations of the study are considered, and final reflections briefly return to the research questions and consider the ways in which these have been addressed.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Chapter overview

Chapter 1 explored the concept of middle leadership, definitions of the term, and the relevant policy context in Scotland. This chapter will build upon Chapter 1 by analysing and discussing literature that explores the knowledge and skills required by middle leaders and their development of middle leadership capacities. The chapter will begin by identifying the approaches used to conduct the literature review, before exploring relevant concepts, theories, findings, and debates within the field. Finally, the chapter will conclude by proposing a gap in research relating to building the capacity of secondary school middle leaders in Scotland.

2.2 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to critically explore what is known about the leadership learning of middle leaders. Discussion will draw from relevant research and theory and from previous discussion of the Scottish context to provide a theoretical and research grounding for the consideration of the leadership learning of middle leaders within Scotland's schools.

The chapter begins with an overview of the approach used to conduct the literature search. As advised by Ridley (2012), the review of literature then captures and discusses current knowledge and theory relevant to the research questions. Section 2.4, the introduction to the review, provides a long-range overview of literature in the field of middle leadership in schools. Sections 2.5 and 2.6 adopt a more focussed approach, exploring and critiquing relevant literature relating to the knowledge and skills required by middle leaders and the development of middle leadership capacity. Depth of analysis and discussion is determined by the relevance of the source to the research questions. Section 2.7 concludes the chapter and identifies a gap in the research literature that might be addressed by this study.

2.3 Approach to conducting a literature review

Cohen et al. (2018) argue that a thorough approach to conducting a literature search and writing the review can contribute to the reliability and validity of a research project by ensuring that the study is firmly rooted within and builds upon existing theory and research in the field. They concur with several authors that the literature review allows the researcher to achieve three key aims: to map the range and type of literature in a particular field, identifying major studies, authors, key theory and practice and any unexplored areas (Booth et al., 2021; Wallace & Wray, 2021); secondly, to enhance understanding and illuminate key debates (Hart, 2018; Ridley, 2012); and thirdly, to provide the wider historical and theoretical context in which the study is located and help identify a research 'gap' (Ridley, 2012).

Hart (2018) proposes that the purpose of a literature review is to seek, gather, analyse, and synthesise literature which is relevant to the specific area of enquiry. He distinguishes between two broad categories of literature review, the selection of which depends upon the purpose of the review and the specific research questions.

- The scholastic or traditional review has a wide focus, exploring key issues, theories, debates and, sometimes, methodologies in the field. This approach is often used to inform an empirical study.
- The systematic or interventionist review has a more specific focus with clearly defined literature search parameters. Systematic reviews can exist as "stand-alone documents in their own right" (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 182), exploring specific areas of inquiry and may be used to inform a specific aspect of practice.

In their typology of literature reviews Grant and Booth (2009) further refine generic definitions of the literature review to define fourteen types of review. In an approach which is closely aligned with Hart's (2018) definition of a scholastic or traditional review, they use the term 'literature review' to describe an approach in which a broad range of published materials are explored. They also identify a 'scoping review' as an approach which involves conducting a search of a broad range of literature in a particular field to identify the scope of literature, "map" the body of literature, identify key concepts, and any gaps in the research.

As such, a scoping review can be used to inform further research, practice, and policy (Booth et al., 2021, p. 14; Grant & Booth, 2009).

As this chapter seeks to provide the grounding for a doctoral thesis, it adopts a largely traditional, scholastic approach to reporting the literature related to the knowledge and skills required by middle leaders and their development of leadership capacity. However, the search for literature was completed in phases and a slightly different approach was adopted at each stage. The first phase was an initial scoping search of literature in the field of middle leadership in schools. This scoping search allowed me to gain a long-range overview of relevant literature in the field of middle leadership, before focussing more closely upon specific aspects of this literature. Scoping revealed key areas of discussion within the field and other significant sources such as existing literature reviews. It also helped inform the identification of potential gaps in the literature.

The second phase of the literature search involved reviewing the body of literature identified in phase one to locate, analyse and thematically organise the sources most relevant to the research questions. The application of specific parameters for identifying relevant sources at this stage aligns with features of Hart's (2018) definition of a systematic literature review. Ridley (2012) uses the term "serendipity" (p. 53) to describe the unexpected discovery of useful and relevant sources. In addition to formal searches of library and database resources, snowball referencing was sometimes used in which references from one source were pursued and explored due to their relevance to the study, this helped identify further relevant sources.

In a third phase of the literature search I returned to literature previously identified and also engaged in further searching to locate specific information to help make sense of issues that arose in subsequent work on the thesis, such as during data analysis and when discussing findings.

Booth et al. (2021) argue that systematic practice when planning and conducting a literature review and transparent reporting can help ensure trust and credibility in the approach taken

and can minimise the potential for researcher bias. I adopted the following practices to help ensure a systematic approach to conducting the literature searches:

- Searching for literature in three databases with differing datasets with the aim of conducting a broad initial search to identify the sources most relevant to the research questions (further details available from the search protocol in Appendix 1)
- Making informed choices about which databases to search, based upon published information about the scope of each database.
- Taking account of any relevant guidance and drawing from relevant findings of other literature reviews in the field of middle leadership in schools. This also helped build the confidence of this beginning researcher that no relevant databases or studies had been excluded from this search.
- Developing and adhering to a search protocol (Booth et al., 2021) (see Appendix 1) in which the aims of the review, literature search questions, search terms and criteria for inclusion and exclusion were identified and defined beforehand. This allowed me to maintain a focus upon the sources most relevant to the study when conducting and reporting the literature review.
- Maintaining accurate records during the search for literature. For example, by using features of online databases to record search details and search results, an electronic reference management system (Endnote) to capture and organise references, and a word-processed package (Microsoft Word) to capture and organise personal notes of key findings from of the sources read.

The review of literature in the field of school middle leadership generated a plethora of sources which included scholarly texts and other sources such as personal commentaries, books, and articles in a range of publications that did not always draw from a scholarly research base. This finding informed my decision to focus upon peer-reviewed scholarly sources. It is hoped that this will enhance academic rigour and ensure that the review is sharply focussed upon the most relevant sources. Some policy and other sources are also included where relevant to the discussion. In the sections that follow discussion firstly draws from the scoping search to provide a long-range overview of literature in area of middle

leadership in schools, then explores specific subsets of this literature to critically discuss the knowledge and skills required by middle leaders and the development of their leadership capacity.

2.4 Middle leadership in schools

The scoping search revealed middle leadership as a small but significant area of study within the wider field of educational leadership in which research interest appears to be growing. The findings of this literature review broadly align with those of published reviews of literature in this field such as Harris et al. (2019), who observe that the study of middle-level leadership in schools is largely dominated by small-scale empirical studies, with some attempts to theorise aspects of middle leadership. However much of the school middle leadership literature presumes that leadership is enacted by multiple individuals within school contexts rather than a sole leader and focusses upon the practice of middle level leaders. There are therefore theoretical connections with theories of distributed leadership (Gronn, 2002; Harris, 2013; Spillane et al., 2004), albeit with a distinct focus upon middle level leaders in schools. Furthermore, despite the lack of an agreed formal definition of middle leadership, there are broad general understandings about the nature of leading at middle level in schools (Adams et al., 2024; De Nobile, 2018), which is evident in discussion throughout this chapter.

The shift in terminology used to define middle leadership appears to reflect the evolving nature of the role. Earlier sources (Adey, 2000; Adey & Jones, 1998; Brown et al., 2002; Glover & Miller, 1999; Gunter & Rutherford, 2000) focus upon the work of 'subject leaders' or 'department heads', making reference to the departmental management and administrative tasks undertaken in these roles. More recent studies such as De Nobile (2018) reveal a transition in terminology from middle management to middle leadership, and a wider variety of roles including subject, curricular, pastoral and whole school roles at middle level. In their systematic review of peer reviewed journal articles published between 2006-2020, Lipscombe et al. (2021) found that middle leadership in schools is defined in a range of ways in scholarly literature such as by formal position within school hierarchies, level of

agency (and the extent to which they can promote the agency of others), relational practices, and their dual accountability to both senior leaders and the teams that they lead. Consistent with the aims of this study, this review draws primarily from sources which relate to formal middle leader posts in secondary schools, and upon the literature most relevant to the leadership learning needs of these middle leaders. Gurr and Drysdale (2013) argue that the expectations and responsibilities of middle leaders vary according to their specific role and the context in which they work. This chapter begins by exploring literature relating to the roles and responsibilities of middle leaders in secondary schools and also makes regular reference to expectations within the Scottish context, as outlined in Scotland's Standard for Middle Leadership (General Teaching Council Scotland, 2021b). The chapter then focusses upon the professional and leadership learning of middle leaders.

2.5 What is expected of middle leaders?

The leadership learning needs of middle leaders are inevitably informed by the difference in the knowledge and skills they possess, and those they require to fulfil their professional role. Discussing school leadership, Slater (2008) refers to the knowledge, skills and abilities required for leadership as "capacities". In the chapters that follow the word capacities is sometimes used as a general term for discussing the knowledge, skills, and abilities required to fulfil the role.

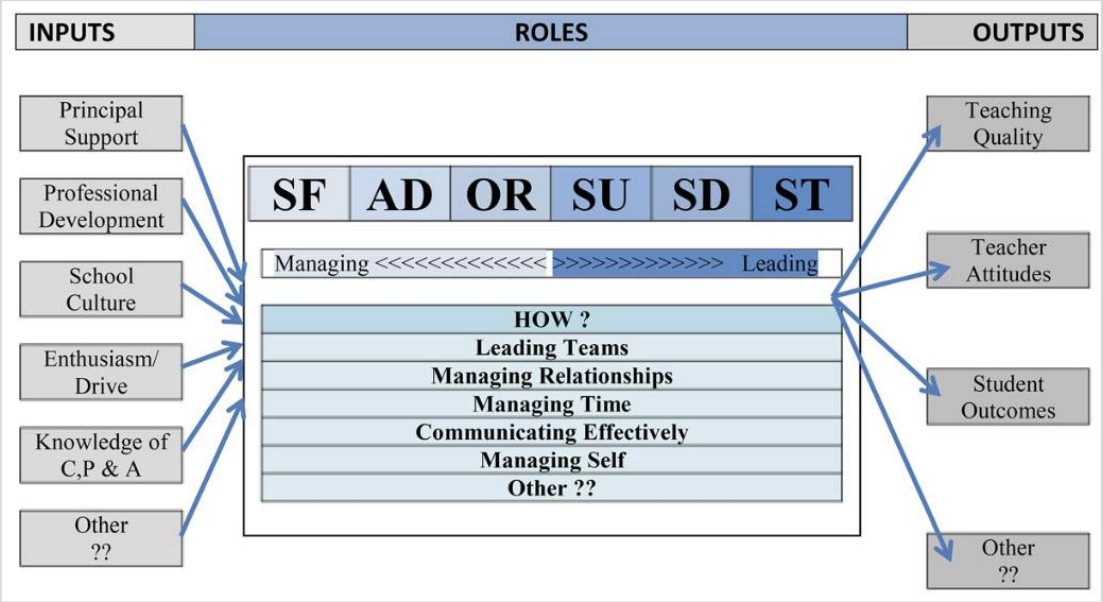
Research that addresses the capacities required for middle leadership reflects the evolving nature of middle leadership in schools. Earlier studies focus upon departmental and subject leadership, with several scholars arguing the need for heads of department to acquire additional capacities to address the changing demands of the role (Adey, 2000; Adey & Jones, 1998; Brown et al., 2002; Glover et al., 1998). Furthermore, Gunter (2001) highlights the impact upon middle leadership of an increasing culture of accountability and ongoing improvement, as reflected in policy documents such as professional standards. More recent sources such as De Nobile (2018), strive to theorise the practice of middle leadership in schools, revealing a broad, diverse range of middle leadership roles and responsibilities. Several scholars argue that an expansion of middle leader roles and responsibilities has occurred as a result of the impact of societal, cultural, political, and other factors upon

schools, and the subsequent cascading of leadership responsibilities from senior to middle leadership (Gurr & Drysdale, 2013; Lipscombe et al., 2021; Tang et al., 2022).

Empirical studies that explore the knowledge, skills, and abilities required for middle leadership draw from the perspectives of a range of individuals within the school community including middle leaders (Adey, 2000), senior leaders (Adey & Jones, 1998; Cardno & Bassett, 2015), and a cross-section of staff (Bassett, 2016; Brown et al., 2002; Bryant, 2019; Dinham, 2007; Gurr & Drysdale, 2013; Javadi et al., 2017; Tam, 2010). These studies reinforce the complexities of working at middle level in schools and the consequential need for professional development in a range of areas. De Nobile (2018) synthesises key aspects of middle leadership into six role categories: student focussed, administrative, organisational, supervisory, staff development and strategic (see Figure 2a). He defines the inputs required to enable middle leaders to fulfil their roles effectively and identifies the desired outputs of those working at middle leader level.

Figure 2a

The Middle Leadership in Schools Model (De Nobile, 2018, p. 6)



De Nobile's inclusion of the category "other" as a mechanism for adding further information or responsibilities helps reinforce the varied and evolving range of middle leader roles and responsibilities. This highlighting of roles and responsibilities that often adapt and evolve to

accommodate school and wider system changes also reinforces the ephemeral nature of leadership at middle level in schools and surfaces the need for versatility and adaptability in the role.

Lipscombe et al. (2021) categorise responsibilities that might be held by middle leaders such as leading teams or departments, teaching and learning, pastoral care, administration and management. Their findings highlight the potential impact of middle leaders in enacting school improvement and influencing teacher practice. However, in an assertion that supports those made by scholars throughout the 21st century (Adey & Jones, 1998; Gurr & Drysdale, 2013; Irvine & Brundrett, 2016), they argue that leadership development opportunities for middle leaders does not sufficiently equip them for the complexities of their role.

2.5.1 Leading learning and teaching

The actions that middle leaders take to facilitate effective teaching and learning is a focus of research interest and includes practices such as defining departmental purpose and direction, engaging in a range of activities to facilitate and manage teaching and learning, and creating and maintaining a positive climate in which both pupils and staff can learn and develop (Gurr & Drysdale, 2013; Leithwood, 2016; Tang et al., 2022). Shaked (2023) argues that the instructional leadership of middle leaders has three key components: leading by expertise in which middle leaders draw from knowledge and experience to lead others and inform decision-making, leading by collaboration where they encourage and empower colleagues to take responsibility for their own pedagogical practice, and leading by example, where they model the good practice that they expect to see in their colleagues.

It has long been acknowledged that the appointment of middle leaders is based upon their teaching knowledge and expertise (Adey, 2000; Adey & Jones, 1998; Irvine & Brundrett, 2019; Lipscombe et al., 2021). It is argued that middle leaders draw from these areas of expertise to support departmental progress, provide guidance to individuals and teams and to make informed decisions about learning and teaching (Shaked, 2023). Indeed the leadership authority of middle leaders is thought to draw more from their professional credibility, than their formally assigned leadership role (Bennett et al., 2007; Gurr &

Drysdale, 2013; Lipscombe et al., 2021; Paranosic & Riveros, 2017). The 'Successful School Leadership Model' (Gurr & Drysdale, 2013, p. 13) identifies the leadership of teaching and learning (pedagogy, curriculum, assessment, and knowledge of students as learners) as a key area of competence for leaders, and argues that a high level of pedagogical knowledge and expertise is central to the effectiveness and credibility of middle leaders. Subject knowledge, teaching expertise and the respect of colleagues is also identified as vital to the successful supervision of teaching and learning and the leadership of staff development (De Nobile, 2018) and for securing colleague engagement in the delivery of departmental development and improvement priorities (Leithwood, 2016; Weller, 2001).

Leading quality learning and teaching and ongoing improvement at middle level is now a formal expectation in professional standards that exist in many countries. Scotland's Standard for Middle Leadership (General Teaching Council Scotland, 2012b, p. 8) outlines an expectation that middle leaders will "build and sustain professional and personal credibility" through modelling a commitment to professional learning and excellent practice, that they will keep abreast of developments in society, education and their field, and lead change and improvement as appropriate within their areas of responsibility. This includes keeping abreast of pupil learning needs within their context to ensure that curriculum and pedagogies continue to be appropriate for all pupil needs. It is argued that this approach highlights a wider commitment to national and international ambitions for social justice (Forde & Torrance, 2017) to which middle leaders are integral due to their leadership and direct involvement in teaching and learning.

2.5.1.1 The management and administration of learning and teaching

The capacity to fulfil management and administrative tasks in support of learning and teaching such as budgeting, resource organisation and management is a long-standing expectation of middle leadership (Adey & Jones, 1998; Farchi & Tubin, 2019) and is a national expectation expressed in professional standards such as the Standard for Middle Leadership (General Teaching Council Scotland, 2012b, 2021b).

Balancing the often-competing demands of leading effective learning and teaching, ensuring quality, delivering improvement and maintaining healthy, productive learning cultures are

identified as a key challenge of middle leadership. Bennett et al. (2003; 2007) found that it can be difficult to fulfil the demands resulting from accountability agendas (such as monitoring the quality of teaching) whilst also trying to sustain collegiate cultures and nurture productive relationships with individuals and teams. The impact of trying to fulfil a significant teaching commitment alongside increasing management and administration responsibilities is addressed by several scholars who argue that the class teaching, preparation or marking of middle leaders can be interrupted or cut short to address pressing management, administrative, pupil welfare, behaviour or progress issues (Collier et al., 2002; De Nobile, 2018; Glover & Miller, 1999; Gurr & Drysdale, 2013). Lipscombe et al. (2021) found that limited time to fulfil the various demands of middle leadership can have a negative impact upon professional practice, with significant teaching and management responsibilities leaving little time for leadership. Farchi and Tubin (2019) argue that the time required to manage curriculum, timetables and resources can undermine the capacity of middle leaders to fulfil their pedagogical roles effectively. In their study of practices in effective secondary schools, they found that supports such as additional resources and clear protocols to address the managerial aspects of their role enables middle leaders to prioritise teaching and learning over administrative issues.

2.5.2 Leading individuals and teams

It is recognised that middle level leadership posts in schools are increasingly varied in nature, they now extend beyond traditional conceptions of head of department to include roles with whole school, pastoral and other responsibilities (Lipscombe et al., 2021; Tang et al., 2022). However, the leadership of individuals and teams continues to be identified as a key responsibility of many middle leaders (De Nobile, 2018; Forde et al., 2018; Leithwood, 2016). De Nobile (2018, p. 6) identifies “Leading Teams” as one of five key aspects of middle leadership, along with two closely associated roles which capture the relational demands of doing so: “Managing Relationships” and “Communicating Effectively”. Reviewing middle leadership literature through a complex system theory lens, Bento et al. (2023, p. 3) allude to the “complex web of interactions” in which middle leaders engage in order to lead, identifying their capacity to influence others as an important contribution that they make to the school community. Indeed it has long been argued that the leadership of effective learning and teaching relies upon middle leaders being able to motivate, inspire, and

support teams of staff (Glover et al., 1998) and to fulfil a pastoral role for the individuals whom they lead, such as providing individual support to colleagues and maintaining harmony and co-operation across the team (Weller, 2001).

Middle leading is distinguished from senior leading by the close proximity of middle leaders to the individuals and teams that they lead (Leithwood, 2016; Tang et al., 2022). In their 'Positioning of the middle leader' diagram, Grootenboer et al. (2015, p. 522), acknowledge duel responsibilities for teaching and leading, illustrating how middle leaders are often embedded within their team, working with them on a daily basis whilst simultaneously maintaining links to school leadership. To address the challenges presented by this positioning (Bennett et al., 2007) and ensure effective practice middle leaders need to maintain productive working relationships with team members and with senior leaders (De Nobile, 2018; Gurr & Drysdale, 2013; Leithwood, 2016; Tang et al., 2022; Weller, 2001).

Edwards-Groves et al. (2021; 2018; 2016) draw from the theory of practice architectures (Kemmis, 2014) to focus on the ways in which middle leaders enact the practice of leading, exploring the sayings, doings, and 'relatings' of middle leaders. They use the term "relational trust" (2016, p. 370) to define the collegial relationships that normally exists in school teams, arguing that relational trust is crucial to departmental improvement and to the professional learning of teachers. Edwards-Groves & Grootenboer (2021, p. 265) identify five dimensions of relational trust and relate these to the practice of middle leading to illustrate ways in which middle leaders convey professional confidence, knowledge and expertise and thus also garner credibility and authority (the "intellectual dimension"), demonstrate capacities such as approachability and care to achieve an inclusive, productive, culture which facilitates wellbeing and professional collaboration ("Interpersonal" and "interactional" dimensions), facilitate team cohesion through developing shared language and understandings ("intersubjective" dimension), and lead the development of colleagues in ways that are relevant and achievable ("pragmatic dimension").

Learning communities with positive learning cultures have long been identified as crucial to the effective learning of pupils and also to building the individual and collective capacities of teachers (Harris & Jones, 2010; Stoll et al., 2006). Middle leaders are recognised as central to

building and sustaining departmental and team cultures which nurture learning. Edwards-Groves et al. (2016) highlight the significant contribution that middle leaders make to school communities by shaping productive contexts in which teachers and pupils can learn and grow. De Nobile (2018, p. 10) outlines the "staff development role" of middle leaders in which middle leaders might enact their "supervisory" role to provide individualised support to develop the capacity of colleagues Tang et al. (2022, p. 519), argue that middle leaders create and maintain a positive climate through their promotion of shared norms, by ensuring "harmonious" relationships, productive professional dialogue and the sharing of practice, and ultimately motivating and supporting teachers in the ongoing development of their practice. Leithwood (2016, p. 123), conceptualising subject departments as collegial units, observes that teachers often identify more closely with their departments than the school due to the distinctive culture and rich environment for collegial work, thus re-enforcing the significance of this middle leader work to teacher identity and wellbeing.

It is acknowledged that the effective leadership of a department/ team is complex for a range of reasons. For many, middle leadership is often the first experience of leading other adults, a responsibility for which many beginning middle leaders have had limited experience or opportunities to develop relevant knowledge, so are poorly prepared (Irvine & Brundrett, 2016; Irvine & Brundrett, 2019). Thus their leadership of others can be a process of trial and error. Grootenboer (2018) cautions that teams with a strong sense of identity and collegiality, can become exclusive departmental silos, which can lead to a disconnect with the wider school community, competition between departments, potential opposition with senior leaders and may ultimately have a negative impact upon the wider school culture. Gurr and Drysdale (2013) highlight the wide variation in departmental cultures and levels of success that exist across schools, which inevitably impact upon the work of staff and the learning of pupils. They found that this variance is often due to middle leader roles, responsibilities, and the level of agency accorded to them by school senior leaders.

2.5.3 Personal capacities and development

It is argued that a key aspect of middle leadership involves self-management. De Nobile (2018, p. 14) identifies "managing self" as one of several roles of the middle leader. He proposes that managing self might include keeping abreast of subject developments,

developing leadership capacity or developing strategies to cope with the pressures, emotions and demands that result from their role.

A number of scholars allude to the emotional toll of working at middle level. Lipscombe et al. (2021, p. 2) identify the need for middle leaders to operate at the 'interface' of multiple sources of influence and change. Leithwood (2016) observes that middle leaders buffer and defend colleagues from wider actions that might have a negative impact upon their teaching, for which a range of personal capacities are required. Bennett et al. (2007) explore the competing demands of loyalty to departmental and senior colleagues and of nurturing collegiate cultures within a team whilst fulfilling performative agendas such as monitoring the work of colleagues. It is argued that supressing personal feelings to maintain a stance that is consistent with the role can constitute a form of emotional labour and ultimately result in psychological costs such as stress, burnout, and mental health issues (Hochschild, 2012). However Bolton & Boyd (2003) propose a more nuanced perspective in which they argue that rather than "sell" emotions to adhere to a pre-defined agenda, individuals learn to deploy different types of emotional labour in different personal, professional and organisational contexts and thus have an experiential opportunity to develop skills in emotion management.

Lambert (2024) addresses various factors that can contribute to work-related stress in middle leaders, particularly the challenges of balancing teaching with management. Exploring the resilience of middle leaders, he identifies support from peers as one of several approaches likely to enhance the resilience of middle leaders in their role. Shaked & Schechter (2019) highlight the regularity with which middle leaders face ambiguity or uncertainty in their daily management and leadership activities. They assert that dealing with such ambiguities requires the capacity to exercise professional judgement, a capacity which, according to Irvine and Brundrett (2019) middle leaders can develop through relevant experience.

The need for middle leaders, and those aspiring to the role, to assume responsibility for their leadership development is another a key focus of discussion. It is recognised that individuals bring a unique blend of knowledge, skills, and experience to their middle

leadership (Gurr & Drysdale, 2013; Irvine & Brundrett, 2019). Therefore, personal strengths and areas for leadership development are also unique to each person. Gurr and Drysdale (2013) propose that the responsibility for developing leadership capacity should rest with middle leaders themselves, with individuals identifying the training and experience that they need to address their leadership learning needs. This builds upon previous calls for a conceptualisation of middle leadership learning in which individuals assume responsibility for their own development rather than consider the process as something that is 'done to' them (Brown et al., 2002). Irvine and Brundrett (2019) argue that identifying and gaining relevant leadership experience is particularly important for those who are beginning or aspiring to middle leadership, arguing that middle leaders draw from their experience to inform their decision-making and professional judgements. Gurr & Drysdale (2013) observe that leadership preparation for middle leaders often relies upon an apprenticeship model in which aspiring middle leaders seek to learn from the practice of middle leader colleagues. They propose this as one component in a multi-faceted approach to middle leadership learning that includes a constructive performance management approach in which middle leaders evaluate leadership practice and receive guidance about next steps for development. Bassett & Robson (2017) reinforce the benefits of performance management but found that middle leader engagement with such activities is limited due to the time constraints of their role.

Within the Scottish context, there is an expectation that all teachers will engage in ongoing professional reflection and development, to develop self-awareness and support the identification of professional learning needs. For middle leaders there are additional expectations that they will model a high level of commitment to professional learning and that they will lead the professional learning of colleagues through approaches such as professional dialogue with individuals and teams, and the provision of a culture which promotes the learning of staff and pupils (General Teaching Council Scotland, 2021b, p. 12).

2.5.4 Strategic leadership and improvement

Underpinning each of the sections above is the expectation that middle leaders will lead teachers in delivering improvements to learning and teaching and thus deliver transformative change within their areas of responsibility and contribute to school

improvement. This expectation is a long-standing focus of scholarly discussion and underpins many of the topics discussed throughout this review. Earlier sources highlight the need for subject leaders to move beyond a narrow departmental and subject focus to embrace wider responsibilities associated with increased accountability and departmental improvement and thus contribute to school improvement. (Adey, 2000; Adey & Jones, 1998; Glover et al., 1998). It was argued that middle leaders required knowledge, understandings and skills to equip them to lead the strategic direction of a subject, lead teaching and learning, lead and manage resources (including staff) efficiently and effectively (Gunter & Rutherford, 2000; Harris et al., 2001). The observations made in more recent sources (Bush, 2023, 2024; De Nobile, 2018; Harris & Jones, 2017; Leithwood, 2016; Lipscombe et al., 2020) suggest that leading ongoing change for improvement is now a well-established expectation of middle leaders. Harris and Jones (2017, p. 214) reinforce the "pivotal" input of middle leaders in delivering positive outcomes for pupils and also highlight an expansion in the focus of middle leaders. Strategic actions such as agreeing a shared vision for improvement within teams and motivating and engaging teams around a common purpose to achieve strategic goals are now identified as key features of middle leadership (De Nobile, 2018; Gurr & Drysdale, 2013; Leithwood, 2016; Tang et al., 2022). Data literacy is also identified as necessary to support improvements to learning and teaching (Fluckiger et al., 2015) and to facilitate the generation and use of data to monitor departmental effectiveness (Gaubatz & Ensminger, 2017).

Fluckiger et al. (2015) argue that a comprehensive understanding of system level information such as legislation, policy and procedures, national curriculum and assessment expectations is essential for middle leaders as it equips them to lead their effective implementation. Indeed, Skerritt et al. (2023) found that it is often middle leaders who enact policy implementation within schools, through their leadership of the development work and changes to practice that bring policy to life. The expectation that middle leaders in Scotland will understand the impact of the wider political context and the implications for practice is evident in Scotland's professional standard for middle leadership which articulates and expectation that middle leaders will exercise "political insight" in their leadership (General Teaching Council Scotland, 2021b, p. 8).

The benefits of collaboration between middle and senior leaders to maximise the positive impact of instructional leadership are highlighted by scholars such as Tang et al. (2022). It has also been argued that subject leaders are potentially the most effective drivers of change for improvement within schools (Bush, 2023, 2024; Leithwood, 2016). This is due to factors such as their proximity to learning and teaching which can support the effective identification of appropriate areas for improvement, help build teacher support for change due to the respect in which they are held by their team, their awareness of the prevailing departmental culture and the extent to which this culture might support or hinder change. It is also argued that the subject expertise of middle leaders enables them to monitor teaching and learning, model good practice and support colleagues as required e.g. through mentoring and coaching (Bush, 2023, 2024; Shaked, 2023). Indeed, Bush (2023, 2024) challenges previously held scholarly assumptions by arguing that the proximity of middle leaders to learning and teaching positions them, rather than head teachers, as the key instructional leaders in schools.

To summarise, discussion throughout section 2.5 has explored the expectations of middle leaders and some of the capacities required in order to fulfil these expectations. The increasing and changing demands placed upon middle leaders and the significance of context to the way in which middle leadership is enacted add to the complexities of leading at this level, and thus to the leadership learning needs of middle leaders.

2.6 Developing middle leadership capacities

Academic interest in the development of leadership capacity largely focuses upon the development needs of head teachers. The professional learning of middle leaders is a small but significant subset of this research.

2.6.1 Leadership learning

Recommended approaches to professional learning in leadership reflect some generic principles of professional learning, particularly those of experiential and collaborative learning and the importance of reflecting upon practice. Analysing the leadership learning of aspiring head teachers in Scotland, Reeves et al. (2002) theorise that learning in leadership

is more likely to occur when it is supported by opportunities for cognitive development, experiential learning, reflection, and social or collegiate processes within the working context. Cognitive development can comprise of any activity that allows individuals to challenge existing understandings or develop new knowledge, experiential learning includes engagement in new practice, reflection helps make sense of and derive learning from any developmental activity, and social or collegiate processes within the working context can, ideally, support and validate new practice and understandings. These four processes form the basis of a model of professional learning (Carroll et al., 2008) the authors of which argue that professional growth is more likely when all four inter-related components are addressed. This model of professional learning and the research from which it was developed (Reeves et al., 2002), have particular significance to this study due to their grounding in leadership development within the Scottish context. The four identified leadership learning components also reflect salient principles from theories of professional learning such as the role of experiential learning in developing teacher practice and beliefs (Desimone, 2009; Guskey, 2002b; Opver & Pedder, 2011), the centrality of context to professional learning (Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002), the need to view professional learning as a process rather than an event (Desimone, 2009; Guskey, 2002b; Opver & Pedder, 2011), and for teachers to exercise agency in their professional development e.g., in determining their learning needs and how best these might be addressed (Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002). In terms of enacting this model in practice, Eraut (2004) argues that professional learning should include an appropriate blend of learning settings (work, home, course etc.), time for study, reflection, consultation and people who are willing and able to give appropriate support, although it is acknowledged that time and funding are likely to be ongoing constraints.

Drawing from a background in the field of human resource management McCauley et al., (2010, p. 4) distinguish between leader development (the development of the individual) and leadership development (development across an organisation). They view leader development as a "process of personal development that improves leader effectiveness"(p. 3) and propose a generic model of leader development, which does not distinguish between different levels of leadership. In views that appear to support the assertion that leaders are made not born (Avolio, 2005, p. 2), they reinforce the notion that all individuals can learn,

grow, and change. They also acknowledge that leadership capacity is likely to build upon several factors including genetics, experience, learning and development throughout life. They argue that individuals can build upon existing capacities and develop in other areas to enable them to enhance their effectiveness in leadership roles. Their Leader Development Model (McCauley et al., 2010) has two components, the first of which focusses upon developmental experience in which they argue that learning experiences designed to develop leader capacity are more impactful if they contain the following three elements:

- Assessment – a process by which leaders draw from available evidence to evaluate their leader development needs. Evidence can include the views of colleagues and any performance-related data.

- Challenge - any relevant learning that extends the knowledge or experience of the individual, places them in a state of "disequilibrium" (p. 11) and requires them to reflect and make sense of their experience. The authors observe that learning occurs in this state of disequilibrium as they process of make sense of the learning experience.

- Support - a variety of approaches that help the leader to make sense of the challenge experience and thus facilitate leader learning such as coaching and time for reflection.

There are clear parallels between this model and the work of Reeves et al. (2002). "Assessment" of leader development needs and "Support" to make sense of the developmental experience requires a process of reflection as described by Reeves et al. (2002). As the reflective processes proposed in both approaches is led by the individual, it could contribute to their exercise of agency in professional learning, as advocated by Clarke and Hollingsworth (2002). The "challenge" dimension refers to any developmental experience and therefore embraces both the cognitive and experiential opportunities for learning outlined by Reeves et al. (2002). McCauley et al., (2010) argue that context determines available opportunities for development and also impacts upon the ways in which processes of *assessment*, *challenge* and *support* are enacted. Indeed, the "support" dimension embraces a wide range of approaches that assist the individual to make sense of

and learn from developmental experiences, the availability of which are likely to depend upon the learning culture of the school (Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002) and the associated social and collegiate processes which influence the extent to which any potential changes in leader practice can be implemented and sustained (Reeves et al. 2002).

To summarise therefore, several aspects emerge as being particularly significant to leadership learning. Given the range of unique capacities and needs that individuals bring to their leadership role, leader development demands an individualised approach comprising of several components appropriate to the needs of the individual (Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002). An assessment of leadership learning needs helps identify relevant areas for development (McCauley et al., 2010) and can provide an opportunity for individuals to exercise the level of agency required to assume responsibility for their own leadership learning (Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002). Opportunities for cognitive growth (Reeves et al., 2002) and challenge (McCauley et al., 2010) can draw from a range of activities including experiential learning which can extend existing knowledge and experience and allow individuals to challenge current assumptions and practice. Reflection upon practice can help in the identification of leadership learning needs (McCauley et al., 2010), allow individuals to make sense of learning experiences and consider implications for practice (Reeves et al., 2002). Finally, leadership learning is most likely to occur in a context which includes opportunities to engage in and learn from experience, and from colleagues, with a supportive ethos in which changes in leadership to practice can be embedded (Reeves et al., 2002). Therefore, context is a key factor in distinguishing the capacities required by each leader, their individual development needs and the available leadership learning opportunities (McCauley et al., 2010; Opver and Pedder, 2011; Reeves et al., 2002).

2.6.2 Ownership and individualisation of middle leader learning

Within the body of literature in the field of middle leadership it is recognised that learning needs alter as experience is gained (Irvine and Brundrett, 2019) and therefore middle leader development requires a flexible, individualised approach (Gurr & Drysdale, 2013) that is relevant to current and future roles (Irvine & Brundrett, 2019). A package of activities is recommended for middle leader development. These activities might include long and short-term professional learning opportunities such as engagement with postgraduate study,

informal training, induction, coaching and mentoring, collaborative communities for learning in which individuals can work with and observe the practice of more experienced colleagues (Busher & Harris, 1999; Glover et al., 1998; Gurr & Drysdale, 2013).

In an approach consistent with McCauley et al., (2010) who argue for initial assessment of individual leadership learning needs, the need for "supportive performance management" (Gurr & Drysdale, 2013, p. 66) or school appraisal processes (Bassett & Robson, 2017) are identified. It is argued that these processes could be embedded within a leadership development programme which begins with personal reflection and identifies areas for development and support (Gurr and Drysdale, 2013; Cardno and Bassett, 2015). This would allow middle leaders and those aspiring to leadership to take responsibility for their leadership development and plan further training and experiential learning opportunities that are relevant to their development needs and career ambitions (Gurr & Drysdale, 2013). However, it is recognised that this approach is predicated upon clearly defined middle leadership roles, expectations and appropriate support, the provision of which continues to be inconsistent in many contexts (Gurr, 2019).

2.6.3 Extending middle leader knowledge and developing thinking

As previously discussed, professional knowledge and expertise is crucial to establishing credibility as a middle leader (Gurr and Drysdale, 2013). The need for knowledge and understanding of context is also identified as central to various dimensions of middle leadership practice (Fluckiger et al., 2015). Indeed, Bush (2023, 2024) argues that middle leaders' knowledge of learning, teaching and their team is central to the delivery of school improvement. Given the importance of contextual knowledge to leadership practice, Bush (2008, 2018), highlights the need for induction for leaders beginning a new role, proposing an approach that includes socialisation to enable the individual to feel part of the organisation, understand the culture and core values of the organisation and the knowledge and skills that individuals require to ensure effective performance. His later work (Bush, 2018), with a particular focus upon head teachers, argues the need for professional socialisation in which individuals have opportunities to reshape their professional identity from teacher to leader. As these processes require time, he also argues that induction must be viewed as an ongoing process rather than a one-off event.

The role of external inputs in developing leadership knowledge and expertise is highlighted by Reeves et al. (2002, p. 64) who outline the importance of external professional learning inputs for expanding knowledge and ensuring that workplace learning does not re-enforce or re-cycle poor or outdated practice. They argue that partnerships with other contexts such as other schools and universities can extend knowledge, develop practice and form networks that can ultimately help "expand horizons" to ensure that thinking is not constrained to a "narrow operational level".

Discussing their provision of a postgraduate programme for middle leaders, Gunter and Rutherford (2000) explore how analytical and critical thinking skills might be developed through a postgraduate programme that aims to prepare middle leaders to lead and develop practice in learning and teaching. In an approach that continues to be highly relevant, they argue the need to develop middle leaders as researchers who can support the gathering and analysis of data about learning and teaching, and as theorisers who are able to identify meaning in data and consider the associated implications for practice. Decades later Archer (2021, p. 790) also found that engagement in postgraduate study equips middle leaders with knowledge and critical thinking skills that helps them balance the competing demands of their role, such as "navigating the tension" between senior leaders and teaching colleagues and Donitsa-Schmidt and Zuzovsky (2020) found that teachers who had engaged in formal, master's level learning (not necessarily in leadership) were more likely to be assigned middle leader roles in Israeli schools where middle leader responsibilities are assigned by Head teachers for a fixed time.

Fluckiger et al. (2015) draw from international literature to identify criteria for determining the quality of middle leadership preparation programmes. Prominent among the ten quality criteria is the expectation that middle leadership programmes will be informed by research and enriched by partnership with relevant external agencies, thus supporting the previously discussed need for external inputs to extend existing knowledge (Reeves et al. 2002). Reflecting a focus upon quality, improvement and accountability, they advocate the regular evaluation of provision to ensure that it delivers relevant, effective, professional learning.

The publication of professional standards for subject leadership in England (Teacher Training Agency, 1998) resulted in scholarly interest in identifying and addressing the development needs of subject leaders, some of which continues to be cited in research papers (Adey, 2000; Adey & Jones, 1998; Brown et al., 2002; Glover et al., 1998; Gunter & Rutherford, 2000; Harris et al., 2001). As discussed in the introductory chapter, recommendations for leadership development within Scotland's schools are outlined in *Teaching Scotland's Future* (Donaldson, 2010) and resulted in the development of a professional standard for middle leadership in Scotland (General Teaching Council Scotland, 2012b) and in the provision of courses and programmes for those working at various levels of leadership in Scotland's schools. However an evaluation of the implementation of *Teaching Scotland's Future* (Black et al., 2016), did not explore the impact, if any, on the professional learning of middle leaders within the Scottish context, thus highlighting again a research gap in this area within the Scottish context.

Harris *et al.* (2001) analysed professional learning and training opportunities for subject leaders in England and Wales, to identify the features most likely to result in a change in middle leadership practice. They identified features such as developing rapport and trust between tutor and participants and encouraging the establishment of participant support networks. This surfaces the important role that courses and programmes play in facilitating supportive peer relationships and networks that may sustain and support middle leaders and their learning after the professional learning programme is completed. Their recommendation for follow-on school-based activity such as participating in areas of school development on returning to school, or stimulating debate about pedagogy and good practice, aligns with the views of other scholars who identify the benefits of experiential and site-based learning and the value of applying this to practice (McCauley et al., 2010; Reeves et al., 2002) thus highlighting the role that experiential learning can play in consolidating new knowledge and understandings.

Brown et al. (2002) interviewed head teachers and middle leaders to discover a range of developmental needs including the need for middle and senior leaders to work together to agree and deliver a common vision and the need to equip subject leaders with skills in development planning. They argue that development needs could be addressed through

active, collaborative engagement in school-based research, using appropriate research methodologies, accompanied by opportunities for reflection to identify further relevant actions for professional development or to enhance practice. The recommendations for active, collaborative colleague learning and the use of data and research to investigate learning within the school context mirror approaches previously discussed (Gunter & Rutherford, 2000; Harris et al., 2001). A specific focus upon the collaborative learning culture of the school reinforces the importance of a context that supports the social dimensions of leader learning, where the application of new knowledge, skills or ideas to practice is a crucial part of the learning process (Guskey, 2002b; McCauley et al., 2010; Reeves et al., 2002). Brown et al. (2002) focus upon the ways in which middle leaders can learn within these collaborative cultures. As previously discussed, this is a somewhat cyclical process as middle leaders are also responsible for building and sustaining collaborative learning cultures within their areas of responsibility (De Nobile, 2018) and thus facilitating the professional growth of colleagues.

2.6.4 Middle leadership experience

Adey and Jones (1998, p. 134) use the term "flounder" to describe the professional challenges that new middle leaders can experience without appropriate preparation for the role. However, it is argued that middle leaders learn from their experience of leadership (McCauley et al., 2010; Irvine and Brundrett, 2019; Lillejord and Børte, 2020). Indeed, Lillejord and Børte (2020 p. 83) argue that experience is the "prime source" of middle leadership knowledge. It is thought that new experiences and those which appear to be challenging (or in which individuals might appear to flounder) often generate meaningful learning. Irvine and Brundrett (2019) argue that engaging with new experiences forces a state of "disequilibrium" (p. 11) in which leaders question their knowledge, skills and previous assumptions and develop new capacities to make sense of these experiences. New experiences therefore provide rich opportunities for learning, particularly when individuals are provided with support to maximise the learning opportunity (Harris et al., 2001). With a specific focus upon middle leadership, Irvine and Brundrett (2019) draw from the theory of skills acquisition (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1980) to outline the ways in which relevant experience can inform the development of middle leadership capabilities, arguing that experience and subsequent reflection upon it, are key components of successful middle leadership learning.

The early stage of learning a new skill is characterised by limited experience and a reliance upon theoretical methods of reasoning. However, experience allows the formation of mental maps from which an individual can draw to inform future practice. Consequently, a greater quantity and quality of experience, provides more information from which to draw and ultimately results in the capacity for swift, intuitive middle leader decision-making and enhanced confidence in the role. With this in mind, experiential learning for established and experienced middle leaders could include undertaking new leadership challenges or projects to further enhance and develop their capabilities (Irvine & Brundrett, 2019) or engaging in enquiry-based learning activities (Brown et al., 2002).

Experiences that might inform the development of middle leadership capabilities can be drawn from leadership roles within schools such as engaging with and learning from peers, from leadership experiences outside school, or gained over time in the enactment of the leadership role (Irvine & Brundrett, 2019). However gaining experience that builds leadership capacity is not always straightforward for middle leaders. Gurr and Drysdale (2013) found that the roles and responsibilities of middle leaders vary according to context and are broadly determined by senior leaders. Lillejord and Børte (2020, p. 83) further extend this notion, drawing from a range of studies, they found that the leadership tasks accorded to middle leaders are often "trivial jobs that do not build their competence". Referring to the Scottish policy context, Hamilton et al. (2018, p. 73) draw from relevant policy and national guidelines which list activities such as chairing working groups or committees, engaging with coaching or mentoring and participating in relevant leadership learning as examples of in-school experiences which can nurture leadership development. However, they caution against the creation of "menus" of available learning opportunities advocating instead for a national strategy in which key actors within the system work together to craft a coherent approach to leadership development for Scotland's teachers.

Examining educational leadership more broadly, research findings also indicate that it can be particularly difficult for women to gain experience that might prepare them to assume leadership roles. Despite the higher percentage of women occupying teaching roles, they continue to be under-represented at all levels of leadership in schools due to structural, organisational and personal barriers which can result in them taking longer to gain relevant

leadership experience than their male counterparts (Harris et al., 2024; Moreno et al., 2024a, 2024b; Thompson & Stokes, 2023, 2024; Watterston & Ehrich, 2024).

The limited leadership experience of teachers underpins scholarly interest in middle leadership preparation. It is recognised that, for many teachers, a middle leader role is their first experience of many dimensions of leadership, such as leading adults. However scholarly interest in leadership preparation and leadership development has traditionally focussed upon preparing head teachers (Bush & Jackson, 2002). Adey and Jones (1998) found that most middle leaders were appointed based on their pedagogical expertise, and that a limited comprehension of the complexities of leadership could make the early days of their middle leader role daunting. Similarly, Brown et al. (2002) challenge the assumption that those aspiring to middle leadership automatically possess leadership capacities. More recently, Bassett and Shaw (2018) propose that first-time middle leaders need opportunities to build confidence in their leadership, which might be achieved by providing time to undertake aspects of the role that are new to them and Irvine and Brundrett (2019, p 75) argue that preparing teachers for their first leadership role should be a "moral imperative", as failure to do so could be viewed as reckless with potentially negative implications for all involved.

The significance of relevant experience to middle leadership effectiveness, thus underscores the need for specific support for those who have limited experience in the role. It is argued that those aspiring to or beginning a middle leader role should actively seek leadership experiences to develop their repertoire of capabilities and that senior leaders should actively make appropriate experiential opportunities available (Irvine & Brundrett, 2019). Relevant developmental experiences for aspiring middle leaders could involve supported engagement in delegated leadership responsibilities (Adey & Jones, 1998), working with experienced leaders, participating in decision making and opportunities to observe (good and bad) leadership practice (Turner, 2000).

As discussed in previous sections there is scholarly agreement that an individualised, integrated package of developmental experiences is likely to address the leadership learning needs of middle leaders, however, it is argued that this is not clearly understood. Drawing

from research conducted Australian schools, Gurr and Drysdale (2013) found that some middle leaders did not appreciate the value of middle leadership preparation. They also found inconsistencies in the views of middle and senior leaders about middle leader roles and responsibilities, and the differing perspectives impacted upon practice. Some middle leaders were recognised as crucial to the leadership of learning and teaching and received support and development to fulfil this role, in other contexts the work of middle leaders was constrained by the prevailing school culture or the views and practice of senior leaders.

Assertions that new experiences and challenges are a key component of leadership development for all middle leaders (Irvine & Brundrett, 2019; McCauley et al., 2010) reinforces the importance of a culture in which the value of developmental experiences are more clearly understood, nurtured and supported. Like Gurr and Drysdale (2013), Irvine and Brundrett (2019) identify an inconsistent, "laissez-faire" approach to middle leadership development in England. They caution that, without appropriate leadership preparation and development, the potential of middle leaders may not be fully realised. More recently Lipscombe et al. (2021), argue that despite an apparent increase in learning opportunities for middle leaders in recent years, these opportunities rarely equip them adequately for the complexity of middle leadership.

At the time of writing this thesis, there is no scholarly research which explores the developmental experiences available to middle leaders in Scotland. This is significant as Scotland has a unique policy context and education system which differs to other countries within the United Kingdom, and which seeks to promote leadership development throughout the teaching career.

2.6.5 Professional reflection

As previously discussed, reflection to identify areas for leadership development is recommended as a first step in planning an individualised approach to middle leader development which can also potentially provide an individualised opportunity for leaders to take control of and develop their leadership practice within their unique context. (Cardno & Bassett, 2015; Gurr & Drysdale, 2013; McCauley et al., 2010) and to facilitate sense-making of leadership development experiences (McCauley et al., 2010; Reeves et al., 2002).

The need for structured opportunities for middle leaders to reflect upon their practice is highlighted in various ways. It is argued that reflection upon leadership experience can significantly ease the period of transition from teacher to middle leader (Irvine & Brundrett, 2019), and can provide opportunities for individuals to learn from their leadership experience (McCauley et al., 2010). Harris et al. (2001) acknowledge the well-established scholarly view that reflection provides a means of internalising new knowledge and considering implications for practice. Investigating training programmes for middle leaders, they identify the need for participants to apply new knowledge to the workplace and to reflect upon the process of doing so.

Coaching and mentoring are identified as a means of supporting developmental reflection upon middle leadership practice and of providing an individualised approach to developing middle leadership capacity. Harris et al. (2001) argue that a change in practice is more likely when reflection is supported by an external agent such as a mentor, coach or critical friend who can encourage creative problem-solving and ownership of problems and preferred solutions. Irvine and Brundrett (2019) identify coaching as a means by which those beginning in middle leadership could identify and draw from any relevant experience that might inform their practice (from school and beyond). Thorpe and Bennett-Powell (2014) found that middle leaders recognise the need for training programmes, however they viewed approaches such as coaching and mentoring as more effective for achieving a change in practice, possibly due to their flexibility, capacity to accommodate a constantly changing work environment, and facilitate an individualised approach to middle leader development. They also highlight blurred understandings of terms such as coaching and mentoring arguing the need for training in these approaches. The challenges of facilitating meaningful coaching conversations within a busy work environment is acknowledged, with several scholars arguing the need for sufficient time to allow meaningful reflective conversations within schools (Glover et al., 1998; Irvine & Brundrett, 2016; Thorpe & Bennett-Powell, 2014).

Brown et al. (2002) promote reflective action research as an approach to middle leadership learning arguing that it has the potential to facilitate departmental collaboration and

collegiate reflective practice and nurture the development of skills in research methodologies. It is also argued that enquiry-focussed approaches are more beneficial than other approaches to leadership development as the reflective, enquiry-focussed approach could support the revitalisation of aspects of middle leadership practice and thus help redefine the profession from within (Glover et al. 1998). For middle leaders who are experienced and established in their role a reflective action research project could therefore present a new challenge or experience from which they can learn and also refresh their leadership practice as advocated by scholars such as McCauley et al., (2010) and Irvine and Brundrett (2019).

2.6.6 Collaborative cultures and leadership learning

It is argued that organisational learning and change is more likely to occur in a culture in which collaboration, reflection, and willingness to try new approaches or take collective risks is a cultural norm (Louis & Lee, 2016). A collaborative school culture is thought to promote higher levels of teacher self-efficacy and job satisfaction and can have a positive impact upon student achievement (Hargreaves, 2019; Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2016). The features of a collaborative school culture most likely to result in teacher professional learning include professional dialogue with colleagues, observations by peers and leaders, feedback from students, professional reading, and coaching (Louis & Lee, 2016).

The presumption of a collaborative learning culture underpins many of the previously discussed approaches to middle leadership learning. The need for senior leaders to create a learning culture in which middle leadership can develop is highlighted (Gurr & Drysdale, 2013). A range of collaborative practices are promoted as vehicles for middle leadership learning including induction (Bush, 2008; Gurr and Drysdale, 2013), coaching and mentoring (Gurr & Drysdale, 2013; Irvine & Brundrett 2016; 2019; Harris et al. 2001; Thorpe & Bennett-Powell, 2014), teaming (Gurr & Drysdale, 2013) or working in collaboration with experienced leaders including peers, participating in decision making and learning by observing good and bad leadership practice (Turner, 2000). Bassett and Shaw (2018) also argue that first-time middle leaders need recognition of their expertise from their peers to

maintain self-esteem and motivation, illustration how middle leaders may also draw from the collaborative support of peers as a source of professional and personal support.

As previously discussed, it is anticipated that middle leaders will build and sustain collaborative learning cultures within their areas of responsibility, nurturing, supporting, and developing teachers and collective working to support school improvement (Fitzgerald & Gunter, 2006; Fluckiger et al., 2015). However, although middle leaders often fulfil a key role in facilitating the professional learning and growth of others, they often feel that senior leaders do not provide this level of support to address their development needs, expressing a sense of injustice at the lack of professional development opportunities available to them (Bassett, 2016). Indeed, the practice of middle leadership in schools and the extent to which middle leaders can shape cultures for learning is identified as a source of tension within the school system. Earlier sources (Adey and Jones 1998; Brown et al. 2002) promote collaborative as opposed to hierarchical or individualistic cultures a means of facilitating middle leader learning. Later sources extend this notion, arguing the vital importance of a pro-active approach by senior leaders to the development of middle leaders, a willingness between senior and middle leadership to work together to achieve common goals (Gurr & Drysdale 2013) and a shared understanding of the key contribution that middle leaders can make to learning and teaching (Cardno and Bassett 2015). However, Gurr and Drysdale (2013) found that senior and middle leader collaboration and the level of agency afforded to middle leaders was inconsistent and varied across different contexts (Gurr & Drysdale 2013) with resultant implications for middle leader practice.

2.6.7 Theoretical highlights

From the literature reviewed, some sources emerge as having particular significance to a study which seeks to explore the leadership learning of school middle leaders. The distribution of leadership among multiple colleagues aligns with theories of distributed leadership (Gronn, 2002; Harris, 2013; Spillane et al., 2004). De Nobile's proposed theoretical model of middle leadership (2018) offers a theoretical perspective of the roles and responsibilities of middle leaders in schools and also addresses developmental inputs that could support middle leaders in fulfilling their roles and responsibilities.

No theoretical models relating specifically to the leadership development of school middle leaders were found in the literature searched. However, this review has established that approaches recommended for building the leadership capacity of middle leaders broadly align with established principles and theories of professional learning (Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002; Desimone, 2009; Eraut, 2004; Opver & Pedder, 2011) and with more generic models of leadership learning (Carroll et al., 2008; McCauley et al., 2010; Reeves & Fox, 2008).

The literature reviewed reveals that the leadership learning needs of those working in or aspiring to middle leadership in schools varies significantly and depends upon the capacities that individuals bring to the role. This is highlighted by Irvine and Brundrett (2016; 2019) who propose that beginning in middle leadership presents significant challenges from which individuals can learn, particularly when appropriate support is provided such as a coach or mentor. It is also reflected in the findings of Gurr and Drysdale (2013) who highlight the importance of context to middle leader development, and theorise that the development of middle leadership capacities demands a package of activities, tailored to the needs of the individual which are identified, planned, and owned by the individual.

Theoretical interest in the professional learning of middle leaders therefore embraces a number of issues including the roles and responsibilities of middle leaders, the need to prepare teachers for middle leadership, and the ways in which all middle leaders can be equipped with the knowledge, skills and opportunities that they require to fulfil their roles effectively and ultimately help deliver school improvement.

2.7 Conclusion

Literature in the field of middle leadership is generally regarded as a subset within that of the much larger field of educational leadership. However middle leaders play a crucial role in the delivery of school improvement due to their potential to make a positive impact upon learning and teaching. A small body of literature that specifically considers the leadership learning needs of middle leaders reveals generic capacities and approaches to leadership development that are relevant to all leaders. However, this search and review of relevant

literature illuminates the ways in which the practice of leading in the middle layer of a school differs to leadership at senior level due to the proximity of middle leaders to the process of learning and teaching and to the teams that they lead. The leadership learning needs of those beginning a middle leader role are likely to be particularly significant due to the limited leadership experience of most teachers at this stage in their career.

This literature review identifies some relevant theoretical insights and a small but significant number of empirical studies which explore the perspectives of middle leaders about their development needs. Most of these studies are now dated and none were undertaken within the Scottish context.

Scotland has a separate education system, political and policy context to other parts of the United Kingdom. Building upon a long-standing tradition of middle leadership posts in secondary schools in Scotland, the publication of Teaching Scotland's Future (Donaldson, 2010) resulted in the development of a policy approach which seeks to develop leadership at all levels. This is reflected in a suite of professional standards for teachers, which includes a standard for middle leadership (General Teaching Council Scotland, 2012b, 2021b), and an increased focus upon the provision of leadership learning for those who lead at all levels in schools. Within this context, this study seeks to address a research gap within the field and within Scottish education by exploring the perspectives of school middle leaders in Scotland regarding their leadership learning needs and their perspectives and experiences of addressing these needs within the Scottish context. It is hoped that the findings of this study will identify approaches that middle leaders identify as helpful in developing their leadership knowledge and skills, and will ultimately benefit middle leaders, those aspiring to middle leadership, and those involved in providing and supporting the leadership learning of school middle leaders.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

Methodology is defined as a realistic account of the research process (Silverman, 2021) which includes a rationale for the ways that the research was conducted (Briggs et al., 2012). Previous chapters introduced the study and explored literature relevant to the research questions, this chapter outlines and justifies the research approach adopted for the study. The chapter begins with a brief overview of the researcher's philosophical stance. It then explores specific aspects of the research methodology, including the approach to data analysis, which seeks to provide a realistic account of the research approach and a rationale for the methodological decision made at each stage. Finally, the steps taken to ensure ethical practice and research integrity are provided.

Brinkman and Kvale (2018) emphasise the importance of establishing the purpose and aims of the study before planning the research design and data collection instruments. The purpose and aims of the study are discussed fully in chapter one and are include again here in the introduction to a chapter which outlines how these objectives were addressed.

The overarching research question is: Which experiences and activities do middle leaders identify as successful in developing their leadership capacity? The specific objectives of the investigation are to

1. Explore the experiences and perspectives of middle leaders regarding their development needs in relation to their leadership.
2. Explore the experiences and perspectives of middle leaders regarding the opportunities available to them in Scotland to support their leadership development.

3.2 Philosophical stance of the researcher

Addressing different assumptions about the nature of social research, Denscombe (2010) argues that social researchers require an understanding of philosophies that underpin the design and implementation of their research, how these positions differ, and where they stand in relation to these differing positions. This is significant as the philosophical

assumptions of the researcher ultimately shape many aspects of the research approach such as research objectives, research design, data collection and analysis. In this section I will articulate my philosophical stance to make explicit the assumptions that underpin the study and thus allow the reader to fully appreciate the philosophical lens which frames my research approach and the decisions made at each stage of the research process.

Creswell (2014, p. 35) defines a worldview as "a general philosophical orientation about the world and the nature of research that a researcher brings to a study", which will inevitably influence the research design and approach. Discussing worldviews, two key dimensions are identified by Denscombe (2010); ontology and epistemology. Ontology refers to beliefs about the nature of reality, within which two key viewpoints are identified; the realist view in which the social world is understood as "having structures and relationships that are fairly consistent and stable" (p. 119) and can therefore be measured, and the constructionists' view that reality is constructed by individuals whose perspectives may vary, and therefore the social world consists of multiple realities. Epistemology addresses ways in which individuals create knowledge about the social world and has two perspectives: positivism and interpretivism. Positivism adopts a scientific perspective closely aligned to the realist ontological view in which measurement and observation are central to how we learn about social reality and are thus accompanied by concepts such as accuracy and objectivity. Interpretivism holds that knowledge of the social world is produced rather than discovered by individuals in their interpretation of the world.

Social reality is therefore subjective, and the research of social reality can be impacted by the humans involved (participants and researchers). Cohen et al. (2018) observe that educational research embraces a range of viewpoints including positivist and interpretive views and others such as critical theory and feminist theory. In their discussion of research paradigms, they identify the interpretive tradition as one which seeks to understand the subjective world of human experience by making efforts to understand the person from within, and to explore how individuals interpret the world around them.

As I hold a constructionist ontological viewpoint, I believe that reality is constructed by individuals and that the social world consists of multiple realities. My interpretive

epistemological view underpins my belief that knowledge of the social world is produced rather than discovered by individuals. These views are reflected in the research aims of this study which seeks to explore the subjective perspectives and experiences of middle leaders in their development of leadership capacity. In later sections of this chapter, it will be evident that this philosophical stance is also reflected in the approach to research design, data collection and data analysis.

3.2.1 The role of the researcher

Bryman (2015) re-enforces the assertion that qualitative research involves researcher and participants in the co-construction of knowledge. He observes that rather than extract knowledge from participants, qualitative researchers contribute to the construction of knowledge, particularly through their interpretation of data and the written transmission of findings. As the researcher for this study and therefore the "primary instrument in data collection and analysis" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 16), I acknowledge that the decisions I make at all stages of the study are inevitably filtered through the lens of my values and experience, and also that my presence as a researcher can ultimately impact upon the phenomenon being investigated. I therefore propose the findings of this study as my interpretation of the phenomenon being investigated.

Due to the professional roles held throughout my career, I had a strong understanding of the issues discussed by participants during data collection. It was helpful to be familiar with the terminology they used, and the wider contexts and systems that they referred to. However, after several years of working out with the school system, I was able to view their perspectives and experiences more as an observer, without the challenges often associated with insider research, such being influenced by daily working relationships with the individuals, or professional biases that may occur when working in the context (Costley et al., 2010). In addition to a strong understanding of the phenomenon being explored, my professional experience also facilitated access to a relevant participant sample, advantages that are not routinely available to researchers who are less familiar with the experiences and contexts being investigated.

Throughout this study my work has been supported by the guidance of academic supervisors who have challenged and supported my thinking. This helped me to question aspects such as my approach when conducting the study and particularly my interpretations when analysing the data. My supervisors have also commented upon the written content of this thesis thus ensuring that it accurately reflects the research process.

Lichtman (2013) proposes that clarity about how the study was done, the role of the researcher, and their relationship to the participants enhances the validity and reliability of a qualitative study. It is hoped that clarity about my professional background and my role as a researcher (outlined here and in Chapter 1), and the detailed account of the study, which is provided throughout this methodology chapter, will facilitate this level of transparency and thus enhance the validity and reliability of this study.

3.3 Research design

Research design is defined as a "framework" which informs the collection and analysis of data (Bryman, 2015, p. 40) and a "plan or strategy for organising the research and making it practicable" (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 173). Bryman (2015) observes that, although some scholars do not support the distinction, social research can be broadly categorised into two approaches; quantitative research which uses measurement, and qualitative research which does not. Acknowledging that there have been some difficulties in achieving an agreed scholarly definition, Flick (2017; 2018, p. x) argues that qualitative research has progressed significantly beyond an initial identity of "not quantitative" research, it now assumes an identity of its own, in which it seeks to explore social phenomena, such as how individuals construct their world. Qualitative research is described as broad in scope capturing a wide, varied range of research approaches and fields (Brooks & Normore, 2015; Cohen et al., 2018; Flick, 2018). Data is gathered in a range of ways such as by analysing the experiences of individuals and groups, (including everyday professional practice), interactions and communications, and documentary evidence, including text and other media. Indeed, it is argued that qualitative research plays a vital role in capturing the complexities of people's lives and experiences in an increasingly complex world (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018).

A number of scholars highlight the importance of carefully selecting a research design that is consistent with the philosophical stance of the researcher and purpose of the study, and which will generate the data required to explore the research objectives (Brooks & Normore, 2015; Cohen et al., 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Consistent with my constructionist interpretive worldview and with research objectives that seek to explore the perspectives and experiences of individuals, I identified a qualitative research design as an appropriate approach, using research instruments that allow investigation of the perspectives and experiences of school middle leaders.

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) assert that the choice of research design should also be informed by the researcher's personality and skills. I am an experienced educator, with effective communication skills, including training in coaching, which has further enhanced my active listening skills. This package of experience and skills equips me well to engage productively with individuals to gather qualitative data and engage in a qualitative study.

A key feature of some types of qualitative study (such as ethnography and phenomenology) is the collection of data in the natural setting in which participants are located (Cohen et al., 2018; Creswell & Creswell, 2022). Data for this study was collected in 2020, during a global pandemic and national lockdown when schools were closed. In accordance with lockdown guidelines, I sought a flexible qualitative research design with data collection instruments that could conform to the required constraints. Among the range of qualitative research designs discussed by Merriam and Tisdell (2016, p. 24) a "basic qualitative study" is identified as an alternative to more specific approaches such as ethnography or phenomenology. They highlight the effectiveness of this approach for exploring aspects of applied practice in various disciplines, particularly in the field of education, asserting that it enables the researcher to explore how people make sense of their lives and experiences with a focus upon meaning, understanding, and process. In a qualitative study that seeks to explore the perspectives and experiences of school middle leaders in the development of their leadership capacity, a basic qualitative study was thought to offer a flexible approach which, with appropriate data collection instruments, would successfully generate the data required to answer the research questions, and also conform to the constraints presented by a global pandemic.

3.4 Data Collection

Data for qualitative studies can be collected by a range of approaches including interview, observation, or document analysis (Brooks & Normore, 2015; Creswell & Creswell, 2022; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) with basic qualitative studies often using interviews and observation along with a purposeful participant sample (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I selected data collection instruments carefully to ensure that they were suitable for the purpose (Cohen et al., 2018) and that they could be used within the constraints of lockdown. The sections below provide a rationale for the data collection instruments that were used and an overview of the data collection process.

3.4.1 Research interviews

The research interview is identified as a flexible data collection tool which can be adopted in qualitative and quantitative research designs (Cohen et al., 2018; Marvasti & Tanner, 2020). It is defined by Brinkman and Kvale (2018, p. 9) as "a conversation that has structure and a purpose determined by one party – the interviewer. It is a professional interaction which goes beyond the spontaneous exchange of views as in everyday conversation". The research interview is therefore perceived to be more than a data collection instrument, it involves active listening and dialogue in which the interviewer and interviewee co-construct knowledge in their "inter-action" (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018, p. 2), and provides researchers with an opportunity to explore and understand the lived experience of individuals (Coleman, 2012). The research interview was therefore selected as an ideal means for exploring the perspectives and experiences of participants and also aligned well my personal qualities and professional skills.

A range of research interview approaches were considered, which varied along a continuum from structured to unstructured (Cohen et al., 2018). The pre-prepared, standardised, closed questions normally used in structured interviews lend themselves to quantifying and comparing across participants and for gathering data that is abundant in quantity rather than depth. They are less conducive to extracting specific details or exploring issues in the depth normally associated with qualitative studies (Brinkmann, 2020). By contrast, unstructured interviews are characterised by minimal researcher direction or control with

considerable flexibility and freedom of discussion (Cohen et al., 2018). Beginning with an initial question, dialogue thereafter is likely to be unstructured, but focussed upon content relevant to the research objectives (Coleman, 2012). With the potential to explore issues in significant detail and depth, unstructured interviews are useful in approaches such as ethnography as they allow aspects such as significant influences, experiences or circumstances to emerge during the interview (Brinkmann, 2020). The expectation that the researcher will avoid interrupting or asking further questions during an unstructured interview therefore positions them more as a listener rather than a significant contributor to what Brinkmann and Kvale (2018) describe as the co-construction of knowledge.

Consistent with an interpretive worldview, I sought to understand participant perspectives and experiences rather than quantify them. I also hoped to achieve some consistency in the areas that were explored with all participants during the interview. I therefore rejected structured and unstructured approaches in favour of semi-structured interviews. Commonly used in interpretive studies (Coleman, 2012), semi-structured interviews allow the interviewee to contribute to shaping the conversation (Bush, 2012), whilst also enabling the researcher to explore specific aspects consistently with all participants in more depth than when using other instruments such as structured interview, questionnaire, or survey. I therefore selected semi-structured interviews for their potential to yield in-depth information such as participant opinions, reasoning, and motivation (Drever, 1995) and to also allow me opportunities to clarify and explore further areas of interest as they arose in discussion such as values, opinions and behaviours (Cohen et al., 2018).

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) argue that a societal context in which many forms of digital communication have become normalised, presents the researcher with a number of additional possibilities for gathering qualitative data. Some scholars highlight the potential disadvantages of approaches where it is more difficult to observe non-verbal cues and body language during the interview (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018), however Lo-Iacono et al. (2016) argue that online interviews using a platform which facilitates visual and audio engagement addresses this concern by providing researchers with opportunities to observe the participants and their non-verbal cues. Furthermore, they argue that the well-established need to build rapport with a research participant can be fulfilled through online

communication prior to the interview (e.g. by email) and that online interviewing offers the potential to involve participants who would otherwise have found it difficult to take part (e.g. due to distance, or time constraints). An online semi-structured interview offered me the opportunity to gather data despite the national lockdown in which travel, and in-person engagement was not possible. To establish rapport and ensure that participants had the information needed to make an informed choice about their participation I engaged in email communication in advance of the interview. I shared the aims and purpose of the study, the potential commitment from the participant and requested their consent to take part. In many cases, participants already knew me from professional contexts such as a school in which I had worked or as lecturer at a university they had attended, so some professional rapport and trust already existed. The availability of online platforms for communication, the increasing societal confidence in using them and the willingness of participants to take part, made it possible to collect data despite the extraordinary circumstances. The use of the online platform also allowed the recording of interviews and the generation of a transcript, all of which was done with participant consent.

3.4.1.1 Interview approach

Drawing from scholarly recommendations I began planning for the interview by first ensuring that I had a clear understanding of the purpose, aims and value of the study and the rationale for using interview as a data collection instrument (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018; Cohen et al., 2018). These aspects had already been considered prior to applying for ethical approval. I designed the interview schedule (Appendix 3a) to ensure that participants would be invited to discuss areas that directly addressed the research aims and objectives for the study. As previously mentioned, participants had been provided with background information about the study. To set the stage for the interview and ensure that interviewees felt comfortable and willing to share their perspectives (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018) I provided an initial briefing. This involved beginning the interview with a welcome and introduction to the study. I also invited questions and assured the participant that they could ask further questions at any point in the interview. In accordance with good ethical practice, I re-assured participants about the confidentiality and anonymity of the interview and their option to withdraw at any time. The first two interview questions invited participants to briefly share information about themselves and their professional journey to middle

leadership. These questions were designed provide an opportunity for participants to relax into the interview(Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018). They also provided valuable information about professional experience, which emerged as central to one of the themes in this study.

Subsequent questions were aligned to specific research objectives, probing the beliefs, perspectives, and experiences of participants in their development of leadership capacity. Open-ended questions were used due to their flexibility and capacity to facilitate further prompting which allowed me to clarify or explore areas in more depth as required and also nurture rapport (Cohen et al., 2018). Care was also taken to ensure that questions were unambiguous to ensure that participants could focus quickly upon their answer (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Some potential prompts were considered in advance and included in the schedule. These were designed to provide me with reminders that could help achieve a consistent focus upon the research objectives throughout the interview as required. Given that interviews were conducted in the first few months of a national lockdown, participants drew mostly from the professional context that had existed prior to lockdown to inform their responses, the only exception being engagement with online resources such as a webinar or a massive open online course (MOOC).

In accordance with the good practice described by Brinkmann and Kvale (2018) the interview concluded with a debriefing in which the participant had the opportunity to ask further questions or make further observations. Thanks were then extended, there was discussion of next steps (the focus group discussion), and the participant was asked whether they would welcome a summary of key findings when the thesis was published.

The first interview served as a pilot interview offering an opportunity to rehearse my interview approach and to evaluate the effectiveness of the interview schedule (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The order of questions was slightly amended after the pilot interview to enhance the flow of discussion. Interviews were conducted using the Zoom platform which had the facility to record the interview and generate a transcript. Each transcript was reviewed, and a significant number of amendments were made to ensure that the transcript accurately captured the interview discussion.

3.4.2 Focus group discussion

The use of at least one other data collection instrument is thought to add depth, breadth and rigour to a qualitative enquiry and can offer opportunities to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the research approach and the findings (Cohen et al., 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The research design included a follow up focus group discussion to provide an opportunity to generate collective rather than individual perspectives (Cohen et al., 2018), provide a means of validating statements and views, and offer the potential for group correction of views that were incorrect or extreme (Flick, 2006). Comparing online with face-to-face focus group discussion, Woodyatt et al. (2016) found that online focus group discussion can generate similar quality, quantity, and content of data. Like the semi-structured interviews, the focus group discussion for this study was conducted using an online platform, the discussion was recorded and a transcript created. The transcript was subsequently reviewed, and a significant number of amendments were made to ensure accuracy.

Hennink (2014) argues that effective focus groups normally comprise of between five and ten participants and propose an optimum number of between six and eight. With this in mind I invited all participants to take part in the focus group discussion as this would allow a viable participant number and the capacity to accommodate some unavailability, last-minute cancellations and technological issues. In fact, there were no significant issues and all nine participants took part.

3.4.2.1 Focus group approach

Hennink (2014, p. 2) defines a focus group as interactive discussion, among a pre-defined group of people, with a clear focus, which has the aim of generating a range of views. Like semi-structured interviews, the introductory phase of the discussion sought to provide reminders of background information and put participants at their ease. Guiding principles for effective discussion were agreed (one speaker at a time, maintaining confidentiality, recognising all views as valid), participants were reminded that they could withdraw from the focus group at any time, and were assured that I would strive to complete the discussion within the agreed timeframe (and did so). We then introduced ourselves to the rest of the group.

A key role of the researcher in focus group discussion is to understand and explore the perspectives of the participants and to prompt their reflection and discussion (Cohen et al., 2018; Hennink, 2014). To ensure that I was able to successfully fulfil the facilitator role I prepared thoroughly. The schedule of questions and prompts (Appendix 3b) was prepared in advance to help provide a clear agenda and central focus for discussion (Cohen et al., 2018). I logged on to the online platform early to ensure that connections were working, recording was enabled, and transcripts would be generated. This helped to ensure that I was able to give my full attention to the focus group during discussion, and was ready to intervene appropriately to manage participant inputs (Cohen et al., 2018) e.g. to ensure a balance of perspectives by inviting contributions from participants who had not contributed, or prevent any over-disclosure that might cause embarrassment, emotional harm or threaten confidentiality (Smith, 1995). No interventions were required to address potential over-disclosure, embarrassment etc., although I did occasionally invite contributions from specific participants to ensure a balance of perspectives.

Discussion questions were effective in provoking participant reflection and discussion. The questions were closely aligned to the research objectives and therefore were almost identical to those in the interview schedule. This high degree of question alignment stimulated discussion content similar to what had been explored during the interviews and therefore helped facilitate the methodological aims of adding depth and breadth to the data, generating collective perspectives (Cohen et al. 2018) and adding rigour through group correction of views (Flick, 2006).

I ended discussion by thanking participants and reminding them of their ongoing right to withdraw consent to use their contribution at any time by contacting the researcher.

3.5 Participant sample

As previously mentioned, of the relatively few studies that explore the leadership learning needs of school middle leaders, most draw from a varied participant sample which includes teachers, senior leaders, and other stakeholders (Adey & Jones, 1998; Bassett, 2016; Glover et al., 1999; Gurr & Drysdale, 2013). These studies thus consider the learning needs of

middle leaders in relation to wider system expectations. Few studies explore the development of leadership capacity from the perspectives of middle leaders themselves. Furthermore, there appear to be no published empirical studies in this field from within the Scottish context. I hoped to address this research gap, and I therefore sought a purposive sample of practicing teachers from Scotland's schools with experience of middle leadership.

Consistent with my qualitative approach, I wanted to explore the perspectives and experiences of a range of individuals in depth rather than gather breadth of the data for quantitative analysis (Creswell, 2007). Volunteer middle leaders were recruited from university leadership programmes and my wider professional networks. I carefully considered the challenges to participation that might be presented by the global pandemic and exercised sensitivity when recruiting participants (this aspect is discussed more fully in section 3.7).

To explore a range of perspectives and experiences, I hoped to recruit middle leaders from different school contexts across Scotland at various stages of their leadership development and experience. The first six people to volunteer addressed these criteria, they also included five participants who had recently engaged in award-bearing leadership programmes. To gather a wider range of perspectives and experiences my ongoing participant recruitment actively sought individuals whose leadership learning was more varied and did not necessarily include an award-bearing programme in leadership. I continued to recruit and interview participants until data saturation, which was evident when no new insights or codes were generated from the interview (Given, 2008; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This occurred in the nineth interview.

All participants were invited to participate in both the semi-structured interview and the subsequent focus group discussion. I hoped that at least six participants would participate to allow me to conform to advice about optimum numbers for focus group discussion (Silverman, 2013; Hennink, 2014). As previously stated, the participation of all nine participants allowed the generation of collective perspectives (Cohen et al., 2018) and provided a means of validating statements and views (Flick, 2006). The differing views and

experiences shared by participants also helped to illuminate areas of tension or inconsistency within the education system in Scotland.

3.6 Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis seeks to understand, explain, and interpret the phenomenon being investigated and is likely to involve activities such as sense-making, describing, organising, noting patterns and themes. It is the process by which the data becomes findings, and transparency in describing the approach to analysis can help convince the reader of the validity of the study (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 643). Throughout this section I therefore seek to provide an accessible, transparent account of the approach taken to analyse the data.

The seminal work of Braun & Clarke (2006, p. 78; Clarke & Braun, 2013) highlights the flexibility of thematic analysis. It is not aligned to a specific methodological approach, offers the researcher a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns in data, and has the capacity to provide a "rich and detailed yet complex account" of the data. They define a clear six-step approach to the thematic analysis of qualitative data which includes the following key stages:

1. Familiarisation
2. Coding
3. Searching for themes
4. Reviewing themes
5. Defining and naming themes
6. Reporting.

Clarke and Braun (2013) argue that thematic analysis can be used as an analytical approach in a broad range of research studies and approaches, including those that seek to explore the experiences or understandings of individuals. It was therefore thought to be an appropriate tool for analysing the data generated in this study, which seeks to explore the experiences and perspectives of middle leaders. Furthermore, this framework for analysis is widely acknowledged as one of the most influential approaches to thematic analysis due to its clarity and accessibility (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017) and is recommended in reputable

research methods textbooks such as Bryman (2015). It thus offers a credible, clearly defined strategy for data analysis which is consistent with my worldview and the qualitative research objectives of the study. The ways in which the six phases of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) were enacted in the study are as follows.

In phase one (*familiarisation)* the automatically generated transcript was checked for accuracy against the video recording of the interview and focus group discussion. There were many inconsistencies in the transcripts, possibly due to the challenges of interpreting a range of local accents. This resulted in the need to make a large number of corrections. Listening to the video recordings and correcting the transcripts allowed me to become very familiar with the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This thorough engagement with the data provided an opportunity to begin initial analysis in which I became aware of content that was not relevant to the research questions and noted these as possibilities areas for data reduction (Cohen et al., 2018). I also began to tentatively consider possible codes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Significant reflections, ideas and possible next steps were noted in my *record of work* (a personal record to support my work on the thesis). Finally, I prepared the transcripts for the next phase of analysis by re-formatting the document to include line numbers and an increased margin in which I could make notes. I then printed the transcripts for the first phase of coding.

Phase two of the process (*coding*) involved reading the transcripts one sentence at a time and making pencil notes in the margin to identify potential codes. I used an inductive, open coding approach in which I allocated codes to significant units of meaning (Cohen et al., 2018), coding all content that might be relevant to the research objectives. The entire data set (all transcripts) were coded systematically in this way, with more than one code allocated at some points. I was keen to collate a comprehensive record of all significant data excerpts in one place, and to make use of the basic features of Excel in the analysis of the data, as described by Bree and Gallagher (2016). I thought that this would assist me in the organisation of the data and would support my identification of patterns and themes. To achieve this, I transferred all coded data excerpts to an Excel spreadsheet. Decisions about which data was sufficiently significant to the research questions to merit transfer to the

spreadsheet provided an opportunity for data reduction, another important step in preparing data for the next stage of analysis (Cohen et al., 2018).

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) highlight the importance of ensuring a system of effective identification of codes so that they can be accessed as needed during data analysis. Each data excerpt was accompanied by an identifier which comprised of the participant number and a line number (e.g. ML3,33 for interview data; or FGML3, 33 for focus group data). The use of the identifier allowed me to easily return to the excerpt in the source transcript as required e.g. to check the context or background of specific data extracts during analysis, to distinguish between interview and focus group discussion or help identify quotations to support discussion when reporting the findings.

I created columns on the spreadsheet for each proposed code, to which I added the relevant data extracts (I also used colour coding to identify themes at a later stage). This level of ongoing engagement allowed me to acquire greater familiarity with the data. This may not have been facilitated had I used a more sophisticated software package for qualitative data analysis and was the main reason that I chose to adopt a hands-on approach to analysing the data for this small-scale study. The use of a spreadsheet enabled me to easily organise the data by code or theme, and to use the search facility to search for key terms such as when double-checking all columns to ensure that I had captured all relevant data relating to a particular code. I began coding whilst still interviewing to allow me to become familiar with the data to be alert to the possibility of data saturation, and to stagger analysis and therefore make the task more manageable (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

In phase three (*searching for themes*) I scrutinised codes and data extracts and sometimes re-considered or re-grouped codes as I considered potential themes. I exploited features of the spreadsheet to assist with the analysis, for example by using data filtering to review code groups and explore how they might combine to form an overarching theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I also used thematic maps to visually capture overviews of various iterations of my developing ideas. The process of data analysis is defined by Merriam and Tisdell (2016, p. 195) as “dynamic and recursive”, and I found this to be the case. As discussed, I often retraced my steps to check the accuracy of my interpretations against the data and to

reconsider codes and potential themes. Indeed, throughout this process of analysis and reflection I initially identified five or six categories which I thought might be potential themes. Discussion with my supervisors made me question whether these categories accurately captured the data set. On further analysis, I refined these categories into two overarching themes, which I tentatively defined as *context* and *experience*. As a beginning researcher, I had initially resisted the theme of context, as I was aware of the well-established significance of context to leadership and hoped to identify a more unique perspective and contribution to knowledge. However, I recognised that research integrity and validity demanded the accurate capture of the essence of the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) and *context* was a central component of participants' experience, and it underpinned many of their perspectives. As I engaged with the data, I also began to appreciate that specific aspects within each theme contributed to knowledge, and I privileged the more unique findings over well-established knowledge when writing up the thesis.

Braun and Clarke (2006) assert that phase four of the analysis (*reviewing themes*) involves checking themes to ensure that they work. This process merged almost seamlessly with phase three, as I had already adopted an approach in which I checked and refined a range of initial ideas several times to eventually identify two potential overarching themes. During this process I reviewed codes and data extracts and had ascertained that these themes appeared to capture the essence of the data in a meaningful way that addressed the research objectives.

In what Braun and Clarke (2006) define as the second phase of review at stage four, I then examined the comprehensive list of codes along with their associated data extracts to check and confirm that the themes and the thematic map accurately conveyed the essence of the full data set. Finally, I began to organise the data within each theme into coherent categories, many of which became sub-themes.

Phase five (*defining and naming themes*) involved ongoing analysis during which I read the collated codes and data extracts associated with each theme, one category at a time to understand the "story" of each theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 92) and I was satisfied that the tentative theme names of *context* and *experience* accurately captured the essence of the

data in each theme. I then confirmed various sub-themes within each theme. These are presented visually in the thematic map in Chapter Four and inform the structure and focus of discussion throughout Chapters Four and Five. Throughout phases three, four and five I also recorded my observations, reflections, and possible next steps in my record of work. This allowed me to maintain a consistent focus throughout the process of analysis and to review any significant observations or reflections to consider whether any personal views or bias might have influenced my interpretation. At this stage I was also able to compare the views expressed in the interviews with those expressed in the focus group discussion. No new codes emerged from the focus group discussion. However, the discussion added depth and illuminated multiple participant perspectives in some aspects of the data, such as in the discussion of professional review and development (PRD).

In the sixth and final phase of analysis (*reporting*) I began drafting thesis chapters in which I sought to provide a coherent, logical, and interesting narrative to accurately reflect the story of each theme and convince the reader of its validity (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To help illustrate each theme, data extracts were selected and shared in the form of quotations. At specific points aspects of the data were also presented in tables due to the capacity of tables to succinctly present larger quantities of data, illustrate specific patterns in the data, allow analysis from multiple perspectives (Cloutier & Ravasi, 2021) and also to facilitate data reduction and the effective display of data (Cohen et al., 2018). Like many qualitative studies I devote a chapter to each theme in which I present and discuss findings together and I draw from relevant scholarly literature to inform the discussion. This approach was designed to allow me to describe the data, and also engage in critical, analytic discussion related to the research objectives (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Silverman (2021) argues that the methodology should provide a realistic account of the research process, it is therefore important that I acknowledge that most stages of analysis involved a period of trial, error and refinement. For example handwritten coding notes were erased and re-written several times until codes were finally decided, I experimented with multiple ways of organising data in the spreadsheet, before realising that, although cumbersome, including all data extracts on one page made it easier to explore patterns and themes in the data, and to search the full data set. It also took several attempts,

considerable reflection, and discussion with supervisors to identify themes that accurately represented the data gathered. I found the process of data analysis to be the one of the most cognitively intensive and time-consuming aspect of conducting the study, and the stage at which I relied most frequently upon the guidance of my academic supervisors. Yet I now realise that the experience has significantly enhanced my knowledge and skills in qualitative research.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

Ethics is crucial to data collection methods in all research (Cohen, 2017). Conducting research in an ethical manner is important to ensuring the welfare of participants, and the validity and reliability of a qualitative study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Flick (2006) argues that consideration of the ethical soundness of research usually has three aspects; the scientific quality of the research, the welfare of participants and respect for the dignity and rights of participants. These aspects align with my personal and professional values and are reflected in the ethical guidelines of the University Code of Practice (University of Strathclyde, 2017) and the Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (British Education Research Association, 2018) and are adhered to throughout this study. The ethical implications of this research study were considered thoroughly and an application for ethical approval was made and approved by the ethics committee of the university.

3.7.1 Ensuring the quality and integrity of the research

Steps taken to ensure the quality and integrity of the research are discussed throughout the thesis, particularly at key points such as when identifying relevant literature, conducting the research, and reporting the findings. The measures implemented to ensure the welfare of participants, and respect their dignity and rights are outlined in the sections that follow. To ensure the quality and integrity of the study the issue of validity was also considered as appropriate to this study and research approach (Cohen et al., 2018). Discussing research in the field of educational leadership, Bush (2012) highlights the importance of a thorough, transparent explanation of the methods used to conduct the study to ensuring that its findings and interpretations are accepted by the research and education communities. Approaches to evaluating the trustworthiness of qualitative research are the focus of

ongoing scholarly debate (Bryman, 2015; Cohen et al., 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Consistent with a constructionist belief that the social world has multiple realities, I sought to authentically represent my interpretation of the issue being investigated and also the perspectives of the participants. Throughout the study, I have been transparent in explaining my approach, aiming to also show my methodical, research-informed practice. In specific chapters of the thesis the steps taken to ensure academic rigour and research integrity are outlined, for example when discussing steps taken to conduct the literature search and collect and analyse data.

I incorporated methodological triangulation into the research design by using two data collection instruments. It is hoped that this will add depth, breadth and rigour to the study and offer opportunities to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the research approach and the findings (Cohen et al., 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The data collection instruments (see Appendices 3a and 3b) are closely aligned with the research questions for this study to generate data that is authentic, rich in detail and trustworthy (Cohen et al., 2018).

Research participants with varying levels of school middle leadership experience were recruited due to their relevance to the study. To ensure the trustworthiness and accuracy of the data I sought clarification from participants during interview and focus group discussion as required. I also used the video recording to check and correct inconsistencies in the automatically generated transcripts of the interview and focus group discussion to ensure that the transcripts authentically represent participant's perspectives.

The guidance provided by highly experienced academic supervisors helped identify potential pitfalls, and any additional aspects that might help to ensure that the study met accepted standards of academic rigour. In addition to academic supervisors, I also benefitted from the insights offered by other scholars when I shared my developing findings in papers at academic conferences, and from observations made by members of the Scottish education community when I presented findings at meetings of colleagues involved in professional learning. These insights and observations made me re-evaluate the significance of particular

findings and, in some cases, to accord a greater degree of discussion to a particular finding in the thesis.

3.7.2 Ensuring the welfare of participants

Qualitative enquiry has specific ethical issues resulting from engagement with the lives of individuals (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2018; Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). It was hoped that the benefits of the research to the teaching profession would outweigh any potential risk or harm (Cohen et al., 2017). All participants were adults, and it was not anticipated that any of the interview questions would cause distress.

However, to ensure the welfare of participants, I firstly considered the challenges presented by the global pandemic. I exercised a high degree of sensitivity in my engagement with individuals recognising that they may encounter difficulties with their health or experience additional challenges in their professional and personal lives at this time. This was also reflected in my approach to participant recruitment where I was ready to devote an extended period to seeking individuals who were willing and able to participate, or to replacing potential participants who had to withdraw from the study at short notice. I also planned not pursue any individuals who disengaged with my communications, but this situation did not arise. In my subsequent engagement with participants throughout the study, I provided regular reminders of the voluntary nature of participation and the option to withdraw at any point if required.

Given the online nature of data collection, I drew from the advice of Lo Iacono et al. (2016) and attempted to build a rapport with participants in advance through email communication e.g. to provide participant information allowing plenty of time for participants to read and to ask questions or decline to take part. To address any potential impact of the interview upon interviewees such as interview stress or a change in the self-understanding of the interviewees that can occur because of the interview (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2018) I included a preamble before the interview, an introductory question designed to put participants at ease and a de-brief at the end. Although it was not required, I was also ready to support, reassure and provide information regarding additional support available from student or professional associations and relevant charity or NHS information.

To ensure the privacy and anonymity of participants transcripts were pseudo-anonymised and stored securely. Zoom video recordings were securely destroyed immediately after the accurate transcript was created. Participant anonymity is maintained throughout this study and in any subsequent work. They are not identified at any point in this thesis or in any associated publications such a conference papers or journal articles. Where participant quotations are used, they are anonymised, and the sample size is sufficient in number and diversity to ensure that it would not be possible to identify the source of a quotation.

After data collection I sent a final email to participants thanking them for their engagement with the study. The replies I received from participants revealed that they had enjoyed and benefitted from opportunities to reflect upon their professional practice both individually in interviews and collaboratively in focus group discussion.

3.7.3 Respecting the dignity and rights of participants

The dignity and rights of participants were respected throughout the study by ensuring their informed consent, the secure gathering, storage, and use of their data and, as stated above, by providing regular reminders of the option to withdraw from the study at any time.

To ensure informed consent participant information sheets were developed and emailed to those who had expressed an interest in participation, with an invitation to ask me further questions before giving their consent. This helped to ensure that participants fully understood the (online) research procedures and their purposes, including any potential discomforts and benefits (Cohen et al., 2018). The master's students who participated in the study had been taught by me in the past, but this was not currently the case as they had moved to another phase of the programme. However, to address any potential power dynamic that can exist when working with students I included a reminder in my email communication and in the interview pre-amble that my research was related to my engagement with a doctoral programme, that the study sought to explore their professional perspectives and experience, was not related to their university progress in any way and that decisions to participate or withdraw from the research would have no impact upon the student-lecturer relationship or their future progress.

Due to the national lockdown, participants and the researcher were in their homes for interviews and (homes or schools) for the focus group discussion. To maintain privacy and to ensure that participants could speak freely, I conducted the online discussions from a private room. I provided participants with advice and instructions for maintaining the privacy of their surroundings during online discussions and they were reminded that the interview could be paused or stopped at any time if required.

To ensure data privacy and confidentiality when collecting data using an online platform hosted by a third party, I explored the privacy, data protection and security policies of the platform used (Zoom, 2020a, 2020b) and was assured of data security and GDPR compliance. I made full use of the security features offered by the platform; password protection ensured that participants had to identify themselves to enter the online discussions, and a waiting room feature ensured that I had control over whom I would admit to the interview or focus group. The opportunity to record the meeting and generate a transcript was only available to me as the meeting host. Consent forms (see Appendix 2c) addressed issues of confidentiality and a reminder about maintaining the confidentiality of the focus group discussion was re-iterated in the verbal preamble to begin the focus group session.

Data was stored securely in accordance with General Data Protection Regulations (Information Commissioner's Office, 2018) and university protocols (University of Strathclyde, 2017). Transcripts were corrected to ensure accuracy, pseudo-anonymised and stored on the secure cloud of the university. The code key was stored in a Word File in the separate secure location of the researcher's password protected laptop. As previously stated, video recordings were securely destroyed after the accurate transcript was created.

Given the demands of their professional role and the additional challenges presented by the pandemic, I ensured that time spent with participants was maximised by ensuring a high level of advanced preparation and organisation for data collection events. At the end of the study a summary of the research findings will be available to participants, and I hope that participants will benefit from a shared sense of achievement in the creation of new knowledge arising from the study.

3.8 Conclusion

This qualitative, empirical study therefore examines the leadership learning of secondary school middle leaders. It seeks to build upon previous studies of middle leadership development by exploring the experiences and perspectives of middle leaders working within the unique Scottish context.

Participants had a varied range of middle leadership roles and responsibilities and were drawn from a number of local authorities across central Scotland. Experience of teaching and school middle leadership differed greatly across participants, from those beginning in middle leadership to others who were more established and experienced in the role. Where appropriate, participants also reflected upon experiences at specific stages of their career, for example to describe activities that they undertook when aspiring to a role. Unlike similar studies such as Adey and Jones (1998) and Irvine and Brundrett (2016), which explore the experiences and challenges of those beginning in middle leadership, this participant sample provided an opportunity to explore the leadership learning of middle leaders with varied levels of teaching and leadership experience.

Data was gathered using semi-structured interviews and a focus group discussion, allowing the exploration of participants' experiences and perspectives in some depth. Consistent with my personal and professional values, care was taken to ensure ethical practice throughout the study in accordance with established ethical guidelines (British Education Research Association, 2018; University of Strathclyde, 2017). This is reflected in the actions taken to ensure the quality and integrity of the research and, importantly, to protect participants' welfare, dignity and rights. Data was gathered in the early months of a pandemic-related lockdown. The potential challenges this could present for participants were also considered and care was taken to ensure their wellbeing, and to use data collection tolls that conformed to lockdown-related local and national guidelines.

Thematic analysis of the data facilitated the identification of themes, patterns and key findings in the data and was therefore an effective vehicle for analysing the experiences and perspectives of school middle leaders which are presented and discussed in the following chapters.

Chapter 4: Context

Analysis and Discussion of Findings: Theme 1

4.1 Chapter Overview

As previously discussed, this qualitative study aims to explore the experiences and perspectives of middle leaders in Scotland regarding their development of middle leadership capacity. In doing so, the study seeks to gain insights into the development needs of middle leaders and the opportunities for middle leadership development in Scotland.

Chapters 4 and 5 present and discuss findings identified through the process of thematic analysis outlined in Chapter 3. As the first of the analysis and discussion chapters, this chapter introduces themes and subthemes and presents a thematic map to offer a visual overview of the relationships between them. Each theme is then explored in individual chapters. Key findings are presented, drawing from data to illustrate and substantiate the assertions made. The significance of the findings is considered and discussed within the context of relevant scholarly literature. A brief summary is provided at the end of each subtheme which builds towards a comprehensive conclusion at the end of the chapter.

Eldh et al. (2020) observe that participant quotations can be used in qualitative research to illustrate specific findings. Lingard and Watling (2021) discuss the role of quotations in illustrating key aspects and patterns in data. They observe that ellipses and short quotations embedded within the narrative can help focus upon the most salient aspects of the data. Throughout chapters 4 and 5 specific extracts from data have been purposefully selected for their capacity to illustrate the subtheme, they are presented as quotations in a range of ways. At some points ellipses are used or short quotations are embedded within the narrative to ensure a succinct focus upon relevant data. Care is taken when shortening participant comments to preserve the meaning ascribed by the participant and therefore the integrity of the data.

The organisation of data into tables can facilitate analysis from multiple perspectives and bring order to large amounts of data (Cloutier & Ravasi, 2021). Tables are used at specific

points in Chapters 4 and 5 to organise and succinctly present some of the analysed data for subsequent discussion. Some of the tables also aim to facilitate comparison and the identification of patterns in the data.

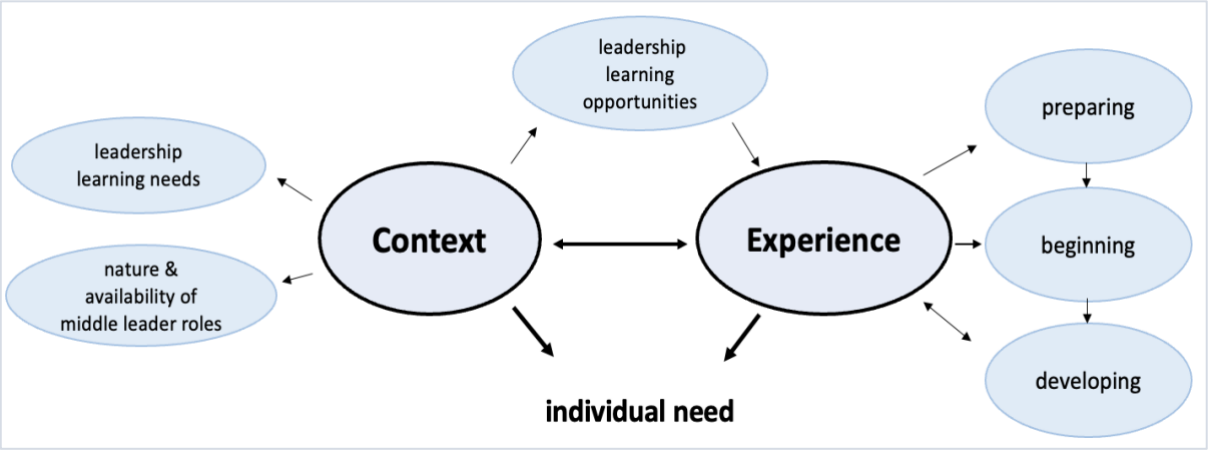
4.2 Theme and Sub-themes

As discussed in Chapter 3, data for the study were drawn from semi-structured interviews and a focus group discussion (involving all participants) which provided an opportunity to add breadth, and depth and thereby enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the study (Cohen et al., 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Transcripts were analysed using a thematic analysis approach as described by Braun & Clarke (2006), with the aim of providing a rich description of the key themes from the data.

The findings of the study confirm and build upon the premise that the development needs of middle leaders are unique to each individual (Gurr & Drysdale, 2013; Irvine & Brundrett, 2019). They reveal that the leadership learning and development of middle leaders draws from a range of experiences, and that leadership learning needs, and the opportunities available to learn, are influenced by the context in which they work. Thus, *context* and *experience* are identified as two overarching themes for the study. The theme of *context* is explored throughout this chapter and the theme of *experience* is explored in Chapter 5.

Braun and Clarke (2006) assert that a thematic map can provide a useful illustration of the inter-relationships between the themes and subthemes identified during the process of analysis. The thematic map illustrated in Figure 4a is designed to provide an overview of the themes and subthemes in this study and their relationships.

Figure 4a: The development of middle leadership capacity



4.3 Introduction to theme 1: Context

This theme suggests that school contexts are embedded within a wider context in which local, national, and international agendas can influence middle leadership practice (Forde et al., 2018). Findings suggest that many of the leadership learning needs of middle leaders and the opportunities to address these needs are experiential, as such they are explored in theme two (Chapter 5). Discussion throughout this theme explores a range of findings which reveal the impact of context upon the development of middle leadership capacity in Scotland's secondary schools. Three sub-themes were identified within the theme of *context:*

1. *The nature and availability of middle leader roles*

   Building upon the premise that professional learning needs result from any gaps between the requirements of the post and the knowledge and skills of the individual, the first subtheme explores the nature and availability of middle leader roles in Scotland's secondary schools, identifying the influence of local and national contexts. Drawing from data and relevant policy, the influence of the wider context upon the nature of middle leadership in Scotland's schools is explored. Findings discussed in this subtheme reveal a hierarchy of middle leader roles in which some posts provide leadership preparation for other posts with larger remits. This sub-theme is explored first due to its capacity to inform further discussion.
2. *The leadership learning needs of middle leaders*

The second subtheme explores the learning needs of middle leaders and the influence of specific aspects of context upon the knowledge and skills required by middle leaders in Scotland's secondary schools.

3. *Leadership learning opportunities*

   This sub-theme focusses upon the perspectives and experiences of participants regarding the learning opportunities available to them in Scotland to develop their middle leadership knowledge and skills. It draws from relevant literature to consider the impact of these opportunities upon practice, the ways in which context can influence access to these opportunities, and the effectiveness of the learning experiences.

4.4 Subtheme 1: The nature and availability of middle leader roles in Scotland

This discussion of relevant findings relating to the nature and availability of middle leader roles in Scotland also draws from policy and literature. It thus reveals the influence of the national context in the form of policy and policy-influenced funding (and initiatives) upon middle leadership roles. Table 4a lists the posts held by participants at the time of interview, revealing a range of middle leadership posts which varied greatly in nature and level of responsibility. It should be noted that the participant sample for this study does not reflect all the middle leadership posts that exist in secondary schools across Scotland.

Table 4a: Participants' middle leader roles

Participant	Role
ML1	Assistant faculty head (Broad General Curriculum) (Point 1 PT)
ML2	Principal teacher of raising attainment (Point 1 PT)
ML3	Principal teacher (subject and a whole school remit)
ML4	Principal teacher (single subject plus faculty responsibility for S1&2)
ML5	Faculty head
ML6	Faculty head
ML7	Principal teacher (single subject department)
ML8	Principal teacher (faculty)
ML9	Principal teacher (Support for Learning)

Table 4a illustrates how various forms of terminology are used to describe middle leader roles in schools across Scotland. Interview discussion revealed how the roles listed in Table 4a differed in terms of their remit and level of responsibility. Where individuals led a faculty or a single subject, they were usually responsible for learning, teaching, and the line management of staff. Faculty heads (ML5 and ML6) were responsible for these aspects across several discreet subjects (such as sciences or creative arts), principal teachers of a single subject led one subject area, sometimes with some additional responsibilities (such as ML3 and ML4).

Faculty head roles, reflect one of several approaches in which middle leader roles in Scotland's secondary schools have evolved beyond the more traditional conceptions of department head that were previously central to school management structures. It is hoped that the faculty approach can enable skilled and able teachers to focus upon their teaching role (Anderson & Nixon, 2010) and help address challenges associated with single-subject leadership models, such as subject isolation and disparities that can arise between large and small departments (Forde et al., 2018, p. 3). Subsuming the leadership of several subjects into the role of one middle leader could deliver savings in school staffing budgets at a time when schools and local authorities are facing a challenging economic climate. It also provides an opportunity to distribute the leadership of specific school priorities to a middle

leader (see Table 4a, ML3). However, the implementation of faculty structures inevitably reduces the number of subject leader roles available and creates some middle leader (faculty head) posts with large, wide-ranging areas of responsibility. The 'assistant faculty head' role (see Table 4a, ML1) suggests that, in some cases, the large remit associated with a faculty head role can also result in the creation of an entry-level middle leader post to support the work of the faculty head in leading and managing the faculty.

The role of Principal Teacher of Support for Learning was more pastoral in nature with a whole-school remit for leading the provision of support for pupils with additional support needs. Their remit included responsibilities for the line management of teaching and support staff, working collaboratively with staff across the school, with pupils and parents and with external agencies such as psychological services.

The diverse range of middle leader roles outlined in Table 4a supports assertions (De Nobile, 2018; Lipscombe et al., 2021) that middle leadership in schools is currently manifest in a wide range of roles which might include leading a team, leading in areas such as subject, curriculum, pedagogy or pastoral care or leading a whole-school priority. Data in Table 4a reveals that, within Scottish secondary schools, there is a co-existence of a varied range of middle leader posts and remits with differing levels of responsibility and role titles. It also surfaces a myriad of management structures across these schools. This diverse landscape of middle leader provision could be due to the impact of a policy approach in which school management in Scotland is devolved to schools (Scottish Government, 2019), with most decisions about staffing and the management structures within schools devolved to head teachers. This approach inevitably influences the number and nature of middle leader posts available within secondary schools. Reporting upon studies of middle leadership conducted in Australia, Gurr and Drysdale (2013) found that the decisions of school leaders regarding the organisational structure, systems and culture of the school also influence the role and the potential impact of middle leaders. This finding helps illuminate ways in which Scottish policy and, by extension, head teachers influence the number, nature and responsibilities associated with middle leader roles in Scotland's secondary schools.

4.4.1 A hierarchy of middle leader roles

In addition to devolved school management, the "McCrone Agreement" (Scottish Executive Education Department, 2001) impacted significantly upon the nature and availability of middle leader posts. The agreement led to the introduction of principal teacher posts in primary schools, where they previously had not existed, and a simplified school management structure in which some middle leader posts such as 'assistant principal teacher' and 'senior teacher' were removed from the management hierarchy.

Two participants (ML9 and ML3) had gained initial experience of middle leadership in assistant principal teacher and senior teacher roles before gaining a subject or faculty head post. When asked about their journey to middle leadership, ML9 listed their voluntary pupil mentor role and assistant principal teacher post as significant steps in their leadership journey. ML3 described how a senior teacher role, initially undertaken on a temporary ('acting') basis, had allowed them to confront some of the responsibilities of middle leadership, and to develop through fulfilling the role and collaborating with colleagues:

> "Starting as an acting senior teacher … the kind of wider school issues, I found that initially quite a daunting thing. But over the years, I think, just the experience of working with different colleagues, I found it easier" (ML3).

The significance of learning from experience is explored further in Chapter 5. However, the removal of entry-level posts such as senior teacher and assistant principal teacher reduced opportunities for aspiring middle leaders to gain leadership experience in entry level roles as mentioned by ML3. With limited experiential opportunities there could be particular challenges in moving from a class teacher role to a middle leader role such as faculty head with it's a considerable level and range of responsibility. It is therefore interesting to find data which reveals the re-emergence of entry level middle leader posts. Table 4a includes two posts which were colloquially referred to by participants as a "point 1 PT post" as they have the lowest level of middle leader responsibility (point 1) and are consequently paid at the lowest level on the national middle leader pay scale. The following quotation by ML1 illustrates how a point 1 PT post provided experience of curriculum leadership, but did not include the line management of staff:

> "… If it's to do with the curriculum, if it's to do with development, if it's to do with, you know, lessons, then I will deal [with it] … However, if the staff for whatever reason, don't do what I ask them to do and they're not responding to me, again that then becomes my line managers responsibility" (ML1).

Some participants viewed these entry level posts as leadership preparation for a middle leader role with a greater level of responsibility. ML2 viewed entry level roles as a strategic step on the path to a middle leader role with a larger remit:

> "I was aspiring to go into a point 1 PT post… in my head it was always a steppingstone. You get your, your teaching post and then a point 1 PT post and then from a point 1 PT post, the possibility of leading a department. A principal teacher curriculum was a career trajectory that I envisaged for myself" (ML2).

Participants such as ML6 and ML8 held point 1 PT posts prior to attaining their faculty head roles. ML6 found that this entry level role positioned them for well for assuming a faculty head role when the opportunity arose:

> "I was appointed principal teacher of literacy (point 1 PT post) … the substantive post holder of the faculty head role was absent for quite some time, at which point I was then promoted again to acting faculty head" (ML6)

In addition to providing leadership experience, viewing some posts as a "steppingstone" or preparation for another post suggests the existence of a hierarchy of middle leadership roles within the Scottish secondary school system. The roles of ML1 and ML2 (see Table 4a) are designed to support the work of another middle leader with greater levels of responsibility (such as a faculty head) or the delivery of a whole-school improvement priority. Each post has limited or no line management responsibilities, and some posts (such as that of ML2) may exist for a specified time only. The existence of these entry-level roles appears to represent a continuation (or re-introduction) of some of the middle leader roles that existed before the McCrone Agreement (Scottish Executive Education Department, 2001), albeit

with slightly different names. The remits associated with posts such as *assistant faculty head* (Table 4a) closely resemble the remit of many *assistant principal teacher* (APT) posts, which previously existed in some large secondary school departments. Similarly, the whole-school remit of the *principal teacher of raising attainment* (Table 4a) closely resembles the remit of some *senior teacher* roles that previously existed.

The impact of headteachers in shaping the middle leadership landscape supports the assertions of Gurr and Drysdale (2013) who argue that the roles and responsibilities of middle leaders vary according to context and are determined by more senior leaders. It also suggests that, despite policy ambitions to streamline middle leadership posts in secondary schools, head teachers have used devolved school management, to enhance middle leadership provision and, potentially, to distribute leadership responsibilities across a wider range of individuals. In doing so, they offer entry level middle leader posts that can potentially provide leadership learning experiences for aspiring middle leaders or faculty heads. The fixed term nature of some point 1 PT posts also allows schools to ensure that they can adapt the roles and responsibilities of middle leaders to suit changing school priorities. Indeed, one area which merits further research (beyond the scope of this study) might be the factors that inform head teachers' construction of middle leader roles and responsibilities within secondary schools.

4.4.2 Summary

Findings within this subtheme reveal ways in which the national policy context has resulted in an increasingly diverse range of middle leader roles and responsibilities in Scottish secondary schools, which extend far beyond traditional conceptions of the middle leader as a head of department. However, a transition from classroom teacher to some of the larger middle leader posts (such as faculty head), would be a significant leap in terms of the demands and responsibilities of such a role. Those with limited leadership experience understand that posts such as faculty head could be potentially hard for them to attain or challenging to perform. Thus, the findings of this study reveal that a hierarchy of middle leadership roles has re-emerged in which posts with lower levels of responsibility (such as point 1 PT post) are viewed as a form of leadership preparation for middle leader posts with a significantly larger remit.

4.5 Subtheme 2: The leadership learning needs of middle leaders

In a study that seeks to explore the perspectives of middle leaders regarding their leadership learning needs, an introductory interview question invited participants to identify key areas of personal and professional development for middle leadership. This offered an insight into the knowledge and skills that participants believed were required to fulfil a middle leader role effectively. The knowledge and skills required for middle leadership have been addressed in several research papers and the findings of this study confirm those of many previous studies. These findings are explored briefly to begin the section below. Discussion then focusses more closely upon two key findings that directly relate to the theme of context and their influence upon the leadership learning needs of middle leaders; the impact of the national context and of a constantly changing context which is focussed upon improvement.

4.5.1 The knowledge and skills required for middle leadership

Data regarding the leadership learning needs of middle leaders was analysed and synthesised and eight overlapping categories of the knowledge and skills required for middle leadership in Scotland were identified. These categories are presented in Figure 4b.

Figure 4b: The leadership learning needs of middle leaders in Scotland

(Source: KM Kerrigan)

The findings summarised in Figure 4b support those of previous studies. The need for pedagogical expertise along with knowledge and skills in management and leadership has been argued for many years and is evident in the work of scholars such as Adey (2000), Adey and Jones (1998), Brown et al. (2002) and Glover et al. (1998). Scholars such as Edwards-Groves et al. (2016) Fluckiger et al. (2015), Glover et al. (1998) and Weller (2001) highlight the communication and intrapersonal skills that middle leaders require to lead others and motivate and inspire teams. The challenges of doing so when working within that team are identified by Bennett et al. (2003; 2007). The need for knowledge and understanding of the specific requirements of the role, the school, and its wider context such as pupils, staff, local protocols, policies are identified by De Nobile (2018) and Fluckiger et al. (2015). In one of the five key roles of middle leaders identified by De Nobile (2018, p. 6), the term "management of self" is used to define a requirement to manage the personal and professional demands of the role and alludes to the need for professional development in aspects such as subject, pedagogy and leadership. Given that many studies mentioned throughout this paragraph were conducted in America, Australia or England, these findings demonstrate some alignment in the leadership learning needs identified by middle leaders working within the Scottish context with those identified in other countries.

4.5.2 The influence of the national context

Sections 4.5.2 and 4.5.3 explore dimensions of the knowledge and skills required for middle leadership that are more unique to this study.

Findings of this study reveal that the perceived personal and professional development needs expressed by middle leaders are influenced, to a large extent, by the national context in which they work. Professional registration with the General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTCS) for those teaching in Scottish state schools is a legal requirement (Legislation.gov.uk, 2011). Attainment of professional standards is required to enter the profession and must be upheld to maintain professional registration. Maintaining professional registration involves participation in an annual process of professional review and development (PRD) which comprises of self-evaluation against a relevant professional standard and discussion of areas of strength and professional development with a line manager in a PRD meeting. Subsequent engagement in relevant professional learning to address identified areas for

development is required, along with an ongoing commitment to “career long professional learning” and a five-yearly process of professional update in which the teacher must engage with the GTCS to demonstrate and verify that they have engaged in these activities (General Teaching Council Scotland, 2024). Discussion in section 4.6.1.5 illustrates the active involvement of participants in this process both individually, and as middle leaders leading the PRD of others.

Professional standards in leadership seek to “provide aspirational and developmental frameworks for teachers in/or considering leadership roles” (General Teaching Council Scotland, 2021b, p. 3) and standards such as The Standard for Middle Leadership (General Teaching Council Scotland, 2021b) are therefore used at least annually to inform the PRD process of middle leaders and those aspiring to the role. Key components of the Standard for Middle Leadership include a requirement for professional knowledge and understanding of curriculum, pedagogy, leadership, strategic vision and of the professional responsibilities specific to the role and context. It is expected that middle leaders will also demonstrate professional skills and abilities in the leadership of each of these areas, and in and others such as the management of resources and modelling good practice and leading others in professional learning and self-evaluation. Figure 4b reveals that the middle leadership knowledge and skills identified by participants align closely with the areas outlined in the The Standard for Middle Leadership (General Teaching Council Scotland, 2021b). In a context in which professional standards play a vital role in maintaining mandatory professional registration, the alignment of participants’ perspectives with the expectations outlined in professional standards is unsurprising. As such, this finding reveals one of the means by which the knowledge, skills and leadership development needs of middle leaders are shaped by the national context.

4.5.3 A constantly changing context focussed upon ongoing improvement

Current statutory guidance such as the Standards in Scotland’s Schools Act, 2000, places a responsibility upon schools to contribute to the attainment of national improvement priorities and to engage in an ongoing cycle of identifying and attaining school improvement targets. ML2, ML3, ML6 and ML8 all alluded to their leadership of ongoing change for improvement when discussing potential areas for leadership learning and aspects of their

role. Leadership of change for improvement was embedded in comments by ML3 who spoke of “trying to wrestle with the big changes that are coming in and re-assuring staff that we are doing the right things”, thus revealing their approach to anticipating change and their readiness to reassure and support staff with the process of change. When discussing the benefits of engaging in an award-bearing leadership programme ML8 stated, “having the tools to generate change in a sustained way, while then undertaking the acting [faculty head] position was totally transformative”, this suggests a perception that initiating and driving change is central to their middle leader role.

The need for professional development to support aspects of leading change for improvement was identified by ML6 who highlighted the need for guidance and training to support effective improvement planning “… you are being entrusted with a school improvement plan, and you're expected to just know what that is …”. Data literacy (including the use of school data management systems such as SEEMIS) was identified as an area for middle leader development, particularly for the purposes of monitoring pupil progress and evaluating the impact of change. Discussing their responsibility for monitoring pupil progress, ML2 identified an increasing need for skills that enabled them to use data to monitor and evaluate pupil progress and attainment:

> “… how to use Microsoft Excel and data analysis … and the same goes for [data management] systems in school like SEEMIS. I think a lot of people who go into promoted posts need to know how to operate SEEMIS, but there is little training goes into that”. (ML2)

Adopting an alternative perspective, ML6 provides an example of how pupil attainment data is used to monitor and evaluate faculty/departmental improvement.

> “… [the Head teacher] used to have these charts up on his wall about attainment … he pointed to his board and he said ‘look at this’, and it was the attainment in [a faculty] and it had been red for 10 years or whatever, and then there was an amber the year that I started and then it was green, green, green, and he just said that's improvement, keep doing it.” (ML6)

The use of pupil attainment data to monitor improvement helps make sense of the views of ML2 who identifies the importance of that data literacy to their leadership practice and supports the assertions of scholars such as Fluckiger et al. (2015) who argue the need for middle leaders to be equipped with data literacy skills. The quotation from ML6 helps to illustrate the increased accountability pressures upon middle leaders which add to the complexity of their role (Lipscombe et al., 2021). Therefore, within this context of increasing accountability, knowledge and skills in data gathering and analysis could help middle leaders monitor and evaluate improvements and generate evidence of improvements which can be reported to stakeholders and others as required.

The active engagement of ML2, ML3, ML6 and ML8 in work to deliver ongoing improvement illustrates how the practice and potential impact of middle leadership has evolved significantly since the publication of earlier studies such as Brown et al. (2002, p. 40) who, when exploring the development needs of department heads, argued the "need to raise their awareness of their essential role in whole-school development planning". This finding also supports more recent assertions (Bush, 2023, 2024; Leithwood, 2016) that departmental leaders rather than school leaders are potentially the most effective drivers of change for improvement in schools due to their proximity to learning and teaching which can support the effective identification of appropriate areas for improvement, their pedagogical expertise which can generate respect from colleagues and help build support for the change, and also their awareness of the prevailing departmental culture and the extent to which it is likely to support or hinder change.

4.5.4 Summary

Discussion throughout this subtheme therefore illustrates the influence of legislative and policy contexts upon the knowledge and skills required for middle leadership in Scotland's secondary schools. Findings relating to participants' perspectives of the knowledge and skills required for middle leadership reveal alignment with Scotland's Standard for Middle Leadership (General Teaching Council Scotland, 2021b) and with those identified in previous research studies. Within a wider culture of ongoing improvement, findings also reveal that delivering improvement is central to the work of middle leaders. A constantly changing context inevitably influences the knowledge and skills required by middle leaders and fuels a

need for ongoing relevant, professional learning and development. For school and system-level leaders it underscores the need to ensure meaningful and relevant opportunities for middle leader learning to ensure that they can successfully deliver in this important and constantly evolving aspect of their role.

4.6 Subtheme 3: Opportunities for leadership learning

Having explored the nature and availability of middle leadership posts in Scotland and the leadership learning needs of middle leaders, this subtheme explores the opportunities available to develop middle leadership capacities. Firstly, a range of opportunities which arose within the school context are explored. Discussion will then focus upon several opportunities which occurred beyond the school context. The learning opportunities that were identified by participants as significant to their middle leadership learning are summarised in Table 4b.

Table 4b: Leadership learning opportunities

Participant	**ML1**	**ML2**	**ML3**	**ML4**	**ML5**	**ML6**	**ML7**	**ML8**	**ML9**
Middle Leadership Experience (years)	**1.5**	**1.5**	**14**	**9**	**6**	**6**	**21**	**3**	**6**
Leadership development activities undertaken									
In-school opportunities									
Assuming leadership responsibility on a temporary basis ("acting")			✓	✓✓	✓	✓✓	✓	✓	
Assuming a leadership responsibility on a voluntary basis, such as leading a school initiative or a curricular area	✓	✓		✓	- ✓			✓	✓
Informal coaching support		✓							
Informal mentoring support		✓							✓
Professional reading		✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	
Participating in colleague-led sessions- on curriculum or pedagogy		✓							
Delivering colleague-led sessions- on curriculum or pedagogy		✓							
In-school leadership learning delivered by colleagues and/or external provider	✓						✓	✓	✓
Learning from other leaders									
Advice and support from school leaders (middle or senior leaders)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
Learning from the leadership practice of role models	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓
Learning by collaborating with leaders on specific tasks	✓			✓		✓			
Peer support - networking with other middle leaders						✓	✓		
Local authority opportunities									
Training in middle leadership		✓			✓	✓			
Attending local authority meetings of subject-specialist middle leaders	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Helping co-ordinate local authority meetings of subject-specialist middle leaders					✓				
Role-specific training e.g. aspects of curriculum	✓		✓	✓✓	✓		✓		✓
Award-bearing programmes									
Master's level award in leadership (PgCert, dip or degree)	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	
Master's level award in other fields (PgCert, dip or degree)			✓						✓
National opportunities									
Engagement with a professional association (such as the Institute of Physics)	✓						✓		
Attending SQA information events	✓			✓			✓		
Training and experience in marking for the SQA	✓			✓			✓		
Training and experience in a leadership role with SQA	✓								
Experience in a leadership role with SQA – leading teams of markers and presenting locally and nationally in relation to SQA assessment	✓								
The Scottish College for Educational Leadership - engagement with online learning in middle leadership and attending a training event	✓								
Other: hearing an inspirational speaker			✓						
Other: Residential leadership programme									
Other: MOOC, Twitter	✓				✓				
✓ as aspiring DHT ✓ for a middle leader role									

The range of learning opportunities outlined in Table 4b suggest that the leadership learning of middle leaders occurs in a range of ways. The activities undertaken show that participants learned from experiences of leading, from engaging with other leaders, participating in activities that expanded their thinking such as courses or university accredited programmes in leadership and other relevant fields, professional reading, or hearing an inspirational speaker. These approaches broadly align with the significant approaches to leadership development identified from previous studies discussed in Chapter 2 and therefore suggest that the approaches identified as helpful in developing school middle leader capacity in Scotland appear to be consistent with established theories of professional and leader development.

4.6.1 Leadership learning within the school context

The range of school-based learning opportunities outlined in Table 4b, positions the school context as a rich site of leadership learning. Discussion throughout section 4.6.1 addresses these in-school opportunities for leadership learning.

4.6.1.1 Voluntary leadership activity

The term "voluntary" is used to describe activities that were additional to the teacher's agreed workload and were undertaken on a non-contractual basis, such as volunteering or agreeing to lead a school activity or an aspect of curriculum. Table 4b illustrates that those who had attained their middle leader post within the last decade had engaged in voluntary leadership activities, whereas participants who were significantly more experienced such as ML3 and ML7 had engaged formally in temporary (or "acting") roles prior to attaining their substantive post. This finding exemplifies aspects of distributed leadership (Gronn, 2002; Harris, 2013; Spillane et al., 2004) and could suggest that the practice of inviting teachers to embrace voluntary leadership roles has become more established within the last decade or so, possibly due to factors such as a reduction in permanent middle leader roles and a consequent reduction in opportunities to fulfil such a role on a temporary basis. It could also reflect an enhanced understanding of the potential benefits of work-based leadership learning as described by Reeves et al.(2002) or an attempt to distribute an increasing

number of management and leadership responsibilities (Gurr & Drysdale, 2013; Lipscombe et al., 2021; Tang et al., 2022) among a wider pool of colleagues, some of whom are not in substantive posts. ML2 outlined the circumstances in which voluntary leadership opportunities might arise: "… point 1 PTs had quite big remits in the school, and they would distribute some of those, or delegate some of those responsibilities to staff who were seeking leadership opportunities". The perception that point 1 PTs have "big remits" is particularly interesting, given that these posts are at the lowest levels of responsibility, with the lowest levels of pay.

The benefits of engaging in voluntary activity were observed by ML9 and ML5:

> "… being given the opportunity to do voluntary roles is helpful as well … that actually gave me experience, in how to work with people and how to, really how to lead, I suppose, but on a smaller scale than you would in a full role" (ML9).

ML5 gained experience through working with the faculty head to lead the introduction of a new subject to the faculty, a subject in which the faculty head was not a specialist:

> "…you never get a chance to set up your own department anymore and that was quite unique ... I was only there for two years before I went for the promoted post, but it really held me in good stead having watched that really experienced faculty head …" (ML5).

With supervision and guidance from the faculty-head, ML5 describes how the experience of establishing the provision a new subject and leading its ongoing delivery helped support their promotion to a substantive middle leader post within two years. McCauley et al. (2010, p. 10) cite "starting-from-scratch" activities such as this as an experience likely provide the challenge required to stimulate leader learning and growth. They propose that building from scratch, often without structure or previous experience to draw from, can force individuals to abandon previously held assumptions and "learn as they go". For those beginning their leadership journey such as ML5, these new leadership experiences involve managing situations that are new to them. Within this context, it is argued that additional support (e.g.

coaching, mentoring) can help the individual to cope with challenge and develop and learn from the experience (Irvine & Brundrett, 2019; McCauley et al., 2010).

Lipscombe et al. (2021) highlight the potential overlap between definitions of teacher and middle leadership. The contested concept of teacher leadership is broadly defined as "teachers who maintain … classroom-based teaching responsibilities, while also taking on leadership responsibilities outside of the classroom" (Wenner & Campbell, 2017, p. 140). Teacher leadership was not mentioned by any participant during interview, possibly because interview questions focussed upon middle leadership. However, Table 4b reveals a potential overlap between activities undertaken by those preparing for middle leadership and those in which a "teacher leader" might engage such as leading a whole school initiative or delivering a colleague-led staff development session. The participant comments above, particularly "seeking leadership opportunities" (ML2) and "I was only there for two years before I went for the promoted post" (ML5) indicate that, for those aspiring to middle leadership, the focus of these voluntary leadership activities was the acquisition of experience that would ultimately support career progression to middle leadership rather than to develop as a classroom teacher or teacher leader.

Access to opportunities to engage in voluntary leadership activity depended upon specific features of the school context such as cultures, protocols, and actions of senior leaders. There was no consistency of practice across different school contexts. In some cases, opportunities were shared with all staff: "…the email that says, 'would you like to be involved' goes out to everybody" (ML4). Whereas in other cases, a more selective system existed: "there are certain people who are invited, rather than … opening this up to everyone and seeing who else would like to do it" (ML7). ML6 spoke of being excluded from participating in an extended leadership team, an opportunity which appeared to be available to other middle leaders with similar levels of experience: "…we had a head teacher, and I think we jarred a bit. So, I wasn't allowed on it [extended leadership team]. So it absolutely comes down to the relationship that we had…" (ML6). The fact that this participant became part of the extended leadership team a short time later when a new head teacher was appointed, appears to support their assertion that, in this context, access to a leadership learning opportunity depended upon their relationship with the head teacher. If access to

relevant leadership experience, courses or programmes is largely informal and at the discretion of others, then features of context, such as the decisions of key individuals, can influence whether or not someone will gain the experience needed to achieve a middle leader role or progress from it to a senior leader role.

Time to engage in leadership learning experiences is discussed more fully in another section of the thesis. However at this stage it is helpful to note that voluntary leadership activities were not necessarily accompanied by an allocation of time to complete the task. The significance of reflection to professional learning is well established, indeed when discussing the training needs of subject leaders Harris *et al.* (2001) observe the importance of opportunities for self-reflection to allow the internalisation of new knowledge and the consideration of implications for practice. McCauley et al., (2010) and Reeves et al., (2002) highlight the importance of professional reflection for learning from leadership development experiences. Adding additional voluntary duties to a working week which is already busy can reduce opportunities for meaningful reflection and thus undermine the leadership learning that might be gained from the experience.

4.6.1.2 Establishing a developmental focus

Some aspiring middle leaders attempted to control additional workload by being selective in their choice of voluntary leadership activities, identifying the most relevant and realistic opportunities by "making sure that whatever I've taken on is manageable and making sure that it is suited to my strengths" (ML2). However, this level of agency was not always evident, some spoke of being asked to undertake tasks that had no specific relevance to their learning needs: "Sometimes tasks are offered as a development opportunity because it is an easy way to get things done, but no additional time or budget is allocated" (ML6). There was a fine line between a developmental activity and what was perceived to be a delegation of workload from one person to another:

> "I knew what was going on there you know, that was just a case of trying to shift something from their desk onto someone else's … they'd come to you and say … 'you should think about this it will be really good for your career'… anything that I did as a

result of those conversations, I didn't feel was benefiting me as much as it was benefiting the school" (ML8).

It is acknowledged that effective middle leadership development must balance the knowledge and skills required by the individual with those required by the school (Cardno & Bassett, 2015; Hamilton et al., 2018). Indeed Cardno and Bassett (2015) assert that in order to realise the desired learning benefits, the focus of leadership development requires negotiation between those involved. The sense of reluctant compliance in ML8's comment and the view of ML6 that some voluntary leadership activities are simply "an easy way to get things done" could suggest limited negotiation regarding the delegation of "voluntary" tasks and that, in some contexts, the need to find someone to lead a school activity can take priority over the development of the individual. It could also suggest an assumption in some contexts that any leadership experience will result in leadership learning, a notion that is contrary to scholarly recommendations that middle leaders need to understand the relevance, purpose and usefulness of the activity to their development in order to fully realise the developmental benefits (Gurr & Drysdale, 2013; McCauley et al., 2010). Furthermore, at first glance the delegation of a leadership task from one member of staff in a promoted post to someone aspiring to the role may initially appear to demonstrate a vision of distributed leadership in which leaders facilitate and support the leadership of others (Harris, 2013, p. 546). However, the apparent lack of agreement with the individual or discussion of their development needs could suggest a more hierarchical approach in which someone with the power associated with their formal leadership role delegates the task to a specific individual. This is more consistent with the assertions of Lumby (2013) who argues that there is little evidence to support arguments that distributed leadership empowers more staff or shares power equitably across all staff.

However, the above comments by ML6 and ML8 could also signal the ways in which those aspiring to a role often need support to see the developmental benefits of an activity or opportunity. ML7 described the support of a line manager who signposted relevant leadership development opportunities as they arose: "she'd say, 'you could do this' and 'why don't you join this committee' … and so as a result of that I was quite high profile within the school". This comment from ML7 illustrates how, in dynamic contexts such as schools,

leadership learning opportunities can arise organically, sometimes at short notice, and how those aspiring to leadership may need to draw from the expertise of more experienced colleagues to fully appreciate the developmental potential of the opportunity or its relevance to their individual leadership learning needs. McCauley et al. (2010) argue the importance of an initial assessment of individual leadership learning needs to ensure a meaningful developmental focus for the learning experience and to help motivate and sustain engagement with the task. They also highlight the importance of appropriate support to allow the individual to cope with the challenges presented by a leadership learning experience. This finding suggests that some individuals, particularly those aspiring to a role, can benefit from the support of a more experienced colleague to recognise the developmental value of a leadership learning opportunity and to consider its relevance to their individual development needs.

Findings discussed throughout this section demonstrate the willingness of many teachers to dedicate time and energy to gaining relevant leadership experience within schools by leading on a voluntary basis, and some of the ways in which aspects of context can support or hinder potential learning from this experience. Table 4b shows that experiences might focus upon middle leadership for those aspiring to the role, or senior leadership for middle leaders aspiring to further promotion. In order to deliver a developmental return on the time and effort invested by individuals in voluntary leadership activities, these findings suggest that such activities should be relevant, informed by an assessment of development needs and accompanied by appropriate time and support to ensure that leadership learning gains are fully realised during the execution of the task.

4.6.1.3 Learning from middle leader role models

Table 4b illustrates that many of the opportunities to learn from school leaders occurred within the school context. Indeed, taken together, learning from school leaders and in-school opportunities account for almost half of the leadership learning opportunities cited by participants. Furthermore, opportunities to learn from inspirational middle leader role models through collaborative working, professional dialogue and observing practice were identified by some as their most helpful form of leadership learning. Speaking of the positive example of a previous middle leader line manager and role model ML9 observed that one of

their most impactful leadership learning experiences was "… definitely having the role model. I think just, you know, watching someone who was so good at the job, and you know just working alongside her as well". ML1, ML3 ML5 and ML7 also spoke of similar opportunities to learn from middle leader role models within departmental or faculty contexts citing the observation of practice, engagement in professional dialogue or working collaboratively on tasks as being particularly helpful. The quotation below by ML3 alludes to a shared staff base in which the team undertook much of their (pastoral care) work. The staff base appeared to facilitate professional dialogue and the opportunity to seek guidance and information from experienced middle leader colleagues. This was valued for its capacity to develop the knowledge and skills of those beginning in the role, and for providing collegiate support for those in post:

> "… in one way, those jobs did feel a little bit like an apprenticeship … people would come into that base … [with questions] that was part of their learning environment there, and they would say 'what we could do about this is' and there was that reassurance that we could run things past other people. So that was enormously helpful". (ML3)

ML3 likens the opportunity to learn from more experienced middle leaders to an "apprenticeship". This conforms to the findings of Lipscombe et al. (2021) who, drawing from a range of empirical studies, found that preparation for a middle leader role has traditionally relied upon an apprenticeship model. Discussing approaches to work-based learning in schools, Reeves et al. (2002) refer to the apprenticeship model as one of the oldest approaches to learning in professions and trades. Working alongside an experienced colleague who acts as a role model, guides, and supports, apprentices learn through observing and completing increasingly complex tasks with guidance and support as required. Relationships between apprentice and master are generally based upon personal respect rather than line management and the master assumes formal responsibility for ensuring that the apprentice acquires the identified knowledge and skills needed to achieve mastery in their own right, often a within a specific timeframe. Several benefits of the apprenticeship model for workplace learning in schools are identified, such as a highly individualised

learning approach which allows the transmission of both tacit and detailed knowledge and opportunities to facilitate cognitive and social development.

However the opportunities described by participants and reflected in Table 4b differed from the apprenticeship model proposed by Reeves et al. (2002) due to their informal nature and random occurrence. None of the participants spoke of a coherent programme in which identified knowledge and skills were shared systematically to allow the acquisition of a degree of mastery within a specific timeframe. The comment by ML3 also illustrates how this approach to leadership learning was facilitated by a shared staff space and a culture in which others were willing and able to share their knowledge and skills informally and work collaboratively, neither of which are guaranteed in all contexts. The fact that some but not all participants expounded the value of learning from other leaders within school contexts could also indicate that these opportunities were not consistently available to all participants.

Adopting an alternative viewpoint, ML9 observed that had they learned from highly effective practice, and also from what they perceived to be poor leadership practice: “I think I probably learned from other people's mistakes as well in a way, and I think I'm very conscious of that ... so I probably learned from the negatives as well as the positives” (ML9).

Busher (2005) identifies the significance of the social dimension of school contexts in shaping professional identity, arguing that the values of middle leaders, which are central to all aspects of their work, are grounded in values that are formed over time in a variety of contexts. The findings discussed above identify meaningful learning gained through engagement with respected colleagues (discussed by ML3) and by rejecting what is deemed to be poor practice (discussed by ML9). This could suggest that aspiring middle leaders and those beginning in the role draw from their experience and established values to evaluate the practice of other leaders and to help inform their own approach to middle leadership.

4.6.1.4 Engaging with middle leader peers

Findings revealed two approaches that facilitated leadership development and also mutual support amongst middle leader peers within schools. One evolved organically and involved

mutual encouragement, sharing aspects of practice, professional reading, and professional dialogue:

> "… three of us started at the same time … and we really just gelled, and I think every piece of learning really came from that, that sort of friendship that built" (ML6)

In the other approach, mutually supportive peer relationships resulted from a strategic school commitment to provide middle leaders with an opportunity to participate together in an established residential programme to develop leadership capacity:

> "I did enjoy that and trying to bring some of those [values] back into the school. I certainly think the school has benefited from taking those groups of maybe eight people together and having an experience like that … it does kind of bond you … it allowed me to go and speak to other principal teachers about how they did things in their Department … specific topics, or conversation that you probably wouldn't have in a staffroom really and you would have to have some quite strong background connections before you could have these honest conversations" (ML7).

The comments by ML6 and ML7 describe experiences which provided personal and professional support and also established or strengthened trusting relationships across cohorts of middle leaders. Indeed ML7 describes the formation of trusting professional relationships in which they could discuss issues specific to their leadership, which they would not share with members of their team. Relationships established during this residential programme also facilitated professional collaborations and mutual support on return to school. It is particularly significant that this example was provided by ML7, who had also reported feelings of isolation in the role (discussed later), thus a key benefit of this strategic initiative which strengthened professional relationships among colleagues within the school included establishing middle leader networks for mutual development and support.

The significance of trusting professional friendship among middle leader peers is evident in the observations of several participants who spoke of how they adopted a professional

stance in which, as team leader, they limited what they shared with their team colleagues. Some reported striving to “curate aspects of your personal self that don't help you in the professional self” (ML8). This curation of personal feelings and emotions was also reflected in comments of ML1 who described a discerning approach to sharing information and “not sounding off” (ML1) to members of their team. Bush (2018) (when discussing head teachers) argues that transition to headship involves a change in professional identity from teacher to leader, which requires time and support. These comments from ML8 and ML1 appear to signal changes in professional identity in the transition from teacher to middle leader, which is reflected in their descriptions of how they adapted the ways that they engage with colleagues. Maintaining a professional distance from the colleagues with whom they worked most closely could contribute to feelings of isolation as described by ML7:

> “You know what it's like to be a principal teacher or a depute and you have to be careful because you do feel that everything you say is judged… and so sometimes you're not keen to share ... I think it can be quite isolating at times”.

The hierarchical positioning of middle leaders between teachers and school leaders is known to present specific challenges. Fullan (2010) observes that leading at middle level attracts pressure from both the top and bottom of an organisation. Brundrett and Terrell (2004) describe middle leaders as a “fulcrum” between classroom teachers and senior leaders. Bennett et al. (2007) identify competing whole-school and departmental loyalties such as the monitoring of quality and performance as a line manager, whilst maintaining collegiality in relationships with and across teams, as some of the key tensions associated with leading a middle level. The quotations of ML8, ML1 and ML7 illustrate this well and also reveal some of the emotional labour (Hochschild, 2012) associated with working at middle level.

With a responsibility to motivate teams, drive improvement and ensure positive learning outcomes for young people (Leithwood, 2016), it is important to the school community that individuals are able to draw relevant leadership learning from the ‘challenges’ of leadership experience as described by McCauley et al. (2010). It is also argued that leadership learning is more likely to occur when there is appropriate support to make sense of the experience (Harris et al., 2001; McCauley et al., 2010; Reeves et al., 2002). The value of approaches

such as peer dialogue and mutual support from colleagues are proposed as a means of mitigating against the potential costs of emotional labour Hochschild (2012), can enhance the resilience of middle leaders in their role (Lambert, 2024) and allow them to learn from leadership experience (Harris et al. 2001). Dialogue with peers could be informal or include formal approaches such as coaching and mentoring which are identified as means by which individualised developmental support can be provided (Brown et al., 2002; Irvine & Brundrett, 2019). The peer supports mentioned throughout this subtheme could therefore allow individuals to maximise the developmental potential of challenges they experience in their role and also support them as they deal with any associated emotional labour or other stressors.

4.6.1.5 The untapped potential of Professional Review and Development (PRD)

As part of their ongoing commitment to career-long professional learning (discussed in section 4.5) teachers in Scotland engage in an annual process of self-evaluation to identify areas of strength and further development. It is anticipated that self-evaluation will be informed by a relevant professional standard, such as The Standard for Middle Leadership (General Teaching Council Scotland, 2021b). The self-evaluation and areas for development are discussed in an annual professional dialogue with a line manager (PRD), at which point potential learning opportunities to address areas for development can also be formally explored. The expectation that The Standard for Middle Leadership will inform the annual process of self-evaluation and PRD thus re-enforces the national vision for middle leadership in schools. Within this framework, the PRD meeting potentially offers a vehicle for the assessment of leadership learning needs as described by McCauley et al. (2010) and an opportunity to plan the individualised approach to middle leadership development recommended by various scholars in the field (Cardno & Bassett, 2015; Gurr & Drysdale, 2013; Irvine & Brundrett, 2019).

After some consideration, I decided not to include PRD in table 4b because, when asked during the research interview, participants did not list PRD as a leadership learning activity that they had undertaken. This suggests a perception of PRD as a procedural rather than a developmental process. However, PRD was mentioned at other points during the interview

by ML1, ML2, ML7 and ML9 and the topic arose during focus group discussion. Participant experiences of PRD were inconsistent. ML1 presented PRD as a constructive professional dialogue with a collaborative approach and a developmental focus: “He's been quite good at undergoing PRD with me year on year … he does challenge me, and he often invites me to challenge him as well”. Other experiences of PRD were not perceived to have developmental benefits:

> “I can't remember ever having a proper PRD… you're doing it with somebody who wants to get it finished … I think the actual idea of PRD is a very good one, but I think we are miles away from having PRD being anything but an exercise that has to be completed” (ML7).

> “I had my PRD yesterday … they actually said, listen this will only take a minute” (ML9).

> “…it should be enormously important; every year our experience is how is it we do that again? … What will we fill in? … Will that do? And in actual fact it's an opportunity missed … it should be streamlined so that it allows for much more profitable discussions” (ML3).

The above experiences of PRD suggest that it’s potential as a vehicle for promoting agency in professional learning and for the identification of leadership development needs is not consistently realised across different school contexts. This is due to factors such as the time pressures upon all involved, an apparent low level of priority accorded to PRD meetings which is reflected in interruptions and curtailed meetings, and practice which conveys a view that the process is a procedural requirement rather than a significant developmental opportunity. Taken together, these findings could suggest a lack of consistent understanding across schools of the developmental potential of PRD, resulting in the process being accorded lower priority than other leadership tasks within a context in which time is a scarce resource.

Findings also revealed a lack of training and confidence in the leadership of PRD:

> "I think it probably comes down to, as much as we feel not trained in taking our staff through it, the deputes probably haven't been trained in taking us through it … you know what I mean? They don't have maybe the skills, or even the resources to. I don't think they even have the time to be fair." (ML4).

> "…one of the things that I felt least confident about becoming a middle manager was the PRD process for the staff in my department … Because you only have your own experience of PRD, and it really depends on how good your previous PTs have been" (ML9).

ML7 spoke of participating in training to develop coaching approaches. The course had been valued, but the coaching skills appear to have been used very occasionally thereafter, and it appears that the potential of coaching approaches for leading the PRD of colleagues was not recognised: "I probably have not had a coaching session like that with my staff, because that that would feel a bit odd... More with the children I would say" (ML7). Coaching is promoted as an approach to allow middle leaders to learn from their leadership experiences (Harris et al., 2001; Irvine & Brundrett, 2019; McCauley et al., 2010) and is a recommended component in a package of activities that might support leadership development (Gurr and Drysdale, 2013). It is promoted nationally in Scotland as an approach that can facilitate developmental professional dialogue in schools. The General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTC Scotland, 2024) and Education Scotland (Education Scotland, 2024a) advocate its use within the PRD process and provide resources for teachers and schools to support and inform the implementation of coaching approaches in schools. There is therefore an expectation that the PRD conversations of Scotland's middle leaders will involve coaching conversations, and that they will also use coaching skills to lead the PRD conversations of members of their team. Furthermore Scotland's compulsory national programme for aspiring Head teachers also includes an individual coaching component. Given that coaching is promoted widely within the national context, it is interesting that it does not feature more prominently in the data for this study. In addition to the comment by ML7, coaching was mentioned briefly in terms such as: "it's more about them providing me with opportunities

and support as opposed to always sitting down and having a one-to-one coaching session" (ML2). Thus, referring to a more general form of support such as signposting relevant opportunities. Data therefore suggests that, despite efforts to highlight the potential of coaching as a tool to support developmental professional dialogue and facilitate meaningful PRD, there appear to be specific challenges in translating coaching theory to practice within some school contexts.

In a perspective that contrasted significantly with those of other participants, ML6 revealed an understanding of the benefits to individual development of taking ownership of the PRD conversation to ensure that it met their individual needs:

> "PRD … is your conversation, and you need to direct that, so if you do have a middle leader or a senior leader who wants to have an anecdotal PRD, you are within your rights to actually drive that conversation, it is your professional development." (ML6)

Gurr and Drysdale (2013) and Irvine and Brundrett (2019) build upon the premise that each middle leader brings a unique set of capabilities and experience to their role, revealing the consequent need for each individual to direct the development of their middle leadership practice. This self-directed approach to professional learning aligns with theories of professional learning that promote the value of teacher agency in professional development (Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002). It also aligns with a professional expectation in Scotland that teachers will "become agents of change, develop an enquiring mindset and take ownership of their learning journey" through PRD which will facilitate the required opportunities for reflection and empowerment (General Teaching Council Scotland, 2019, p. 3). Comments from ML6 and aspects of the observations made by other participants such as ML1, ML2 and ML9 suggest that to an extent, they also viewed PRD as an opportunity to direct their middle leadership learning and development. The experiences of other participants suggest that the potential of PRD to empower individuals to direct their middle leadership development is not consistently understood by middle leaders and others.

Although PRD practice is well established within the Scottish educational context, inconsistencies in participants' experiences and perspectives of PRD reveal varied levels of

understanding of the potential of PRD to facilitate tailored, self-directed learning in leadership for middle leaders. Factors such as time constraints and a lack of knowledge and skill in leading developmental PRD dialogue were found to result in a tokenistic approach and a focus upon completing the required paperwork, rather than developing the leadership capacity of the individual. Given the potential benefits of PRD and the central role that middle leaders play in leading the professional development of teachers (Edwards-Groves et al., 2018; General Teaching Council Scotland, 2021b), relevant and impactful PRD for middle leaders could make a valuable contribution to their leadership development, and to their leadership of the PRD and development of others, thereby contributing to building capacity across a school.

4.6.2 Leadership learning beyond the school context

Table 4b illustrates that a number of middle leadership learning opportunities that were found to be helpful occurred within wider contexts such as through engagement with local and national organisations, programmes, courses or events.

4.6.2.1 Local and national organisations

Table 4b and previous findings illustrate the potential impact of middle leader peers upon middle leadership learning. Most local authorities facilitated opportunities for middle leaders to meet. For those working in secondary schools this normally involved meeting with middle leader peers from schools across the authority who were leading the same or similar subject areas. In authorities where learning events were few, these meetings were a rare but valued opportunity for middle leader learning. The focus of these meeting appeared to be largely curriculum or policy related and views about the value of such meetings varied. For some, the opportunity to engage with other middle leaders and share expertise and ideas for practice were helpful in providing information that could inform their work.

> "… so you can find out you know, what's happening and what's going on … there's a few people on there who are verifiers, who organised trips or are doing all sorts of different things and I find, I think they [the meetings] are very supportive" (ML7).

ML3 (from a different local authority) questioned whether the content addressed at such meetings was consistently helpful and relevant:

> "The stuff that hasn't been helpful has been the stuff that has been instantly forgettable and probably there was lots of stuff at PT meetings that went in one ear and out the other" (ML3).

The difference in experience could be due to a number of factors, particularly the ways in which the meetings are organised by the relevant local authority and the extent to which they meet the individual needs of specific middle leaders as previously discussed.

Engagement with professional networks such as The Institute of Physics or with information days offered by the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) were also valued as a means of allowing participants to keep abreast of developments in their subject, pedagogy, or assessment and also to network with fellow subject specialists. The insights gained were shared within departments and, again, the information used to inform practice in the teaching of their subject. The previous comments of ML7, and the range of activities in Table 4b that have a clear curricular or pedagogical focus demonstrate that middle leaders continue to view the leadership of learning and teaching as central to their role, consequently they identify this as an area for their middle leadership development. The perspective of viewing curriculum and pedagogy as central to their middle leader role re-enforces established literature in this field (Adey, 2000; Adey & Jones, 1998; Gunter & Rutherford, 2000; Gurr & Drysdale, 2013; Weller, 2001).

4.6.2.2 Award-bearing part-time study and events.

In addition to learning within school and local authority contexts, Table 4b reveals a range of award-bearing programmes, national organisations and events that provided opportunities to develop leadership knowledge and skills.

As mentioned previously, courses that provided participants with knowledge or skills related to the leadership of learning and teaching (e.g. regarding new curricula or national assessment procedures) were considered essential for middle leaders of a secondary school

subject area. University award-bearing courses and programmes were also valued for their capacity to develop thinking and professional reflection, introduce bodies of academic literature or policy which participants were previously unaware of, and provide opportunities to network with colleagues beyond the school context. Speaking of their engagement with a generic MEd programme, ML3 spoke of how the programme had developed their critical thinking, they believed that this ultimately equipped them with confidence in their decision-making: “it [an MEd] provided me with that critical capacity, and to be confident about my own decisions”. Similarly, ML6 described how an award-bearing university programme in middle leadership had equipped them with a knowledge base that enabled them to share a clear rationale for their decisions with colleagues: “when people say, well, why are we doing that? Being able to give them that rationale and say, well actually here it is … sometimes I've given them some of the [research] papers…”. ML8 described how participation in a university programme in middle leadership allowed them to reflect upon their middle leadership practice more objectively: "the greatest transformation … being kinda able to take yourself outside of yourself and having the wider picture at all times".

This finding illustrates ways in which engagement in university programmes facilitated opportunities for middle leaders to extend their knowledge (Reeves et al., 2002), the comment by ML8 suggests that the experience also provided space and stimulus for professional reflection. Middle leaders subsequently drew from new knowledge to inform and enhance their decision-making and their leadership confidence. The reflection and enhanced understandings evident in the comments of ML8, ML6 and ML3 demonstrate features of cognitive development, one of four components that Reeves et al. (2002) recommend for transferring learning from courses and programmes to practice in the workplace. It is also interesting to note that ML3 and ML6 were established and experienced middle leaders, whereas ML8 was newer to the role, suggesting that engagement in university learning has the potential to offer relevant, appropriate development regardless of level of middle leadership experience. To an extent, this finding exemplifies the assertions of Archer (2021) who found that the skills gained from participation in postgraduate study (such as critical thinking skills) supported middle leaders to balance the competing demands of their role, and also enhanced the likelihood of being promoted to a middle leader role.

ML4, an experienced middle leader alludes to how learning from a university accredited middle leadership programme was consolidated by applying new knowledge and insights to their leadership practice: “The combination of experiential learning and formal leadership learning has been most helpful for leadership development … that crystalised the leadership experience”.

Those aspiring to middle leadership spoke of how an award-bearing programme in middle leadership provided an opportunity to learn about leadership through engaging with research and from the experience of others, and how it also provided an opportunity to form networks of experienced colleagues:

> “The post graduate certificate … that for me was hugely influential - learning and the professional reading and the conversations that you had around that professional reading … I was really blown away by it at that stage in my career … you're able to go away and read that research and digest it and then come back and discuss it with people who had more experience than you. I found that really, really, valuable.” (ML2)

This comment by ML2 demonstrates that informal support networks existed among participants of the programme, providing a source of peer support beyond their school context, a benefit which is identified by Harris et al. (2001). In addition to facilitating opportunities to learn from other contexts (Reeves et al., 2002), this finding is significant as peer support is identified as one of several means by which middle leaders can learn to manage the identified challenges of their role (such as balancing competing loyalties and expectations) and ultimately develop the resilience needed to combat work-related stress (Lambert, 2024). Furthermore, the acquisition of new knowledge through award-bearing courses aims to stretch individuals beyond their normal realm of knowledge and expertise, and therefore meets the criteria for “challenge” as defined by McCauley et al. (2010). As such the impact of the learning experience is likely to be fully realised when other elements are in place, such as support to cope with the challenges of the experience and to make sense of it in order to develop personally and professionally. Support from peers, either in

cohorts of leadership development programmes, or formal peer coaches or mentors in the workplace (Irvine & Brundrett, 2019) could be a vehicle for support.

The time commitment required to participate in an award-bearing programme was identified as a challenge by a number of participants. ML2 spoke of trying to balance existing commitments with the demands of part-time study:

> "… I think it's a big commitment to engage in those courses … I was in a lucky position where I don't have … major family commitments, ... So I was able to commit that time to it. But I think other people in similar positions, who maybe have families, and young families would find it really, really challenging to be able to manage the hours that go into professional learning [at that level], as well as doing your post in school" (ML2).

This view was echoed by ML7 and ML9 who spoke of how the demands of combining their professional role with family and caring responsibilities presented barriers to their engagement in further study. ML7 stated "I would like to go back and do some more [learning] … but in the general mass of everyday running about you never quite seem to be able to get to it". ML9 had achieved a master's level diploma but had been unable to find the time to complete the degree: "I was anxious to be as equipped as possible to take on that role … I did the diploma, and I was hoping to finish my master's, but I never got round to doing the dissertation". The fact that both of these participants are female and spoke of their caring responsibilities, illustrates recent research findings which indicate that, despite the higher percentage of women occupying teaching roles, the impact of structural, organisational and personal barriers such as caring responsibilities can impact upon their career trajectory in educational leadership (Harris et al., 2024; Moreno et al., 2024a, 2024b; Thompson & Stokes, 2023, 2024; Watterston & Ehrich, 2024). Indeed it is argued that a woman's leadership career path is often more complex than their male counterparts due to their consideration of the impact of their career decisions upon others such as close family (Watterston & Ehrich, 2024).

The financial implications of participation in programmes in leadership also arose. Until recently Scottish Government funding was available to local authorities to support teacher engagement in master's level learning. This supported key recommendations from significant reports such as *Teaching Scotland's Future* (Donaldson, 2010, p. 99) and the report of the *Independent Panel on Career Pathways for Teachers* (Boland, 2019, p. 15). Some participants mentioned that they had funded or part-funded their leadership studies personally, ML1 spoke of how they used a recent increase in salary to fund their studies: "having been appointed to my PT role I can afford to pay for it". Thus, indicating that not all participants had access to national funding to support their studies. Lack of time and access to funding therefore emerge as potential barriers to engagement in the part-time university-accredited leadership development programmes available in Scotland.

Discussion throughout this section has focussed largely upon award-bearing part-time study, however one participant also spoke of the developmental benefits of attending a one-off presentation by an inspirational speaker along with some colleagues. The session focussed upon motivation, and the colleagues' professional dialogue which ensued resulted in the implementation of strategies to support pupil motivation and engagement at departmental then school level:

> "…even though it wasn't directly relevant, we began to speak about that in the department and there was this one wee thing that was relevant to what we did and I remember the Head teacher acting upon that … that made a big difference." (ML3)

Contrary to recommendations that professional learning should be viewed as a process, rather than an event (Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002; Guskey, 2002a), this example illustrates how a one-off lecture by an inspirational speaker provided a catalyst for critical reflection and the motivation to enhance an aspect of practice. Out with the school environment, this event allowed colleagues to hear and process the speaker's key message and consider how their learning might be applied to enhance an aspect of their practice. As such it further illustrates the cognitive benefits of an external input (Reeves et al., 2002) and may have provided individuals with an element of fresh challenge, pushing their thinking into a state of disequilibrium from which learning occurred (McCauley et al., 2010).

4.6.3 Summary

Discussion within this subtheme reveals the significance of the school context as a rich site of leadership learning for middle leaders. It can provide opportunities to gain relevant experience and learn from, and with others through activities such as observing practice, collaborative working, professional dialogue, peer networking and support. Indeed, some participants believed that these opportunities were the most helpful forms of leadership learning. In addition to identifying the approaches to leadership learning that middle leaders find helpful, these findings also reinforce the significant role that middle leaders play in providing leadership learning for others such as acting as a role model or signposting relevant learning opportunities for those aspiring to the role. Factors which facilitate the leadership learning of middle leaders in school contexts include opportunities to engage with and learn from middle leader colleagues both formally and informally, and the time and the space to do so. In addition, there is scope to fully exploit the potential of PRD and other nationally promoted approaches such as coaching to facilitate a more focussed and individualised approach to leadership development in schools.

The positioning of the school context as a potentially rich site for middle leader learning offers messages for middle leaders themselves and school leaders of all levels about the important role that middle leaders play in developing the next generation of school leaders and the need for leaders and aspiring leaders to own and direct their leadership learning. Findings which identify features of context which are most (and least) likely to deliver meaningful learning such as the benefits of mentoring, peer support, time and meaningful PRD dialogue are particularly relevant for school and system leaders as it provides information which can be used to help establish a context which nurtures and supports middle leader learning.

Opportunities in wider contexts beyond schools also allow the acquisition of new knowledge and skills, help reduce the likelihood of recycling existing or poor practice and can play a significant role in stimulating new, innovative practice. Through engaging with professional associations and participating in activities such courses, programmes and events middle leaders also have opportunities to extend their professional networks and their opportunities for peer support. Access to many of the leadership learning opportunities

within and beyond school depend upon a range of factors including time, funding, and the willingness of other leaders to provide and support the learning opportunity. Table 4b and the findings discussed throughout this subtheme illustrate the availability of a range of opportunities for leadership learning in a range of settings, consistent with recommendations that professional learning should include an appropriate blend of learning settings, and people who are willing and able to give appropriate support (Eraut, 2004). However, these opportunities depend upon context, they vary in terms of their effectiveness and can be constrained by lack of time or other resources. A number of actions are required to ensure that such opportunities fully deliver their potential to support the leadership learning of middle leaders across Scotland including a shared, professional understanding of the developmental purpose of activities such as PRD and coaching, and a consistent approach to providing experiential opportunities and associated support to ensure that individuals are able to fully exploit the leadership learning potential of these opportunities.

4.7 Conclusion: Theme 1

Findings throughout this theme therefore build towards the conclusion that the school, and the local and national contexts in which middle leaders work inform their roles and responsibilities, shape their leadership learning needs, and can be a catalyst or barrier to effective middle leadership learning.

The leadership learning needs of middle leaders in Scotland are found to be similar to those identified in other contexts such as England (Irvine & Brundrett, 2016) and Australia (De Nobile, 2018; Gurr & Drysdale, 2013). The findings of this study also reveals recognition among middle leaders of their central role in leading ongoing change for improvement, and the associated need to develop skills such as data literacy to support this aspect of their work.

Findings that the nature and availability of middle leader roles in Scotland are influenced by local, national and, to an extent, international contexts align with those of Gurr and Drysdale (2013) who theorise that context influences the roles and responsibilities of school middle leaders. As this study also found that aspects of context shape the knowledge and skills that middle leaders require, their leadership learning needs and, significantly, the nature and

availability of opportunities for middle leader learning, the findings also extend the work of Gurr and Drysdale (2013) to reveal ways in which context impacts upon the knowledge and skills required for middle leadership, and the nature and availability of the learning opportunities that would allow middle-level leaders to acquire them.

In his theoretical model of middle leadership, DeNobile (2018, p. 16) adopts an overarching perspective of middle leadership, with a focus upon the contribution of middle leaders to learning and teaching. This study illuminates aspects of the middle leader role which are not fully explored by DeNobile. Significantly, the findings reveal ways in which established, experienced middle leaders are often central to the leadership learning of those aspiring to leadership through activities such as role-modelling, collaborative working, coaching, mentoring and nurturing leadership capacity, thus extending DeNobile's theory in relation to the staff development role of middle leaders

Findings of this study also reveal that, due to the hierarchy of middle leader roles that exists within Scotland's secondary schools, some middle leaders hold a responsibility for monitoring the leadership of other middle leader colleagues. As the monitoring responsibilities explored in DeNobile's (2018) model focus primarily upon monitoring learning and teaching, this finding adds a further dimension to the proposed supervisory role of middle leaders.

The Scottish context therefore offers a range of opportunities for middle leaders to develop their leadership knowledge and skills within schools and beyond. However, access to opportunities for middle leadership learning, the effectiveness of these opportunities in building the leadership capacity of middle leaders, and the extent to which individuals can maximise the developmental value of these opportunities is variable and depends upon a number of contextual factors. These inconsistencies reveal areas where improvements in the provision of middle leader learning might be made and may have particular relevance to school leaders and system-level leaders.

Chapter 5: Experience

Analysis and Discussion of Findings: Theme 2

5.1 Chapter Overview

This chapter presents and discusses findings related to the second theme of 'experience', as identified through the process of thematic analysis described in Chapter 3.

The chapter begins with a short reminder of the relationship between themes 1 and 2. Key findings are then presented, drawing from data to illustrate and substantiate the assertions made. The significance of findings are considered and discussed within the context of relevant literature. A short summary of discussion at the end of each subtheme builds towards a chapter conclusion which captures key findings and aspects of discussion for this theme.

As mentioned in section 4.1, data extracts are presented throughout the chapter in the form of quotations and tables. Quotations are selected for their capacity to illustrate each subtheme. As each subtheme explores participant perspectives with specific levels of leadership experience, the quotations used draws from data relating to specific participants as relevant to their level of experience (or their reflections upon their experiences when working at that stage of leadership). Tables are again used at points to organise and succinctly present some of the data and to provide a structure that facilitates comparison or the identification of any patterns in some of the data.

5.2 Theme and Sub-themes

Throughout this theme experience is interpreted in two ways: the observation of or participation in events, and the knowledge or skills gained through doing so.

The thematic map (Figure 4a) illustrates the two-way relationship between experience and context. As discussed in theme 1, the nature and quality of leadership experience is influenced by the school and wider contexts. The leadership experience of staff also impacts

upon the context, particularly through the ways in which experienced leaders are able to support the development of those aspiring to middle leadership.

Consistent with the findings of Irvine and Brundrett (2019), this theme finds that experience is a key element of leadership development and that the development of middle leadership capabilities occurs in stages. Analysis of findings for the cohort of participants in this small-scale study resulted in the development of three subthemes, centred around three stages of middle leadership experience, each with distinct characteristics and differing leadership learning needs.

All participants acknowledged the need to continue their development as a professional. The term 'developing' is therefore used to describe the final subtheme which captures a broad range of development needs and levels of experience. Many of those operating at this level are contributing to the leadership learning of others by facilitating and supporting leadership learning experiences, this subtheme therefore links to the theme of experience, and ultimately to that of context.

5.3 Introduction to theme 2: Experience

When discussing the leadership learning opportunities available to them, gaining experience of leadership was cited by participants as a highly beneficial form of leadership learning. Particularly when supported by other individuals such as experienced leaders whom they could approach for advice and support. As previously discussed, those who had engaged in accredited leadership development programmes also learned from the experience of applying relevant research and theory to their leadership practice. This supports the assertions of Reeves et al. (2002) who found that workplace learning is most successful when it includes: opportunities for cognitive development, experiential learning, reflection, and a socially supportive context to implement any changes to practice resulting from the leadership learning.

Findings in the subthemes that follow confirm and build upon established thinking that the development needs of middle leaders are unique to each individual and therefore demand a

package of tailored support (Fluckiger et al., 2015; Gurr and Drysdale, 2013), that the acquisition of middle leadership capacity builds upon experience of both teaching and leadership (Adey & Jones, 1998; Irvine & Brundrett, 2019) and that middle leader development occurs in stages (Irvine & Brundrett, 2019). Three stages of middle leader development were identified through the analysis of data in this small-scale study and these form three subthemes as follows.

1. *Preparing* for middle leadership reveals a growing expectation in Scotland's schools that those applying for middle leader posts will have engaged in some form of leadership preparation.
2. *Beginning* middle leadership explores learning needs that are unique to this stage of development, identifying a potentially significant reduction in support for some at this stage.
3. *Developing* as a middle leader surfaces the diversity of development needs at this stage due to differing levels of experience and career ambitions and highlights participant perspectives of approaches that are thought to be helpful.

5.4 Subtheme 1: Preparing for middle leadership

Within this subtheme, characteristics of a specific stage at which teachers were *preparing for middle leadership* were evident and these will be defined. This subtheme also considers the learning needs of those aspiring to middle leadership and the approaches to professional learning that are particularly significant to this stage of development.

Building upon the premise that leading and teaching are two different skills, each of which require robust preparation, scholars in the field of middle leadership have argued for many years that a coherent approach to leadership development is required for those assuming a middle leader role (Adey & Jones, 1998; Brown et al., 2002). Recognising that middle leadership can be the first experience of leadership for many, it is strongly argued that teachers require comprehensive, relevant professional learning and support to prepare and equip them for leadership and to ensure their ongoing development. (Adey & Jones, 1998; Forde et al., 2018; Glover et al., 1998; Gurr & Drysdale, 2013; Irvine & Brundrett, 2019;

Thorpe & Bennett-Powell, 2014). The range of leadership development opportunities for those aspiring to middle leadership discussed throughout this subtheme suggests increasing recognition across the Scottish education system of the need to prepare teachers for their first leadership role. The available opportunities, and the fact that all participants reflected upon the learning experiences they had engaged in when preparing for middle leadership, distinguished this as a distinct stage of development and a sub-theme within the theme of experience.

5.4.1 Characteristics of preparing for middle leadership

The subtheme of *Preparing for middle leadership* is defined as the point at which teachers did not have a substantive middle leader role but were striving to gain knowledge, skills and experience that would prepare them to achieve this. The activities undertaken before participants achieved their first permanent middle leader role are summarised in Table 5a. The data outlined in Table 5a reveals that this stage was characterised by actively seeking out and engaging in opportunities that would facilitate leadership development. This includes experiences such as seeking advice and support from school leaders, participation in a range of school, local authority and university courses and programmes, gaining experience in a temporary middle leader post, or by assuming leadership responsibilities on a voluntary basis such as leading a whole-school initiative or an aspect of curriculum. At the time of interview all participants had a fixed-term or substantive middle leader role, therefore information in Table 5a captures interview data in which they reflected upon the leadership development activities that they had previously undertaken when aspiring to middle leadership.

Table 5a: Leadership learning activities undertaken prior to attaining a middle leader role

Participant (arranged in ascending order of middle leadership experience)	ML2	ML1	ML8	ML6	ML5	ML9	ML4	ML3	ML7
PT/FH Experience (years) including temporary experience	0	0	1.5	3	6	5	9	14	21
Entry level middle leadership experience	1.5	1.5	2	3	0	2	0	0.5	0
Teaching experience	5	11	10	10	12	26	18	25	25
Leadership development activities undertaken									
In-school opportunities									
Assuming leadership responsibility on a temporary basis ("acting")							✓	✓	✓
Assuming a leadership responsibility on a voluntary basis, such as leading a school initiative or a curricular area (often as a subject specialist within a faculty)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
Informal coaching support	✓								
Informal mentoring support									
Professional reading									
Participating in colleague-led sessions- aspects of curriculum or pedagogy	✓								
Delivering colleague-led sessions- aspects of curriculum or pedagogy	✓								
In-school leadership learning delivered by colleagues and/or external provider			✓			✓			
Learning from other leaders									
Advice and support from school leaders (middle or senior leaders)	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Learning from the leadership practice of role models		✓							
Learning by collaborating with leaders on specific tasks		✓						✓	
Peer support - networking with other middle leaders									
Local authority opportunities									
Training in middle leadership	✓								✓
Attending local authority meetings of subject-specialist middle leaders		✓	✓	✓					
Helping co-ordinate local authority meetings of subject-specialist middle leaders									
Role-specific training e.g. curriculum, pedagogy policy		✓				✓			
Award-bearing programmes									
Master's level award in leadership (PgCert, dip or degree)	✓	✓	✓						
Master's level award in other fields (PgCert, dip or degree)			✓			✓		✓	
National opportunities									
Engagement with a professional association (such as the Institute of Physics)		✓							
Attending SQA information events		✓							
Training and experience in marking for the SQA		✓					✓		✓
Training in a leadership role with SQA		✓							
Experience in a leadership role with SQA – leading teams of markers and presenting locally and nationally in relation to SQA assessment		✓							
The Scottish College for Educational Leadership - engagement with online learning in middle leadership and attending a training event		✓							
Other: hearing an inspirational speaker									
Other: Residential leadership programme									
Other: MOOC, Twitter		✓							
✓ = ongoing									

5.4.1.2 Pre-requisites for preparing for middle leadership development

When discussing their preparation for middle leadership some participants reflected upon the factors that had preceded this stage. Data suggests that *preparing for middle leadership* was usually preceded by two elements: attaining professional confidence and competence as a teacher, and the impetus to progress to middle leadership.

Three participants had leadership ambitions from the beginning of their teaching career, seeking out and pursuing relevant leadership development opportunities from an early stage. ML8 expressed a desire to establish themselves as "an excellent teacher" first. ML1 appeared to allude to professional confidence as they discussed reaching a point when they felt ready for the "next step". ML5 had not applied for an acting leadership role until receiving encouragement from a trusted line manager to do so, thus indicating that the belief of others in their ability was a motivating factor in prompting them to take the first step into middle leadership:

> "…the outgoing faculty head [and others] … said I really think you should put your hat in the ring here … all had that bit more self-belief than I did … there was definitely a feeling from others that this was something I was ready to do" (ML5).

As this comment came from a female participant it could support the assertions of Watterston and Ehrich (2024) who argue that the confidence of women to lead is impacted by psychological barriers such as a lack of belief in their abilities, which renders them less likely to apply for leadership roles than their male counterparts. Data in Table 5a could also suggest a contextual expectation that middle leaders will be experienced classroom teachers before gaining a middle leader post, which is reflected in the fact that all participants who currently lead departments or faculties (ML3-ML9) have at least ten years of teaching experience, whereas ML1, who has less teaching experience, is currently in a fixed-term entry-level post without a line management responsibility. The expectation that middle leaders will have significant teaching experience and expertise was revealed in some participant comments. ML6 had been advised by a trusted colleague that: "you bide your time, and you prove yourself [as a teacher]". Similarly, ML7 described how they had conformed to these expectations:

> "I did what people of my generation did, which was wait and we got our qualifications, and we did these things [took on leadership responsibilities on a voluntary basis] and we developed our skills and experience" (ML7).

Indeed, ML5 faced challenges when promoted to a faculty head post in their sixth year of teaching, exposing tensions around the point at which teachers are considered by peers to be sufficiently prepared to assume a middle leader role with a full range of middle leader responsibilities such as Principal Teacher or Faculty Head (PT/FH):

> "… one of the key challenges, when I was put in post is that I was the youngest faculty head to be appointed in the city at that point and there was definitely an outside view of 'you're too young', 'you're too inexperienced' … there was definitely friction within the staff" (ML5).

Given the success of ML5 in a competitive interview, it is assumed that they were deemed capable of undertaking the role by the interview panel. However, the "friction within the staff" highlights a perception that length of time devoted to classroom teaching is a key factor in determining readiness for middle leadership, and therefore to establishing credibility as a middle leader. Paranosic and Riveros (2017, p. 444) argue that the authority of middle leaders draws from the trusting relationships and credibility that they have built with their team. ML5's perceived lack of experience presented a challenge when beginning a PT/FH role and potentially signals the need for middle leaders to focus upon gaining the trust of their colleagues and establishing their professional credibility in order to develop the authority they require for middle leadership.

Expectations regarding the professional experience and expertise of middle leaders are well established in scholarly literature. A number of studies have found that colleagues expect middle leaders to model thorough knowledge of the subject area and good pedagogical practice (Adey, 2000; Adey & Jones, 1998; Gurr & Drysdale, 2013; Weller, 2001). It is also anticipated they will contribute to the development of the subject (Gunter & Rutherford, 2000). In some of these studies, such as Gurr and Drysdale (2013) research findings capture

perspectives from individuals across school communities including senior leaders, school governors, middle leaders and teachers, indicating that these expectations are widely held. However findings of this study suggest that certain allowances were evident in some cases, for example for entry level middle leader posts. One participant who sought opportunities to gain leadership experience from their second year as a fully registered teacher had been concerned about “how would other people perceive me as a young member of staff, a temporary member of staff, who's taken on leadership opportunities in schools?” (ML2). This concern appears to have diminished on achieving a fixed-term, entry level middle leader role (point 1 PT) in their third year as a fully registered teacher: “I'm [in] a point one PT post where you have the authority, you have the status, the title” (ML2). The apparent successful transition of ML2 to this entry level middle leader role at an early stage in their career contrast with those of ML5 when beginning a faculty head role. This suggests staff acceptance of the appointment to an entry level leadership role and could indicate some recognition that posts such as point 1 PT posts provide a learning experience for teachers who are aspiring to leadership. Staff acceptance of ML2 in the point 1 PT role could also be attributed to the effective execution of their previous temporary entry-level role, thus suggesting that such roles provide a vehicle to gain experience, demonstrate leadership potential to others, and build credibility.

The contrasting experiences of ML5 and ML2 reveal that middle leader capacity appears to be defined by some in terms of age and classroom teaching experience. Although high levels of knowledge and expertise are identified as central to nurturing the credibility and respect that middle leaders require to lead colleagues (Gurr & Drysdale, 2013; Leithwood, 2016; Lipscombe et al., 2021; Paranosic & Riveros, 2017), the use of age and length of experience as sole indicators of suitability neglect to consider factors such as the relevance and quality of experience and other relevant knowledge and experience from which individuals can draw to inform their leadership. This could include leadership experience out with the teaching profession (Irvine and Brundrett, 2019) and knowledge and understanding gained through relevant postgraduate study (Gunter and Rutherford, 2000).

Discussion throughout this section therefore proposes that middle leadership development within the Scottish context comprises of a preparatory stage. At this stage of development

those aspiring to middle leadership actively seek experiences that will prepare them to assume a middle leader role. Activities include developing pedagogical expertise and engaging in a range of activities on a voluntary basis to gain experience of middle leadership, demonstrate their leadership potential to others and nurture professional credibility. These aspects are explored in more detail in the discussion that follows.

5.4.2 Leadership learning when preparing for middle leadership

Previous discussion proposes that teaching experience and pedagogical expertise are pre-requisites for middle leadership, and that transition to a role which has a significant level of leadership responsibility is easier when experience and expertise is evident to others. This subtheme draws from these findings to focus upon leadership learning needs when preparing for middle leadership. As previously discussed, leadership learning needs at this stage revealed that they had specific purposes which could be categorised as follows:

1. developmental - in which teachers seek to develop their leadership knowledge skills and experience,
2. strategic - in which teachers seek to demonstrate their leadership potential to others and thus help build their credibility.

5.4.2.1 Developmental

Built upon the view that people learn best through experience, the seminal work of Kolb (1983) illustrates the powerful impact of experiential learning. Irvine and Brundrett (2019) argue that relevant leadership experience can be gained from similar or different leadership roles in school or in other schools, experience outside school and dialogue with peers. They propose that experience and subsequent reflection are key components of leadership learning from which leaders can draw to inform their future decision-making and leadership.

Table 5a summarises the range of activities undertaken by participants to develop their leadership knowledge, skills and experience before attaining a substantive middle leader post. It is evident that participants engaged with school and local authority programmes in leadership, developed leadership knowledge and skills by observing and working with

middle leader role models, and undertook leadership tasks on a temporary or voluntary basis.

Findings discussed throughout theme 1 outline various contextual factors that impact upon the availability of opportunities; participants took opportunities to participate in training courses and programmes to develop their leadership and their subject specific knowledge and skills, all participants had also gained leadership experience prior to assuming a substantive middle leader role in a temporary leadership role or through engagement in voluntary leadership activity. Voluntary experience might involve leading activities such as a school event or project or an aspect of curriculum within a faculty, temporary and voluntary leadership activities were perceived to have specific developmental benefits. ML5 made the following observation when reflecting upon their voluntary leadership of a subject area:

> "… prior to being in post as a faculty head, I had established a department within a faculty that didn't have [my subject] … so I had the experience of setting up and establishing a department by myself." (ML5).

ML9 made the following observation when reflecting upon their experience of fulfilling a middle leadership role on a temporary basis:

> "So that actually gave me experience in how to work with the people and how to erm, really how to lead, I suppose, but on a smaller scale than you would in a full role … and it also gave me confidence as well" (ML9).

Formal responsibility and accountability for tasks completed on a voluntary basis continued to lie with a middle or senior leader, who might therefore provide support and advice in the execution of the task. With this support, the experience could provide aspiring leaders with a scaffolded introduction to leadership. ML9 also spoke of several benefits gained when completing voluntary leadership activities in collaboration with a middle leader, particularly the encouragement and support that this experience provided:

> "… watching someone who was so good at the job, and you know just working alongside her, just having encouragement and someone who had belief in your abilities as well, that was very encouraging, and knowing that you were being shaped to lead a department - she was very open about that, and I think that encouragement went a long way for me to believe that I could actually take the department on" (ML9).

ML2 spoke of the support and the learning gained through their engagement with middle or senior leaders during a voluntary leadership activity:

> "… meeting with those people and running things by them and asking for support and making sure that I'm constantly consulting them, constantly communicating with them checking in with them … you're leading it with their support and with their mentorship" (ML2).

The case of ML1 is also interesting, Table 5a illustrates the comprehensive range of developmental experiences in which ML1 engaged before achieving their first middle leader role, the range of activities in which they engaged demonstrates their commitment to preparing for middle leadership. Comments from ML1 reveal colleague acceptance of their readiness for the role when an entry level middle leadership opportunity arose:

> "So when the opportunity to become Assistant Head of Curriculum [arose] … I think everybody agreed within the faculty that I would be a good candidate for it, and you know? It allowed me to use what I've learned in my kind of informal leadership roles to make sure that I got that job" (ML1).

A number of researchers (Cardno & Bassett, 2015; Gurr & Drysdale, 2013; Irvine & Brundrett, 2019) highlight the need for an individualised approach to leadership development due to the varied levels of knowledge, skills and experience that each leader brings to the role. Gurr and Drysdale (2013) propose that preparation for middle leadership requires a package of activities which includes long and short-term professional learning, induction, coaching, mentoring and a supportive performance management programme.

No participants indicated that the range of developmental activity that they had undertaken was part of a package tailored specifically for their needs. However, the leadership journey of ML1 and their comments during interview reveal a self-directed search for learning experiences that would give them the knowledge and skills that they believed they required for middle leadership. This responsibility for managing their professional learning was also evident in comments from some other participants who adopted a proactive approach to their professional development. ML2 used the term PRD to refer to a professional dialogue in which they explored next steps in their development:

> "… having the confidence to approach these people and express my desire to be involved in additional responsibilities or opportunities … going in and having a meeting with a person and asking if I can have a mini-PRD process with them, from where we sort of identify what I've been involved in my career, up until this point and what opportunities I could get involved in" (ML2).

The potential of Scotland's formal PRD process to promote a self-directed and tailored approach to leadership learning has already been discussed (section 4.6). However, ML2's engagement with senior leaders to request relevant experience also suggests a high level of confidence and a strong commitment to gaining leadership experience, perhaps fuelled by their ambition for promotion to a middle leader role.

The findings discussed here outline a developmental dimension when preparing for middle leadership in which participants might engage in activities to develop leadership capacities, such as exploring the requirements of the role though observing and working with established middle leaders and gaining leadership experience in temporary or voluntary roles. Although evidence of a formal, planned leadership development package is limited, the activities of ML1 and ML2 (see Table 5a) suggest that a self-directed, pro-active approach to leadership development can generate a supportive response from colleagues and provide leadership knowledge and experience that can help prepare individuals for a middle leader role.

5.4.2.1 Strategic

Table 5a and previous discussion reveals that, as aspiring middle leaders, some participants had engaged in public-facing activities such as leading or presenting on aspects of pedagogy, curriculum or assessment. Further to previous discussion, engagement in these public activities could suggest an understanding of the need to make their knowledge and skills visible to others as a means of demonstrating expertise to their peers and thus help build credibility. The development activities listed by ML1 and ML2 (see Table 5a) includes several highly visible actions that allowed them to showcase their commitment, professionalism and expertise and thus demonstrate their middle leadership potential to others (for example leading a school or departmental responsibility on a voluntary basis, or a leading staff development activity). ML1 also spoke of how engagement with master's level study helped enhance their understanding of policy, which they hoped would allow them to convey an informed approach when discussing it with colleagues and ultimately help build their professional capital (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012): "… the biggest thing that I took from that initially was … that the policy background was there and that building my professional capital would be greatly enhanced by talking about and engaging with that policy". When considered along with their participation in public-facing activities, this quotation also reveals the participant's tacit understanding of the importance of demonstrating their knowledge and expertise to colleagues to build credibility and respect as a potential middle leader (Gurr & Drysdale, 2013; Leithwood, 2016; Lipscombe et al., 2021; Paranosic & Riveros, 2017).

Activities such as assisting a senior leader in the implementation of a school initiative had been helpful in raising the profile and enhancing the reputation of aspiring middle leaders, particularly when these involved leading associated staff development sessions and, sometimes, information sessions beyond school. Consistent with the assertions of Irvine and Brundrett (2019), participants had also learned from their experience of leadership in other contexts such as with national organisations like the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA). As previously discussed, several participants were SQA markers and used their training and experience to enhance their practice and that of their peers. For example, ML1 had a lead marker role, which ultimately positioned them as an authority on SQA assessment matters and resulted in them leading relevant staff development within school, the local authority

and at national SQA meetings and events. This led to them assuming the voluntary leadership of their specific subject area within the faculty and of a whole school initiative. It also provided a platform to cultivate a positive professional reputation within school and beyond and they ultimately achieved a substantive middle leader post.

Discussion throughout this section therefore argues that the leadership development activities in which individuals engage when preparing for middle leadership have two dimensions: a developmental dimension in which aspiring middle leaders engage in a range of activities to develop knowledge and skills in pedagogy and leadership, often on a voluntary basis, and a strategic dimension in which teachers seek to demonstrate their pedagogical expertise and leadership potential to others as they strive to gain credibility as a potential leader.

5.4.3 Summary

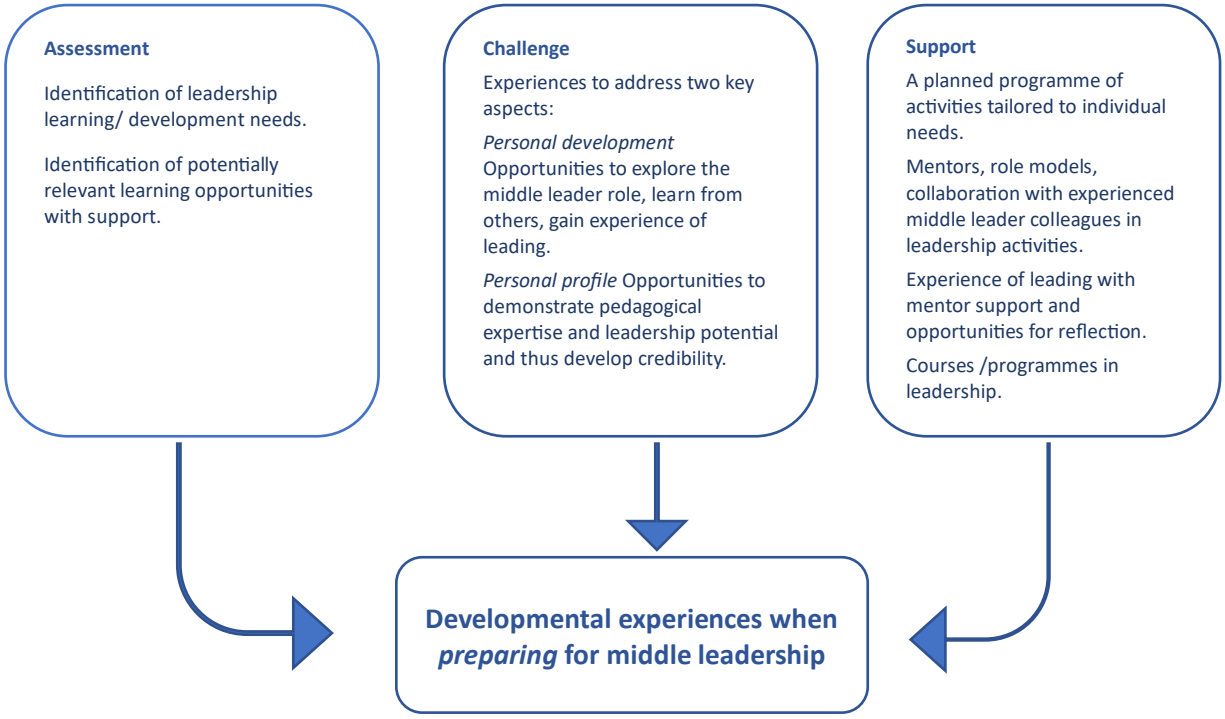
In a theme which proposes that middle leadership development occurs in stages, this subtheme explores findings which reveal that the first stage involves *preparing for middle leadership*. At this stage aspiring middle leaders seek to learn about the role, gain leadership experience, knowledge and skills, and demonstrate their leadership potential to others. The identification of stages of middle leadership development, the defining characteristics of each stage and the key developmental purposes of *preparing for middle leadership* (to develop in leadership and nurture personal credibility) are significant, as these insights are unique to this study and therefore help to make an original contribution to knowledge. The range of leadership activities outlined in this chapter, particularly by those who do not hold a formal leadership post, reveals the ways in which leadership is enacted by various individuals within school contexts and thus illustrates theories of distributed leadership (Gronn, 2002; Harris, 2013; Spillane et al., 2004).

Findings of this subtheme suggest that those preparing for middle leadership in Scotland's schools actively engage in a range of activities to fulfil their leadership learning objectives at this stage. Table 5a illustrates that activities include courses and programmes in middle leadership, or middle leading on a voluntary basis in school. The willingness of teachers to seek out various experiences to develop leadership expertise, and the availability of these

opportunities suggests increasing recognition across the education system of the need to prepare teachers for middle leadership. Findings also suggests that these activities had both a developmental and strategic role where the public-facing activities allowed individuals to demonstrate their readiness and suitability for middle leadership, help build credibility and ultimately smooth the transition to a middle leader post. Opportunities to gain leadership experience may often arise by chance (such as the absence of a colleague) and, as previously discussed can depend upon contextual factors, which can result in inconsistent access to relevant experience, however the experiences of ML1 and ML2 demonstrate how a self-directed and pro-active commitment to leadership development at this stage can facilitate an individualised and strategic approach and can also earn support from more experienced colleagues.

As discussed in Chapter 4, PRD offers a formal mechanism during which individuals can identify their leadership learning needs and any developmental experiences that might address these needs. The leader development model (McCauley et al., 2010) recommends three components to ensure that leadership development experiences deliver the desired results (assessment of individual needs, challenge to extend and develop leadership experience, and support to understand the demands of the task and to help individuals to make sense of and learn from the experience). In Figure 5a, the leader development model is used as a framework to curate findings from this subtheme along with relevant findings from theme 1 and the literature review to present the leadership learning needs of those preparing for a middle leader role.

Figure 5a: Leadership learning when preparing for middle leadership



5.5 Subtheme 2: Beginning as a middle leader

Further to the sub-theme of *preparing for middle leadership*, this sub-theme explores the leadership learning needs of middle leaders when beginning their first substantive middle leader post. Discussion will firstly explore characteristics of this stage of development, then focus upon the learning needs of beginning middle leaders. Within the subtheme three areas of leadership development were evident: relational, contextual and strategic. Discussion that follows will explore these areas of development and also the approaches to leadership learning that were thought to have particular significance at this stage.

5.5.1 Characteristics of *Beginning as a middle leader*

The stage at which teachers assume the full range of middle leadership responsibilities for the first time is acknowledged as a significant stage in their leadership development and is referred to in terms such as "emergent leadership" (Bush, 2008). Table 5b illustrates that several participants gained their first experience of middle leadership in entry level posts such as point 1 PT or assistant head of faculty, and also in posts such as senior teacher and assistant principal teacher (which are no longer part of the hierarchical leadership structure in Scotland's schools). Entry level posts such as these included some, but not all middle leadership responsibilities, for example, none of the entry level posts mentioned by participants included the line management of colleagues. Whereas those with permanent or temporary Principal Teacher or Faculty Head (PT/FH) posts experience a full range of responsibilities (such as the line management of individuals, leadership of teams, full responsibility for leading specific areas of curriculum or pastoral care). This subtheme considers the experiences of those beginning PT/FH posts and some entry level middle leader posts (point 1 PT). The terms PT/FH and point 1 PT are used in discussion to distinguish between these categories as required. Table 5b summarises the leadership development activities that participants had undertaken when beginning as a middle leader. As all participants had a middle leader role, Table 5b draws from interview data where participants reflected upon the leadership development activities that they had undertaken when beginning as a middle leader. Table 5b differs from Table 5a as it focusses upon the activities undertaken when beginning as a middle leader. As such, boxes relating to activities undertaken when aspiring to middle leadership are unticked in Table 5b.

Table 5b: Leadership learning activities undertaken as a beginning middle leader

Participant (arranged in ascending order of middle leadership experience)	**ML2**	**ML1**	**ML8**	**ML6**	**ML5**	**ML9**	**ML4**	**ML3**	**ML7**
PT/FH Experience (years) including temporary experience	**0**	**0**	**1.5**	**3**	**6**	**5**	**9**	**14**	**21**
Entry level middle leadership experience	**1.5**	**1.5**	**2**	**3**	**0**	**2**	**0**	**0.5**	**0**
Teaching experience	**5**	**11**	**10**	**10**	**12**	**26**	**18**	**25**	**25**
Leadership development activities undertaken									
In-school opportunities									
Assuming leadership responsibility on a temporary basis ("acting")									
Assuming a leadership responsibility on a voluntary basis, such as leading a school initiative or a curricular area (often as a subject specialist within a faculty)									
Informal coaching support									
Informal mentoring support					✓				
Professional reading									
Participating in colleague-led sessions- aspects of curriculum or pedagogy									
Delivering colleague-led sessions- aspects of curriculum or pedagogy									
In-school leadership learning delivered by colleagues and/or external provider									
Learning from other leaders									
Advice and support from school leaders (middle or senior leaders)	✓	✓			✓				
Learning from the leadership practice of role models					✓			✓	
Learning by collaborating with leaders on specific tasks	✓	✓						✓	
Peer support - networking with other middle leaders				✓					
Local authority opportunities									
Training in middle leadership	✓			✓	✓				✓
Attending local authority meetings of subject-specialist middle leaders	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Helping co-ordinate local authority meetings of subject-specialist middle leaders									
Role-specific training e.g. curriculum, pedagogy policy						✓			
Award-bearing programmes									
Master's level award in leadership (PgCert, dip or degree)	✓		✓		✓				
Master's level award in other fields (PgCert, dip or degree)						✓			
National opportunities									
Engagement with a professional association (such as the Institute of Physics)		✓							✓
Attending SQA information events									
Training and experience in marking for the SQA		✓					✓		✓
Training in a leadership role with SQA		✓							
Experience in a leadership role with SQA – leading teams of markers and presenting locally and nationally in relation to SQA assessment		✓							
The Scottish College for Educational Leadership - engagement with online learning in middle leadership and attending a training event		✓							
Other: hearing an inspirational speaker									
Other: Residential leadership programme									
Other: MOOC, Twitter		✓							
✓ = ongoing									

When discussing their first months as a PT/FH participants referred to the experience as a "baptism of fire" (ML4) or being "chucked into the deep end" (ML6). This suggests that they were simultaneously confronting a number of issues for the first time, and supports the assertions of authors who argue the significant differences between middle leadership and classroom teaching and the resultant need to prepare teachers for middle leadership (Adey, 2000; Adey & Jones, 1998; Brown et al., 2002; Irvine & Brundrett, 2016).

The limited time available to fulfil the responsibilities of middle leadership were acknowledged by participants and this contributed to the challenges experienced by those fulfilling the role for the first time: "I only had three (forty-eight-minute) periods more than a classroom teacher to do everything I needed to do" (ML6). ML8 spoke of how they addressed this challenge by sacrificing time previously devoted to lesson preparation:

> "…while you would have liked to have done fantastic all singing, all dancing lessons … you can't, you can't deliver "crit" style lessons when you're doing the faculty head role … and that can be quite a hard pill to swallow…" (ML8).

The colloquial term "crit" is used by ML8 to refer to a lesson which is prepared to a high standard, often by a student or probationer teacher, for the purposes of observation or assessment. This comment by ML8 suggests participants learn to prioritise tasks as they attempt to balance the demands of a significant teaching commitment with their leadership and management responsibilities. The time challenge of middle leading in schools are well established (Brundrett & Terrell, 2004; Bush, 2011; Collier et al., 2002) and scholars assert that balancing the sometimes competing responsibilities of teaching, leadership and management results in long working days with work rarely completed by the end of the day. These demanding expectations would certainly meet the criteria of 'challenge' as defined in the leadership development model (McCauley et al., 2010). It also confirms to the findings of Irvine and Brundrett (2016) who propose that encountering the full range of middle leadership responsibilities for the first time can be overwhelming and that it demands the acquisition of a new set of capabilities. As such, beginning middle leaders have specific leadership development needs when assuming a middle leader role for the first time.

5.5.2 Leadership learning when beginning as a middle leader

Data suggests that leadership learning priorities for beginning middle leaders included learning about the role, building relationships, and developing their area(s) of responsibility. The leadership learning needs identified at this stage could therefore be categorised as contextual, relational, and strategic. These areas are explored in the sections that follow.

5.5.2.1 Relational

Establishing positive relationships with pupils and staff was a priority for those beginning in middle leadership, however participants' experiences of trying to do so were varied. ML4 spoke of a culture in which they were able to rely upon departmental colleagues for support when beginning their PT/FH post: "I was lucky, I had a really nice department and there was no conflict or anything there, so you know, when we were pulling together … there weren't any kind of, any issues". ML7 also spoke of fulfilling a two-month temporary PT/FH role in another school and was therefore new to the staff and to the pupils:

> "… it nearly exhausted me, because it was quite a different school. The department were good, and they were very supportive of me … [However] you were the principal teacher in a school and didn't know any of the children … so you're relying on others to support you" (ML7).

The fact that ML7 was able to rely upon the support of colleagues when fulfilling a temporary PT/FH role could reflect the capacity of the individual to build positive relationships quicky, or could indicate a collaborative school and departmental culture in which development is supported and encouraged through dialogue with peers and collaborative working, as described by Seashore-Louis and Lee (2016). Thus staff and, possibly, the culture of the school helped to shape a context in which this beginning PT could gain the support (McCauley et al., 2010) they needed to ultimately learn from this leadership experience.

Despite viewing the establishment of relationships as a priority, the relational aspect of middle leadership was an area that others found more challenging when beginning a PT/FH post: "So, in post the harsh reality of the importance of relationships was really exposed"

(ML5). Some participants spoke of concerns about how they would be perceived and of working hard to earn the trust and credibility of their team:

> "… of course you're still always considering how other people are going to perceive things and how you're going to be viewed by others. I think I was so aware of that … and you need to be very, very careful how you interact with people, how you present things to people" (ML2).

In some cases, the need to preserve positive trusting relationships with individuals in their team resulted in a cautious approach when handling staff issues as demonstrated by ML8: "I mean having a challenging conversation would take less than five minutes, but I really thought long and hard about it every single time" (ML8).

Challenges could arise when participants were promoted within their own department. The change in status from team member and friend to PT/FH, forced beginning middle leaders to re-frame how they viewed themselves and their colleagues and adjust their behaviour accordingly. ML1 spoke of the need to guard against "sounding off" to friends within the team as they might have done before assuming a leadership role, and ML8 spoke of the need to "curate aspects of your personal self that don't help you in the professional self". Commenting upon their participation in postgraduate study, and alluding to some issues that their faculty dealt with, ML1 (a point 1 PT) observed:

> "… if I had to choose anything about what I wanted more from that PG Cert [Middle Leadership and Management] it would be a bit more about the kind of the friction and tension that you get from your staff when you have to sell something that you know they're not going to like" (ML1).

Edwards-Groves et al. (2016) argue that a crucial aspect of middle leadership is the role middle leaders play in cultivating trust with and among colleagues and thus facilitating collaboration within teams. The perspectives of ML1 and others suggest that beginning middle leaders recognise the relational challenges of middle leadership, although they may not yet be confident in their ability to deal with these. ML8's description of the thought and

planning they undertook when preparing for a challenging conversation with a colleague illustrates how limited experience of leading others can cause some anxiety and result in a cautious approach to handling relational issues when beginning in a PT/FH role. These findings are consistent with the findings of Irvine and Brundrett who assert that the management of staff is an aspect of the role that beginning middle leaders find particularly daunting (Irvine & Brundrett, 2019), and for which teachers need to acquire new capabilities to equip them for middle leadership (Irvine & Brundrett, 2016).

Further to their comment above, ML1 discusses a course studied during their master's programme in which they applied ethical lenses (Shapiro & Gross, 2013) to their decision-making for a challenging situation:

> "The ethics course has been fabulous ... what I will say, in terms of why that was so useful. The ethical dilemma that I choose really did, make me critically look at myself in terms of how I perceive a certain member of staff and how to make our relationship better after a critical incident. And it has worked, you know. There's been a real change in the way that we interact and the way that he, the kind of trust that he puts in me again as perhaps I don't think that he was particularly trusting of me. That in itself is a fantastic outcome … So you know, right from the start of last session, there has been so much tangible good that having done that professional learning has kind of impacted - not just for me or for the members of staff but also for the kids that are there, you know?" (ML1).

Another beginning middle leader spoke of how the same course: "made me go back recently and reflect on my values and how, how do I communicate my values on a regular basis with people that I'm leading in school whether that is the pupils or groups of staff" (ML2). Highlighting the difference in the roles of classroom teacher and middle leader, and the resulting need for leadership preparation for those beginning in the role, Irvine and Brundrett (2016, p. 87) argue that "novice" middle leaders initially rely upon "an analytical and theoretical method of reasoning" due to the limited range of middle leadership experience from which they can draw to inform their practice and decision-making. Both ML1 and ML2 are new to middle leadership, to an extent their quotations illustrate a

theoretical approach to reasoning as described by Irvine and Brundrett (2016). However these quotations also highlight potential benefits to practice of engaging with leadership theory at an early stage in middle leadership. The quotations illustrate how the use of resources such as decision-making frameworks can support the practice of beginning middle leaders. Indeed they can facilitate a guided consideration of key factors such as relationships with colleagues their leadership practice and their priorities when handling a challenging situation. They can therefore support the decision-making and the relational practice of beginning middle leaders until they have sufficient relevant experience from which to draw to inform their professional judgement and practice.

5.5.2.2 Contextual

Participants spoke of the need to learn how to address a range of administrative, management and other leadership tasks when beginning a middle leader role. This involved navigating the organisational structures and systems of the school, gaining awareness of policy, and learning how to perform routine management tasks such as balancing the departmental budget. This applied to those new to middle leaders and also to experienced middle leaders who had transferred to new roles or contexts:

> "… I'm coming from the experience of having done it in an acting capacity, so I still don't know how to do everything … I'm [now] in a different council so the way that they do things is completely different to the way they did them elsewhere" (ML8).

> "… it wasn't easy, because obviously transitioning from one school to another, one local authority to another, you kind of feel like you, you go in as a novice leader really. You know what you need to do, but actually the protocols and how that school works operationally puts you back a wee bit and obviously that leads to toes being stepped on and relationships you know, really 'jarring'" (ML6).

The experiences of ML8 and ML6 illustrate the significance of contextual knowledge to effective leadership. A lack of awareness of local protocols and procedures prevented ML8 and ML6, both of whom had some middle leadership experience, from being able to fulfil their role as effectively as they might have hoped. In the case of ML6, this also resulted in

some relational challenges. These experiences reinforce the previously discussed importance of induction for those who are new to middle leadership or new to the school using an approach that includes social and contextual components to enable the individual to feel part of the organisation and are equipped with the knowledge required to fulfil the role (Bush, 2008, 2018).

On a similar vein Reeves et al. (2002) identify the potential of schools as sites for social learning, for the development of professionalism and the formation of professional identity. They argue that weak socialisation can ultimately result in a lack of shared culture, limit constructive professional dialogue and thus contribute to a culture that is less professionally collaborative. Given the significant role that middle leaders play in developing and nurturing positive, productive culture and communities for learning (Fluckiger et al.,2015) an effective induction experience could be central to helping ensure that positive cultures and core values are maintained. It could also provide those beginning a new middle leader role with individual support to aid their transition to the role and to learn from the experience.

As previously discussed, beginning a new middle leader role presents several experiences from which middle leaders can learn, these might be described as experiential 'challenges' which offer opportunities for leadership growth (McCauley et al., 2010), or learning experiences from which middle leaders might eventually draw to inform their future decision making (Irvine & Brundrett, 2019). Leadership learning from these experiential challenges is more likely when adequate support is in place to help make sense of and learn from the experience (Harris et al., 2001; McCauley et al., 2010). None of the participants spoke of any input to support their transition to the role, however these findings suggest again that relevant, meaningful induction has the potential to offer logistical and developmental support to those beginning a middle leader role and also help facilitate a smooth, effective transition which could benefit the individual and their new context.

5.5.2.3 Strategic

A factor that distinguished beginning middle leaders from those with more experience was a concentrated focus upon their area of responsibility in their early days in post. Beginning middle leaders appeared to form a vision for their area of responsibility quickly and were

keen to implement change: “everyone’s priority in a new job, is to make sure your departments is, you know, everything is perfect” (ML4). Previous quotations from ML6 and ML8, suggest that engagement with theory, gained through participation in an award-bearing course helped equip them with knowledge and skills to inform their leadership when beginning as a middle leader. Similarly, ML8 outlines transformative benefits of learning about relevant research and theory in an award-bearing middle leadership programme whilst fulfilling a temporary (‘acting’) middle leader role: “Thinking about this, actually having the tools to generate change in a sustained way, while undertaking the acting position was totally transformative”. The use of words such as “generate” and “sustained” hint at their strategic ambitions to effect change. Reflecting upon beginning in a PT/FH role, ML6 appears to balance their ambitions for immediate change with the need to gain the support of their team: “I needed the good will of people because I needed people to buy in [to their proposals for change], that was already part of my leadership style”. Irvine and Brundrett (2016) identify a clear vision for the department as an enabling factor in supporting the work of novice middle leaders, an understanding which is evident in the quotations of ML4, ML6 and ML8. The quotations of ML6 and ML8 suggest a more nuanced, strategic consideration of how change might be enacted, which is potentially due to their study of the topic in an award-bearing course. They demonstrate consideration of the need to develop and agree a shared vision within their team, and the importance of being able to facilitate a sense of common purpose and joint actions to achieve these common goals as outlined in several studies (Glover et al., 1998; Leithwood, 2016; Tang et al., 2022).

When reflecting upon their early days as a PT/FH none of the participants alluded to wider school issues, unlike more experienced PT/FHs who were more aware of the work of the wider school and how their department contributed to this work (discussed in forthcoming section 5.6). The need to equip middle leaders with a range of strategic skills, including the ability to adopt a whole-school perspective and contribute to whole-school development planning has been highlighted by scholars for many years (Adey & Jones, 1998; Brown et al., 2002). The fact that a whole school perspective is less evident when beginning the role and more evident in established, experienced PT/FHs, could suggest that this perspective develops with time and experience in a middle leader role, possibly when middle leaders are confident that immediate departmental priorities have been addressed.

5.5.3 Learning from others when beginning as a middle leader

Previous discussion has highlighted the relational, contextual, and strategic learning needs of those beginning in middle leadership. Discussion that follows will consider ways in which these learning needs were addressed.

When beginning as middle leaders some participants (ML1, ML2, ML6 and ML9) spoke of how they drew from the practice of middle leader role models to inform their individual approach to leadership. ML6 spoke of the formative influence of highly respected middle leader role model upon their leadership practice:

> "[the middle leader] is actually really, really similar to me and my viewpoints and I think he was the one that had the greatest shape on me as a leader in school. I really, really respected him" (ML6).

ML2 observed leadership practice, with a view to adapting positive aspects of the approach to suit their personal leadership style:

> "… you try to emulate someone else, you can possibly try to lift something, lift how they do things, try to use their approaches, and implement that … [but] I think it's about identifying what are their strengths and what sort of things could I take from that" (ML2).

ML1 spoke of what they had learned about leading colleagues through observing and working collaboratively with the PT/FH:

> "… [he] taught me that he made mistakes at the start but, you know, by being able to just be empathetic with people and being able to see it from their perspective and being able to think carefully about the implications of any decisions he makes …" (ML1).

As previously discussed, ML9 also spoke of learning from mistakes:

> "I think I probably learned from other people's mistakes as well in a way … so I probably learned from the negatives as well as the positives" (ML9).

To an extent this finding illustrates again the perspectives of Busher (2005) who argues that personal biographies shape the identity of middle leaders, and that the values they bring to their role come from a variety of life and professional experiences. It also aligns with Reeves et al. (2002) who maintain that the greatest influence upon teacher professionalism comes from their immediate teacher community. The quotations above reveal how experiences such as observing (good and bad) middle leader role models or working collaboratively with middle leaders within their school community has shaped and informed the leadership practice of those beginning in a middle leader role. The ways in which the skilled, experienced middle leaders share their practice, nurture experiences for leadership learning and shape contexts in which colleagues can learn illuminates the cyclical nature of middle leadership development, in which, through various forms of leadership learning, those aspiring to and beginning in middle leadership ultimately become the established and experienced leaders from whom the next generation of middle leaders learn.

However, comparison of data in Tables 5a and 5b suggests that the opportunities for advice and support from experienced middle leader colleagues, which were found to be helpful when aspiring to the role, reduce significantly when beginning as a PT/FH. Table 5b reveals that opportunities to work closely with an experienced leader when beginning as a middle leader are rarely cited, this is in stark contrast to the range of opportunities available when aspiring to the role, or when working in an entry level role. This hiatus in support from more experienced middle leaders when beginning as a PT/FH could arise from a change in status from team-member who has access to a middle leader line manager for advice and support, to middle leader who is expected to fulfil this role for others. It could also arise from individuals assuming a promoted post in a new school in which they have not yet established support networks. ML5 was the only participant who mentioned that they had benefitted from (informal) mentoring support when they began their post. This support had helped them navigate the contextual and relational issues they encountered in their first years in post:

> "I had two very experienced people who knew the staff, who knew the complications and who really mentored me … [sharing] all the sorts of things you don't know about being a faculty head, nobody tells you about them and they were a key source of keeping me right because there's so many things that you don't know until you're in and you're doing the job" (ML5).

This experience contrasts with that of ML8 who compared their experience of beginning as a middle leader to that of beginning as a teacher and identified the need for middle leader mentors who could support the transition to a PT/FH role and provide advice on practical, contextual, or relational matters similar to the approach used for probationer teachers in Scotland:

> "…someone that I could go to with operational stuff, you know? … How do you work out your budget? How do you make sure that you don't go over your photocopying [limit]? Just silly little things like that, but also … 'I've got an issue with this member of staff who is pushing back', or 'I've done this, how could you deal with that?' … That's something that I think would be better- if there was some sort of mentor" (ML8).

A number of scholars (Gurr & Drysdale, 2013; Harris et al., 2001; Irvine & Brundrett, 2019) argue that an integrated package of support for middle leaders should comprise of professional learning, opportunities for experiential learning and reflection. Harris et al. (2001) argues that change is more likely to occur from reflection when the process is supported by a coach, mentor or critical friend. In the case of ML8 a mentor had the potential to both advise on the issues that they mention and also support critical reflection to help make sense of their experiences and thus develop their leadership practice. Despite the potential developmental benefits, findings throughout this subtheme suggests that the support of a mentor is not routinely available for beginning middle leaders in secondary schools in Scotland, that time for reflection can be limited and induction is not evident. If credibility as a leader requires the demonstration of a high level of subject knowledge and professional competence (Gurr & Drysdale, 2013; Leithwood, 2016; Lipscombe et al., 2021; Paranosic & Riveros, 2017), the reduction in opportunities for leadership learning and

support from more experienced leaders at this stage is therefore particularly significant as information, advice and support at this point could support a smooth transition to the PT/FH role which could ultimately contribute to the beginning middle leader establishing credibility as a leader.

With limited formal supports in place, some participants had established their own network of mutual support and professional friendship when beginning in a middle leader role. Findings discussed in section 4.6 reveal how ML6 benefitted from the mutual peer support of other PT/FH colleagues beginning their posts at the same time. Similarly, ML9 spoke of the importance of working to identify one or more trusted middle leader colleagues who could provide professional friendship and support: "… I think that's a good leadership tip. I know who mine are in school and that's probably where I draw my experience and strength from as well".

As discussed in theme 1, middle leaders, including those beginning in the role, also benefitted from participation in events out with schools. Opportunities such as award-bearing postgraduate programmes extended the peer networks from whom middle leaders could learn and draw support, and exposed individuals to external inputs that could minimise the re-cycling of (good and bad) practice as discussed by Reeves et al. (2002).

The findings above therefore reveal that the leadership of those beginning in a middle leader role draws from leadership practice that they have observed and from previous experience of working with middle leader colleagues. Their leadership learning can be supported in various ways including induction, support (such as mentoring) from experienced leader colleagues, and experiences that provide opportunities to learn and engage with others beyond school. These learning experiences could contribute, as appropriate to an individualised leadership learning package for beginning middle leaders.

5.5.4 Learning in entry level middle leader roles when beginning in middle leadership

Table 4e (in section 4.6) illustrates that over half of the participants had gained leadership experience in an entry level role such as point 1 PT (or similar such as senior teacher or assistant principal teacher). These entry level middle leader roles are discussed in section

4.4. As previously discussed, these posts did not normally include a line management responsibility, and participants viewed them as an opportunity to gain leadership knowledge and experience, often on a journey to a middle leader post with a greater level of responsibility. These posts also allowed participants to demonstrate their leadership capabilities to others. Similar to voluntary leadership activities, those engaging in point 1 PT roles appeared to benefit from some support to inform their leadership practice. ML6 spoke of this being the point at which they received school support to participate in local authority leadership training: "… that's when I was allowed to go on a year's course called "Current leader, future leader" and the school paid for me to go, and [it] involved getting out [of school] on some days".

As discussed in theme 1, ML1, who was responsible for an aspect of curriculum within a wider faculty, spoke of undertaking their role in the knowledge that the faculty head was ultimately responsible: "… essentially as my line manager is still responsible for the whole Science faculty and, if you like, the "buck" still does stop with him …" (ML1).

ML2 spoke of building networks of individuals whom they could approach for advice and support:

> "I think, first of all, it's about increasing your confidence as a leader. And, because I felt that I've had a strong support network that I can lean on and go to and receive help from I've become a much more confident leader, more confident in my ability … I am going to them quite regularly, but eventually, they've actually been able to sort of take a step back and you're able to go on your own. You know? … I have been able to trust my own decision making, because I've learned and developed expertise in different areas … I've developed confidence." (ML2)

The quotation by ML2 helps exemplify the assertions of McCauley et al. (2010) who argue that support is required to enable the middle leader to make sense of and learn from the leadership learning experience. In the examples above, individuals cite various ways in which they were supported when beginning in an entry-level middle leader role, these include opportunities for training, a smaller remit (often without a line management responsibility), and support from key individuals. This suggests that experience in an entry

level middle leader role can provide a scaffolded opportunity to develop some middle leadership knowledge and skills and also build confidence in leadership abilities.

When exploring the relational demands of beginning in middle leadership in section 5.4, participants reported that point 1 PT posts had provided some opportunities to observe the relational demands of middle leadership without the responsibilities for line-managing colleagues. Without previous experience of line managing staff, the relational dimension of middle leadership could become a significant area for development when moving to a PT/FH post. Reflecting upon their move from point 1 PT to faculty head, ML6 stated:

> "I went from having no line manager responsibility … I feel that when you when you have had no line manager responsibility you really, really have to utilise all the tools in your tool kit when it comes to leadership, … you have to be that person that is willing to go over and above … because I needed people to buy in" (ML6).

It is therefore evident that the experiential learning gained in a point 1 PT post is inevitably constrained by the scope of the role. The difference in capabilities required for point 1 PT roles when compared to the responsibilities of a faculty head highlight again a hierarchy of middle leadership posts in Scotland. Furthermore, the varied range of experience that individuals bring to their middle leader role reinforces again the need for an individualised approach to middle leadership learning.

Discussion throughout this section proposes specific developmental areas for those beginning in middle leadership. These include the need to develop relational capacities, contextual knowledge and strategic awareness and skills. Entry level middle leader roles provide an opportunity to gain some experience of middle leadership, but as these posts often do not include the full repertoire of responsibilities that might be expected of a PT/FH the transition to a PT/FH role would benefit from the support of a tailored leadership development package which could include a relevant induction programme, opportunities to build relationships and credibility, input from experienced middle leader mentors and peers and ongoing engagement with courses and programmes in leadership.

5.5.5 Summary

In conclusion therefore, this subtheme explores the leadership learning of those beginning in middle leadership. Findings support scholarly assertions (Gurr and Drysdale, 2013) that middle leadership development for those beginning as a middle leader demands a package of individualised experiences and support.

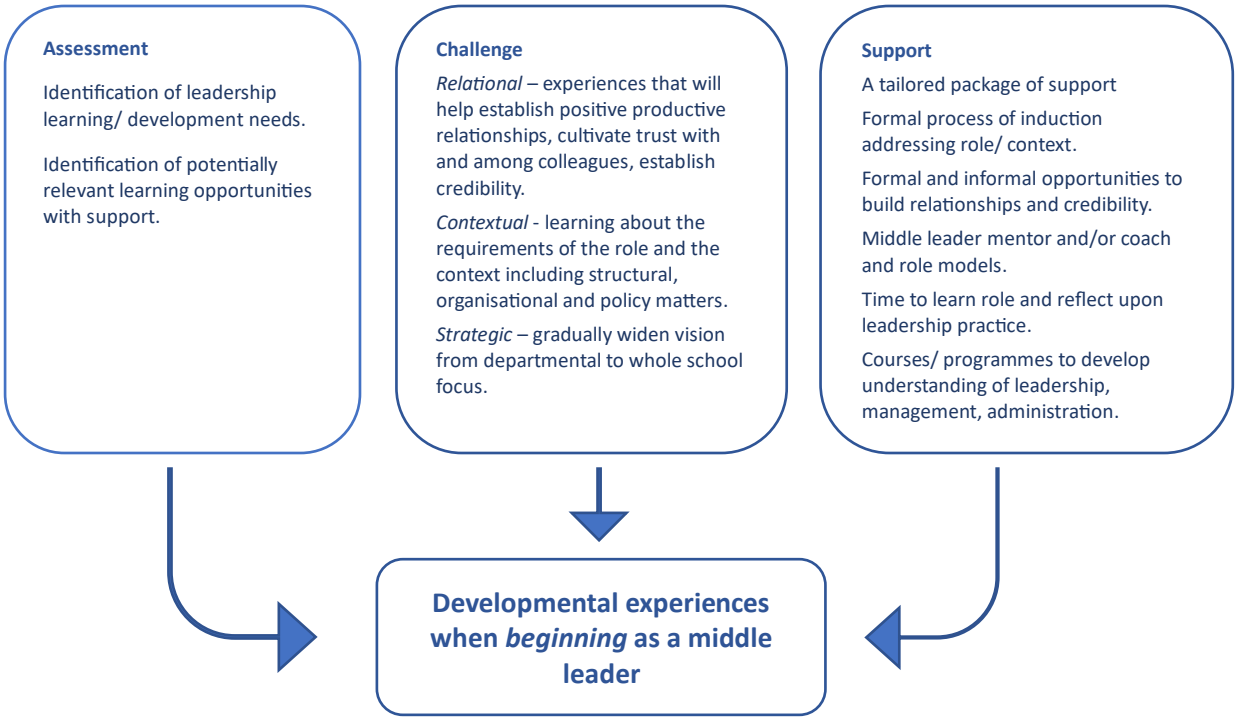
The experience of beginning in middle leadership is explored by a number of scholars (Adey, 2000; Adey & Jones, 1998; Irvine & Brundrett, 2016; Irvine & Brundrett, 2019) who argue the need to prepare for middle leadership and highlight the potential benefits of supports such as coaching and mentoring. The findings of this study add to theoretical knowledge by exploring the leadership learning needs at this stage in more depth and categorising these needs as contextual (developing an understanding of the school and departmental context including the required management and administrative tasks), relational (knowledge of colleagues and advance interpersonal and intrapersonal skills) and strategic (strategic leadership including vision for area of responsibility and beyond).

The increasing availability of entry level roles in middle leadership can be helpful, as roles with a limited range of responsibilities can build confidence and credibility, aid career progression and provide an opportunity to gain some middle leadership experience, albeit limited as it does not fully prepare individuals for all aspects of a PT/FH role.

Academic programmes in the practice of leadership and relevant scholarly literature can support the leadership development of beginning middle leaders, along with opportunities to engage with others who are beginning middle leadership posts. Support and mentoring from more experienced leaders can support the transition to a PT/FH role. The need for contextual knowledge means that this support is helpful both for those beginning in a PT/FH role and also for those with some experience who are moving to a new post. However, data suggests that, within the Scottish context, there is a reduction in the availability of support from experienced leaders for those beginning a PT/FH role, at a time when it could be most beneficial.

Figure 5b uses the leader development model (2010) as a framework to present findings from this subtheme along with relevant literature and other findings to summarise the leadership learning needs of those beginning in a middle leader role.

Figure 5b: Leadership learning when beginning as a middle leader



5.6 Subtheme 3: Developing as a middle leader

This sub-theme builds upon subthemes one and two: *preparing for middle leadership* and *beginning as a middle leader*. The thematic map (Figure 4a) illustrates how this subtheme also links back to the theme of experience in a cyclical process whereby those who have this level of experience and expertise contribute to shaping the leadership learning experiences of others, and thus the cycle continues. In addition to contributing in various ways to the leadership development of others, established, experienced middle leaders also contribute to the learning culture of the team, department and school (i.e. the contexts in which they work). This ultimately links the two themes of this study: experience and context.

This subtheme focusses upon the leadership learning needs of experienced, established middle leaders (PT/FHs) as they continue to develop leadership expertise in their role. Drawing from the participant sample for this study, this stage of middle leadership includes those who were not "aspiring", "beginning" or in an entry level leadership role. This stage is broad in its scope as it includes middle leaders with a varied range of experience. Further study, using a more purposive data sample comprising only of experienced, established PT/FHs could illuminate further developmental stages at this level and the associated leadership learning needs. This level of refinement was not possible within the participant sample of this small-scale study.

Discussion that follows will first explore the characteristics of this stage of middle leader development. It will then consider the leadership learning of established, experienced PT/FHs as they continue to develop their leadership practice. The indirect link between this subtheme and the theme of context is particularly evident in this section and is reflected in the regular reference to issues previously discussed when exploring the theme of context.

5.6.1 Characteristics of *developing as a middle leader*

None of the experienced, established PT/FH participants alluded to a stage at which they had achieved "mastery" as described by Irvine & Brundrett (2019). Their perspectives throughout the discussions appeared to reflect professional confidence and an understanding of the need to continue to develop as a professional and a leader, consistent

with current professional expectations in Scotland (General Teaching Council Scotland, 2012a, 2012b). Table 5c summarises their leadership learning activities.

Table 5c: Leadership learning activities undertaken as a developing PT/FH

Participant (in ascending order of middle leadership experience)	**ML2**	**ML1**	**ML8**	**ML6**	**ML5**	**ML9**	**ML4**	**ML3**	**ML7**
PT/FH Experience (years) including temporary experience	**0**	**0**	**1.5**	**3**	**6**	**5**	**9**	**14**	**21**
Entry level middle leadership experience	**1.5**	**1.5**	**2**	**3**	**0**	**2**	**0**	**0.5**	**0**
Teaching experience	**5**	**11**	**10**	**10**	**12**	**26**	**18**	**25**	**25**
Leadership development activities undertaken									
In-school opportunities									
Assuming leadership responsibility on a temporary basis ("acting")				✓			✓		
Assuming a leadership responsibility on a voluntary basis, such as leading a school initiative or a curricular area (often as a subject specialist within a faculty)							✓		
Informal coaching support									
Informal mentoring support									
Professional reading									
Participating in colleague-led sessions in aspects of curriculum or pedagogy									
Delivering colleague-led sessions in aspects of curriculum or pedagogy									
In-school leadership learning delivered by colleagues and/or external provider									
Learning from other leaders									
Advice and support from school leaders (middle or senior leaders)					✓	✓			
Learning from the leadership practice of role models							✓		
Learning by collaborating with leaders on specific tasks				✓			✓		
Peer support - networking with other middle leaders				✓					✓
Local authority opportunities									
Training in middle leadership									
Attending local authority meetings of subject-specialist middle leaders			✓	✓		✓		✓	✓
Helping co-ordinate local authority meetings of subject-specialist middle leaders					✓				
Role-specific training e.g. curriculum, pedagogy policy				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Award-bearing programmes									
Master's level award in leadership (PgCert, dip or degree)			✓	✓	✓		✓		
Master's level award in other fields (PgCert, dip or degree)									
National opportunities									
Engagement with a professional association (such as the Institute of Physics)									✓
Attending SQA information events									✓
Training and experience in marking for the SQA									✓
Training in a leadership role with SQA									
Experience in a leadership role with SQA – leading teams of markers and presenting locally and nationally in relation to SQA assessment									
The Scottish College for Educational Leadership - engagement with online learning in middle leadership and attending a training event									
Other: hearing an inspirational speaker								✓	
Other: Residential leadership programme									✓
Other: MOOC, Twitter									

✓ = ongoing ✓ = to gain DHT experience

Table 5c illustrates that the participant sample included PT/FHs who wished to remain in a middle leader role and some who were aspiring to more senior leader roles (see green highlighting). Data for ML1 and ML2 is not included in Table 5c (see grey columns) due to their limited middle leader experience which did not include working in a PT/FH role at the time of interview.

PT/FHs with greater experience, who were continuing to develop in their middle leadership appeared able to draw from their experience to demonstrate greater levels of professional confidence and strategic awareness and a more informed approach to the leadership of others. These aspects are discussed throughout this subtheme.

5.6.1.1 Professional Confidence

A characteristic that distinguished developing PT/FHs from those beginning in the role was that of professional confidence, this was conveyed in a reflective comment from ML3: "One of the things I learned…, which I think is useful, is to clear the pathways throughout anything … just simplifying the ways for the year groups … to clear paths for staff engagement". This quotation outlines how ML3 has learned from their experience of middle leadership and the use of the phrase "One of the things I learned" reveals an associated process of reflection upon their practice. Similarly, when discussing their middle leadership, ML9 spoke of "being reflective of what works" acknowledging that they had: "… learned along the way, and all of the experiences that I've had have all been helpful. They might not all have been positive ones, but I've learned from them …".

The capacity of professional reflection to provide an individualised opportunity for middle leaders to take control of and develop their leadership practice within their unique context has been argued for many years. Glover *et al.* (1998) argue the need for structured opportunities for middle leaders to reflect upon their role, their competencies and areas for development. Harris *et al.* (2001), assert that the well-established benefits of reflection to professional learning include the opportunity to internalise new knowledge and consider implications for practice. They also claim that professional reflection is essential to the processes of transferring new knowledge to the workplace. The quotation above from ML3 suggests that reflection upon their experience in middle leadership over time has equipped

them with an assured understanding of the requirements of their role, of strategies and approaches that they can use to deliver specific outcomes and a people-focussed approach to middle leadership. When discussing their approach to middle leadership and the skills needed to fulfil the role, ML4 also reveals confidence and the ability to draw from a range of knowledge and skills to communicate personal values and a departmental vision.

> "But skills. Gosh, I mean, they're the, the given, the interpersonal skills, the communication skills. You have to be able to stand up and communicate what you're thinking and where it comes from and be able to share - people should be able to see what person you are from the decisions you make, and the priorities, and the vision you have for where you want to go with your department" (ML4).

Discussion of values distinguished the most experienced, established PT/FHs from others in this study. ML4 also spoke of being "transparent and consistent so that anyone in the department could predict what you would do in certain situations". ML3 alluded to how they drew from their values to inform their professional judgement: "…you constantly have to say 'I've got a professional judgement to make on this. What is the reasonable thing to do? What is the correct thing to do?'"

The perspectives of ML3 and ML4 contrast with that of a beginning middle leader; although clearly motivated by a desire to make a positive difference for pupils, ML1 found it difficult to understand the need to devote time to a school-organised event which was designed to allow staff to explore their professional values:

> "I totally agree that personal values are absolutely important and being able to, you know, think about what would you go to the wire for? If you know what I mean? … I think too much time has been kind of allocated to it" (ML1).

It is argued that that effective middle leadership of colleagues in educational contexts requires the articulation and modelling of a commitment to core values and principles (Leithwood, 2016; Tang et al., 2022), such as the moral purpose of education and ensuring positive outcomes for pupils. Fluckiger et al. (2015) propose this as a dimension of

development of self. The focus and the quality of the whole-school learning event discussed by ML1 is not known, and a number of factors could have precipitated this negative perspective. However the fact that ML1 did not feel that they learned from this opportunity could also support the assertions of McCauley et al. (2010) that participants must understand the intended learning outcomes of a leadership learning experience in order to fully benefit from it. The contrasting perspectives of ML1, a beginning middle leader in an entry level role, with those of two experienced PT/FHs (ML3, ML4) could also suggest that, for some, appreciation of the significance of core values to their middle leadership, and the confidence to articulate these values, develops with time and experience in a middle leader role. Given the previously discussed demands of beginning in a middle leader role and the tendency of beginning middle leaders to focus primarily upon their area of responsibility, activities that are not perceived to be relevant to this responsibility could be allocated a lower level of priority by a middle leader beginning in the role.

5.6.1.2 Strategic Awareness

Contrasting with the narrow departmental focus of beginning middle leaders, established experienced PT/FHs embraced a wider strategic focus. They reflected upon the importance of making a difference to the lives of their pupils and how they might facilitate this: "… you really look at how to help your pupils be as successful as possible … that's a big part of middle leadership" (ML4). They were also aware of the contribution of their team to the work of the wider school and were keen to ensure that this was widely understood:

> "… to make sure that your department know the part that it plays in the school's success. That obviously goes with celebrating the success - the small ones in the big ones too to, to make sure that, you know, they are seen as valued" (ML4)

> "… being able to sell yourself and sell your department you know? That PR job that you have to do …" (ML7).

Experienced, established PT/FHs were aware of their individual contribution to the leadership of wider school agendas. This was demonstrated in comments which revealed

middle leaders' engagement with their team to convince, persuade and secure support for the achievement of whole school objectives:

> "… I supposed to go back to relationships … I know we always quote the "buffer and bridge", we always do that! And having the relationships to take what your hierarchy are passing down to say to your department 'look, I know we are all busy and all, but this is what we have to do, and we are one cog in a very big machine, but if our cog doesn't work, then everything else kind of seizes'" (ML4).

The tensions of working in the 'middle' layer of leadership within a school are widely acknowledged. Bennett et al. (2007) use the term 'buffer and bridge' to describe middle leaders' upward and downward engagement with senior leaders and teams of colleagues, and the related mediation of differing views and demands. They identify this aspect of the role as the source of two key tensions; firstly, divided loyalties between team/department and senior leadership, secondly the challenges of balancing line management responsibilities with expectations that they will lead and foster a culture of collegiality. In the quotation above, ML4 refers to these tensions and also reveals some of the relational skills required of the role and how ML4 draws from knowledge of their team, and their experience to navigate this challenging aspect of the role.

5.6.1.3 Leading others

Table 5c illustrates the range of ways that experienced, established PT/FHs developed the capacities of those aspiring to leadership. This included activities such as role-modelling good practice, signposting relevant learning opportunities, working collaboratively with aspiring middle leaders, and providing advice and support. As discussed in section 4.6 those aspiring to middle leadership highly valued the input of experienced middle leaders to their leadership development, demonstrating again the significant role played by experienced, established PT/FHs in the leadership development of others.

Some PT/FHs spoke of the ways in which they nurtured and made the most of the specific talents within their team. ML3 recognised the "incredible expertise" in their department, and spoke of the "really enriching experience" of working collaboratively with colleagues,

and the steps they took to allow individuals to exercise leadership within the faculty so that all could benefit from the range of expertise and skills amongst departmental colleagues.

Unlike beginning middle leaders, who found the leadership of other adults a new and challenging experience, experienced, established PT/FHs were more self-assured. They highlighted the importance of working to develop relationships, although they also acknowledged that handing conflict or a "difficult" staff situation remained one of the more demanding aspects of the role.

> "… even today, we had quite a turbulent day at work, and my leadership skills … they were called upon to use quite clearly today with the staff and the department … I think being an effective middle leader is all about relationships. It really is, you know? I mean … I don't think that comes immediately as a middle leader you've got to work at that" (ML9).

ML4 demonstrated an understanding of the nuanced nature of relationships within teams stating that "the relationships you have with different people are very different". Some PT/FHs revealed strategies they used in their leadership of other adults such as "talking things through with people and looking at what the problems are… negotiation skills" (ML7), or ensuring that their team felt adequately supported:

> "I think that is one of the things about being a middle leader is that, you know, you need to make sure that your staff feel supported … You've got to work at building trust and making sure that [staff] feel supported … if [staff] come to me, I listen" (ML9)

The need to build strong, productive relationships and the importance of gaining trust and respect was reflected in the wide range of interpersonal and communication skills that were cited when PT/FHs were asked about the knowledge and skills needed for middle leadership, thus broadly aligning with the observations of several scholars. Indeed, the quotations above from ML3 and ML9 show how they work to motivate, inspire, challenge and support teams of staff (Cardno & Bassett, 2015; Fluckiger et al., 2015; Glover et al., 1998). Those of ML3,

ML7 and ML9 reveal some of the pastoral requirements of the role which includes providing support to individuals, and maintaining harmony and co-operation across teams (Weller, 2001). The confidence, and the self-assured approach of experienced, established PT/FHs suggests that their practice is informed by much more than a knowledge of the rudimentary requirements of middle leadership. Indeed, they reveal an understanding of the ways that these roles and responsibilities can be enacted effectively and that established personal and professional values underpin their leadership approach.

Discussion throughout this section seeks to define the developmental characteristics of experienced, established PT/FHs who are continuing to develop as leaders. The limitations of a small-scale study are very evident here and it is acknowledged that a larger, purposive sample of experienced, established PT/FHs (only) could reveal a greater number of developmental stages and allow greater refinement of associated learning needs. In broad terms, it is argued that this stage of middle leadership development is characterised by professional confidence as a leader, a greater degree of strategic awareness and the demonstration of more advanced skills in the leadership of others.

5.6.2 Leadership learning when developing as a middle leader

Table 5c illustrates the differing leadership ambitions of those in a PT/FH role. All PT/FHs spoke of leadership learning to develop in their middle leader role. However, some also spoke of learning as an aspiring senior leader. Discussion that follows will firstly focus upon learning when developing as a PT/FH and will then briefly touch upon the experiences of those aspiring to a senior leader role.

Table 5c and associated interview discussion reveals that experienced, established PT/FHs who were continuing to develop in middle leadership viewed keeping abreast of developments within their area of responsibility as a key component of their leadership learning (e.g. subject, pedagogy, pastoral care). There was also a view that learning more about their school context could potentially enhance PT/FH practice. Their leadership learning needs at this stage therefore centred around continued development in their professional and strategic knowledge and expertise. Findings reveal that experienced, established middle leaders learned from and were supported by engagement with

experienced, established PT/FH peers (as discussed in sections 4.6 and 5.5) and learned from participation in leadership programmes. The potential benefits to their leadership practice of inspirational one-off events was also mentioned.

5.6.2.1 Professional expertise

Section 5.6.1 highlights the characteristics of more experienced middle leaders who continue to develop in their role. At this stage in their leadership development experienced, established PT/FHs continue to maintain a strong focus upon learning and teaching. When asked about their professional learning in middle leadership most included learning opportunities that were designed to advance knowledge and skills in their area of responsibility/ professional field, pedagogy, curriculum or assessment. This is illustrated in Table 5c, particularly in data related to role specific training and engagement with professional organisations such as the Institute of Physics and the SQA. The focus upon pedagogy, curriculum and assessment reflected a view among participants that middle leadership responsibilities include consistently modelling good pedagogical practice "because if you're not a competent practitioner people don't really have the confidence in you" (ML7), and keeping abreast of developments in their field "I think I've probably always felt … you know, the need to have more expertise than the people that I'm leading" (ML9).

The PT/FH focus upon maintaining expertise in pedagogy, curriculum and assessment is consistent with the findings of Gurr and Drysdale (2013) who argue that credibility as a leader depends upon being able to demonstrate a high level of professional competence. It also supports long-established expectations that middle leaders will model excellent practice (Adey & Jones, 1998), demonstrate a thorough knowledge of the subject area, including subject-specific pedagogies (Adey, 2000; Gurr & Drysdale, 2013; Weller, 2001) and be able to contribute to the strategic development of the subject (Gunter & Rutherford, 2000).

As discussed in section 4.6, it was recognised that some PT/ FH roles in Scotland included leadership of subjects in which the middle leader was not a specialist. In these cases, PT/FHs might delegate some subject leadership tasks to a subject-specialist teacher (in a voluntary or entry level role). This demanded trust, and a willingness to distribute leadership. As previously discussed, this practice also provided aspiring leaders with some leadership

experience. ML1 spoke of their experience of working as a point 1 PT adhering to responsibilities delegated to them by the PT/FH:

> "… to be honest with you [the delegation of tasks] has caused a little bit of friction from time to time. But you know he is very, he's very distributive and he lets me get on with it, he trusts me, and we do work very well together" (ML1).

In terms of learning from this experience, the challenge of resolving this "friction" could potentially provide a learning opportunity for those involved as described by McCauley et al. (2010), particularly if accompanied by other key components such as the opportunity to assess the learning value of the experience and support to make sense of the learning. Within a culture in which middle leaders are held accountable for the work of their team (Bennett et al., 2007; Lipscombe et al., 2021), this quotation exemplifies again the previously discussed hierarchy of roles within middle leadership in Scotland. It also reveals how some middle leaders (PT/FHs) now have a responsibility for planning and monitoring the leadership of other middle leaders (such as point 1 PTs). Middle leaders' responsibilities for monitoring teaching and learning are well established (De Nobile, 2018; General Teaching Council Scotland, 2021b; Tang et al., 2022). However it appears that PT/FH responsibility planning and monitoring the leadership activity of other middle leaders has not yet been recognised or explored in research and this interesting development may be worthy of further study.

5.6.2.2 Enhancing strategic understanding through whole-school engagement

All participants demonstrated an aspiration for further growth and development. Some, but not all experienced, established PT/FHs spoke of developing their strategic knowledge or skills through contributing to the leadership of a whole-school activity. The motivation to learn from the experience of leading at whole-school level was varied, some middle leaders sought promotion to senior leadership, others wished to develop in their middle leader role. ML4, spoke of undertaking senior leadership experiences with a view to possible promotion and described how learning about the wider school context helped inform their middle leadership practice by increasing their awareness of issues involved in school decision-

making. This allowed them to consider their area of middle leader responsibility from a different, and wider perspective:

> "… in the senior management team meetings, you see how that all pulls together … you get to see the, the real decisions, the thinking behind decision-making I think, and you get to see, … a lot more about the school's values … the kind of morals that drive things … Which is important because … being a subject PT, I don't get an awful lot of the experience about, you know, the 'rounded' part of the pupils, you know, things like child protection … and that's really important to see as well" (ML4).

At the time of interview ML5 had no aspirations to senior leadership, but also expressed an interest in some of the strategic work of the school:

> "I have no interest in being a deputy head … I do think that I would really enjoy some of the strategic remits that deputes have, for example I'm very keen in the P7 - secondary transition aspects of things and my school has been very helpful and allowed me to take on a role within that. The strategy yes, but the pastoral side of things no, I would just miss teaching a class you know. Having that relationship with pupils" (ML5).

ML7, wished to continue in middle leadership and viewed engagement with wider aspects of school life as a developmental opportunity that could extend their experience and inform their practice. They spoke of a desire to achieve a greater understanding of aspects of the wider school context and of the issues that prevent them from doing so:

> "…there are aspects about how the school is run that I would like to find out more about, you know? So about, sort of how deputes are dealing with parents, about organising the timetable, I would like to know how that's put together and how classes are put together. I have an interest in learning about those things … but there are not very many opportunities to kind of get involved in that because you're so busy doing what you're doing. So perhaps some kind of way in which you could learn? There might actually be some in-house things where people could say ML7,

> ‘I’m doing this now would you like to know how?’ You know, or ‘who would like to be involved?’” (ML7).

The perspectives of ML4, ML5 and ML7 demonstrate potential benefits to PT/FH practice of learning about or being involved in the strategic work of the wider school. However a comparison of the data in Tables 5a and 5c reveal that the majority of the experiential opportunities cited by participants were undertaken when aspiring to a role such as middle or senior leadership. This small-scale study found no evidence of any formal approaches within schools that are designed to specifically nurture or develop the leadership capacities of experienced, established PT/FHs. The ‘Learning from other leaders’ section of Table 5c illustrates that activities such as learning from leadership role models and collaborating with other leaders were cited only by those preparing for senior leadership. Taken together with the quotations of ML5 and ML7 this suggests that experiential leadership learning for experienced, established PT/FHs who wish to remain in middle leadership roles is limited, context dependant, and, where it does occur, is confined to what a PT/FH can reasonably undertake in addition to their existing role.

The limited availability of leadership development opportunities for PT\FHs aligns with the findings of Fluckiger et al. (2015) who identify a gap in the availability of leadership development opportunities in Australia for those who wish to remain in school middle leader posts rather than seek promotion. They suggest that the leadership development of those remaining in post could be informed by ongoing development of knowledge and skills relating to the context and wider system in which they work and also in the areas of leading pedagogy and people and enhancing their knowledge and understanding of self. Comments from ML7 and ML4 reveal a belief that they would benefit from the perspectives gained through wider experience in school and beyond. The challenge of doing so, particularly when combined with appropriate support it could facilitate meaningful leadership learning (McCauley et al., 2010).

The knowledge and skills that individual PT/FHs could bring to whole school projects could potentially make a positive contribution that enhances the experience and the outcomes for all involved. However, as discussed in theme 1, there is no guarantee that time can be made

available to undertake additional or voluntary responsibilities and individuals are more likely to benefit from experiential opportunities when they have time to reflect upon it, and support to makes sense of and learn from the experience.

Forde et al. (2018) discuss the positioning of middle leaders in schools highlighting their vertical connections between teachers and senior leaders and horizontal connections to other middle leaders to meet the needs of pupils and ultimately deliver school improvement. The findings of this study also reveal the potential of horizontal connections between PT/FH peers as a source of leadership learning and peer support. Indeed, Table 5c shows that five experienced, established PT/FHs cited learning from other leaders as significant in supporting their leadership learning, this includes the support previously described by ML7 (see section 4.6) which involved critical and professional friendship and sharing practice with a trusted PT/FH peer. Significant expertise and experience in the role, combined with training in coaching approaches, potentially positions PT/FHs as potential sources of support to fellow PT/FH peers. As such, they could therefore fulfil a central role in providing support to make sense of day-to-day and additional leadership experiences as described by McCauley et al. (2010) and provide trusted critical and professional friendship to support wellbeing and enrich leadership practice. Engagement such as this across the community of middle leaders within the school thus has the potential to strengthen the middle leadership layer of the school and contribute to enhancing the school ethos.

5.6.2.3 External inputs

Table 5c demonstrates that experienced and established PT/FHs continued to develop their practice through engagement with external inputs such as local authority training, working and learning with national organisations, attending events or participating in academic programmes. The leadership learning gained from these experiences are discussed in section 4.6, which also explores how the availability of, and access to external outputs again depended upon contextual factors. Referring to the assertions of Fluckiger et al. (2015) that middle leadership learning should seek to develop knowledge and skills in the areas of pedagogy, people, place, system and self, Table 5c reveals that opportunities for experienced, developing PT/FHs to further develop their subject expertise (pedagogy) are represented through local and national events. However, opportunities to further develop

their knowledge and skills of people, place, system and self, are few, some of which included participation in further study. ML4 and ML5 spoke of their participation in an award-bearing postgraduate middle leadership programme at a point when they were already an established middle leader with many years of experience:

> "… The formal learning opportunities ... It really seemed to put more impetus behind me. I would think, Yeah, I could do this, this makes sense… I was able to demonstrate an awful lot of the skills and qualities that are required to be a DHT" (ML4).

> "the University course allowed me to engage with the literature and finally understand some of the theories behind things that we as a school were trying to do or trying to implement, but also allow me to talk to a really wide range of other middle leaders or aspiring middle leaders, to then realise that a lot of the situations weren't unique to me, they happened in other places and hearing other peoples' approaches and also being able to share some things that had worked for me, really helped me solidify where I was as a middle leader" (ML5)

These quotations reveal the benefits to experienced, established PT/FHs of engaging in leadership learning, and they mirror findings discussed in sections 4.6 and 5.5 relating to the benefits of external inputs for extending middle leader knowledge and professional networks (Harris et al., 2001; Reeves et al., 2002). ML4 also reveals how engagement with academic study in the field of educational leadership supported them in their ambitions to secure a senior leader role. As previously discussed, Fluckiger et al. (2015) argue that the differing career ambitions of middle leaders (to remain in post or seek further promotion) demands different approaches to professional learning, Table 5c. The perspectives of ML4 who is seeking promotion to senior leadership and ML5 who wishes to remain in middle leadership along with scholarly perspectives (Archer, 2021; Reeves et al., 2002) suggests that postgraduate course and programmes in leadership can successfully address the needs of PT/FHs with various career ambitions. Indeed quotations above support the views of Archer (2021) who found that the knowledge and skills acquired by middle leaders through postgraduate study are often more beneficial to them (and their promotion prospects) than the certification itself, as they helps equip them to address some of the acknowledged

challenges of middle leadership such as acting as “buffer and bridge” (Bennett et al., 2007, p. 462) between teachers and senior leaders.

5.6.2.4 Aspiring to senior leadership

Table 5c indicates that two participants had begun to engage in activities to prepare for a depute head teacher (DHT) role (see green highlights). For ML4 and ML6, the leadership development activities in which they were engaged included temporary (‘acting’) and voluntary senior leadership activity and learning from and collaborating with senior leader role models, thus resembling those undertaken by aspiring middle leaders. ML4, although aware of the potential value of the DHT experience, spoke of how trying to undertake voluntary DHT activity in addition to their substantive PT role presented particular challenges:

> “… if a school trip was on and one of the deputes was away for like a week, then I would just, you know, deputise for that depute for the week. So that would involve looking after a year group … all the things that that entails … it's tricky in a way because, you know well, because if you go into that ‘cold’ you don't have an awful lot of that prior knowledge … Doing a PT function with that DHT function, I guess, that is difficult …you're not afforded any extra time to do it, so it can be quite tricky.” (ML4).

As previously discussed, the opportunity for reflection allows individuals to internalise new knowledge, apply it to practice (Harris et al., 2001) and further support from a coach or mentor can allow individuals to make sense of and learn from the experience (Irvine & Brundrett, 2019; McCauley et al., 2010). In this case, it appears that undertaking voluntary responsibilities whilst maintaining existing teaching and leadership commitments was not accompanied by time to reflect or by support to make sense of and learn from it, thus potentially limiting the leadership learning potential of the experience.

Fluckiger et al. (2015) advocate that middle leaders with ambitions to more senior roles are likely to benefit from the further development of their strategic knowledge and skills. This could include advancing their knowledge of education legislation, policy, and systems. A recent quotation from ML5 describes how engagement with scholarly literature in an award

bearing programme enhanced their understanding of school processes and approaches. Table 5c illustrates that few other opportunities to develop knowledge of education legislation, policy, and systems were available to middle leaders. For those aspiring to Head teacher roles in Scotland, the mandatory "Into Headship" qualification (Education Scotland, 2024b) is designed to facilitate a knowledge of *place* and *system* through the study of leadership, legislative and operational aspects of a Head teacher role. As the Into Headship programme is available only to established DHTs who are preparing to assume a head teacher role in the near future, it is not routinely available to middle leaders aspiring to senior leadership, thus revealing a gap in provision for experience PT/FHs who wish to advance their knowledge and skills in this area.

5.6.3 Summary

In conclusion therefore, this subtheme explores the leadership learning needs of a broad range of experienced PT/FHs who are continuing to develop in their leadership role. This cohort is likely to comprise of a range of developmental stages and differing career ambitions. As such, leadership learning needs at this stage are varied but are likely to include the need for continued development of professional and strategic expertise. Like other stages, leadership learning at this stage requires an individualised approach.

Defining features of this stage of development include looking outwards, beyond the immediate area of responsibility, contributing to the wider work and aims of the school and recognising the significance of core values to middle leadership. Findings suggest that core values emerge and develop over time. The capacity to embody and share these values helps distinguish experienced, established middle leaders from those aspiring and beginning in the role.

The willingness of many established and experienced middle leaders to model good practice, coach, mentor and work collaboratively with others positions them as central to the leadership development of those aspiring to the role. They could potentially extend this support to routinely include mentorship and support for beginning middle leaders or those beginning a new middle leader post in a new context.

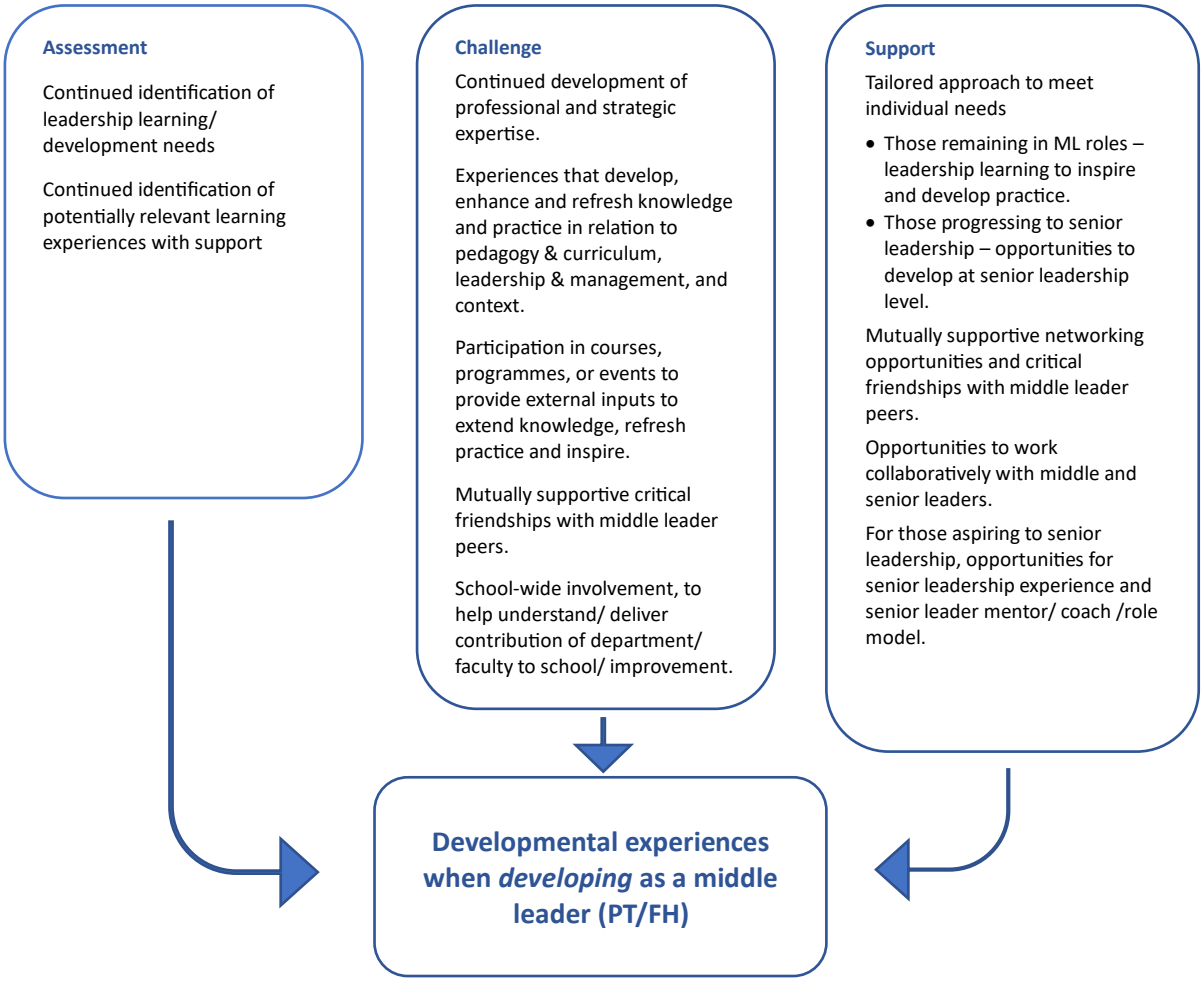
A strong focus upon maintaining expertise within their area of responsibility is identified as an ongoing area of development at this stage and this is reflected in the local and national opportunities in which experienced, established PT/FHs engaged. Ongoing development of knowledge and skills in leadership, management and aspects of research and policy was achieved through participation courses and programmes in leadership. These programmes provided challenge, offered a means of ensuring that knowledge is expanded rather than re-cycled, and were a valuable catalyst for reflecting upon and developing leadership practice.

Opportunities to contribute at whole school level are identified by some as a means by which middle leaders could work collaboratively with and learn from senior leaders. For some experienced, established PT/FHs this practice provided an opportunity to acquire contextual knowledge which could be used to enhance their leadership practice within their area of responsibility. Other experienced, established PT/FHs undertook voluntary activity at school leadership level to gain relevant skills and experience as an aspiring senior leader. This experience had the potential to offer a developmental challenge which, with appropriate time and support, could facilitate leadership learning.

The benefits of engaging with peer PT/FHs are identified as a means of support and a way in which the middle leadership layer of the school could be strengthened. Considering the particular the capacity of middle leaders to connect above, below and across the school community, strengthening the school-wide cohort of middle leaders as a support network could provide schools with a significant force for change. Figure 5c synthesises the findings of this subtheme with other relevant finding from the study to the model of leadership learning (McCauley et al., 2010).

Figure 5c

Leadership learning when developing as a middle leader



5.6.2 Conclusion Theme 2

The findings throughout this theme build upon scholarly literature that identifies teaching and leadership as two different skills, each of which require significant preparation and confirms the theories of scholars such as Irvine and Brundrett (2016; 2019) that beginning in middle leadership can present specific challenges for teachers, particularly in aspects of leadership that they are encountering for the first time, such as the leadership of other adults.

The findings of this theme significantly extend Irvine and Brundrett's theory (2016: 2019) by proposing three stages of middle leadership development; aspiring, beginning and

developing, each of which have distinct characteristics and can also differ in their focus for learning as described throughout this chapter. The identification of these characteristics, the leadership learning needs and the proposed focus for learning at each of these stages offers new perspectives to the field of middle leadership preparation and development. As such these findings and insights are particularly significant as they are unique to this thesis and therefore contribute to its original contribution to knowledge.

The findings of this theme also illustrate developments in practice in Scotland to the extent that those aspiring to middle leadership engage in a range of activities, often in addition to their formally allocated commitments, to gain knowledge and skills in leadership and to demonstrate their potential to others. Input from middle leader role models and mentors features strongly in the developmental supports available at this stage of middle leader development.

However, input of this type is less prevalent when middle leaders begin a substantive PT/FH role, at a time when it could be particularly helpful in supporting the transition to a role with the full range of middle leader responsibilities, sometimes in a new context. For experienced, established PT/FHs there is recognition of the need to continue to develop as a professional and as a leader. Many of the learning opportunities available to established, experienced middle leaders have a subject-specific rather than a direct leadership focus and it was found that, where available, courses and programmes in leadership could provide valuable opportunities to extend knowledge and learn from middle leader peers.

These findings reinforce previously identified areas for improvement in relation to leadership development in schools. The potential benefits to Scotland's schools of formally establishing a process of induction for those beginning a middle leader role, of providing an experienced, established middle leader mentor and opportunities for experienced and established middle leaders to engage with peers either within school contexts or when participating in external courses, programmes or events are evident. They also offer the potential to build individual and collective middle leadership capacities and to nurture productive professional networks which might ultimately support the delivery of departmental, faculty and school improvement.

Chapter 6: Conclusions and Recommendations

6.1 Chapter overview

This study sought to

1. Explore the experiences and perspectives of middle leaders regarding their development needs in relation to their leadership.
2. Explore the experiences and perspectives of middle leaders regarding the leadership development opportunities available to them in Scotland.

Previous chapters within the study explored relevant scholarly knowledge to identify a research gap, outline how the study was conducted, and present and discuss key findings. This final chapter begins by reflecting upon the significance of the study to the field of educational leadership, outlining the contributions to knowledge made by the study. Discussion that follows suggests recommendations for further research and practice and considers strengths and limitations of the study. Final reflections briefly return to the research questions and reflect upon how these have been addressed.

6.2 Significance of this study to the discipline

As previously stated, I am experienced educator who has worked for over twenty years as a secondary school middle leader in Scotland's schools. During this time, I held middle leadership roles in pastoral care (Support for Learning) and curriculum (Home Economics) and have some experience of leading at senior level as an acting depute head teacher. Now employed within higher education as teacher educator, I develop, lead, and deliver courses and programmes in the field of educational leadership, with a particular focus upon middle leadership. I hope that, through contributing to what is known about the leadership development of school middle leaders, this study will add to the body of scholarship available in this field and also support and inform practice in the leadership development of middle leaders in Scotland.

Many recent empirical studies which address middle leadership development analyse the perspectives of middle leaders along with those of other stakeholders such as senior leaders,

school governors, teaching colleagues or pupils (Gurr & Drysdale, 2013; Irvine & Brundrett, 2019). Consequently, the findings of such studies capture the development needs of middle leaders in relation to the expectations placed upon them by multiple actors within the system. Few studies since Glover et al. (1998) specifically explore the perspectives of middle leaders only. Drawing from a sample of middle leaders with varied levels of experience, this study explores their unique perspectives and experiences and draws from these perspectives to identify strategies and approaches to middle leader development that are available within Scotland.

Scotland's education system and policy context is different to that in other parts of the United Kingdom. Similarly, scholarship exploring middle leadership within Scotland is limited and this appears to be the first empirical study that captures the perspectives and experiences of middle leaders about their professional learning needs within the Scottish context. This is particularly significant at this time due to the impact of several policy initiatives upon school leadership and leadership development within Scotland within the last ten to fifteen years. Indeed there is very little research from the Scottish context which explores the impact of significant policies such as Teaching Scotland's Future (Donaldson, 2010) upon leadership development, and none which relate specifically to middle leadership. It is hoped that this study will therefore add to the limited body of literature regarding the development of middle leadership capacity and also help address a paucity of empirical research into middle leadership within the unique and evolving Scottish policy context.

6.3 Original contribution to knowledge

Previous discussion highlights how the Scottish context of this study contributes to the field by adding to the limited body of empirical research in school middle leadership in Scotland and in the development of middle leadership capacity. This section will summarise contributions to knowledge that are made by this study by exploring specific findings that develop, contradict, or add to what is already known. Discussion will first identify ways in which the national policy context has shaped middle leader roles and responsibilities in Scotland's schools. This is followed by a section in which two theories of leadership

development, research in middle leadership and key findings from this study are synthesised to define three key stages in middle leader development and propose activities that are thought to support and facilitate the development of middle leader capacity at each stage.

6.3.1 The significance of context to middle leadership

Consistent with findings of previous studies, findings throughout theme one of this study confirm ways in which middle leadership in schools is inextricably linked with context; findings reveal that the roles and responsibilities of middle leaders are shaped by context, that middle leaders shape the working context of the staff and pupils whom they lead and can also contribute to the culture of the school. Each of these aspects, and the specific developments to this body of knowledge identified by this study are discussed in more detail in the sections that follow.

6.3.1.1 The roles and responsibilities of middle leadership are shaped by context

The inextricable link between context and leadership is a well-established topic of scholarship. Furthermore, school leaders may be leaders in some contexts and not in others for example a deputy head might lead at whole school level but not when they are working in a teaching team that is led by a middle leader.

Some elements of the Scottish policy context that impact specifically upon middle leadership in schools were outlined in Chapter 1 and the discussion of theme 1, subtheme 1 builds upon the work of Forde et al. (2018) to surface ways in which the Scottish policy context is influenced by wider socio-political agendas. Findings explored in theme 1, subtheme 2 reveal that participants' perspectives of the knowledge and skills required to fulfil their role articulate with national policy expectations. This is unsurprising given that, like many English-speaking countries, the teaching profession in Scotland is regulated by means of professional standards. Indeed the overarching roles and responsibilities of middle leaders in Scotland are articulated in the national Standard for Middle Leadership (General Teaching Council Scotland, 2021b). It is expected that Scotland's teachers will refer to a relevant professional standard to inform an annual process of self- evaluation and professional development review, and a five-yearly process of professional re-accreditation known as

Professional Update (General Teaching Council Scotland, 2024). These processes are required in order to maintain the professional registration which is required to teach in Scotland's state schools. The alignment of these national expectations with middle leaders' perspectives of the knowledge and skills required to fulfil a middle leader role thus illustrates an impact of the wider socio-political context upon the roles and responsibilities of middle leaders in schools.

Consistent with national policy ambitions for the teaching profession (Scottish Government, 2017), findings discussed in theme 1, subtheme 2 reveal that middle leaders now identify a need for enhanced data literacy skills such as gathering and analysing data to support their leadership of improvement. This builds upon previous scholarly assertions in which scholars (rather than middle leaders) identified this need (Fluckiger, 2015; Gaubatz & Ensminger, 2017). This finding thus illustrates the evolving nature of middle leadership and the need to continue to develop the knowledge and skills required to lead in changing contexts. Earlier studies such as Adey and Jones (1998) call for action to ensure middle leader awareness of their potential contribution to whole-school development. More recent literature captures the contribution that middle leaders make to school improvement through ensuring ongoing improvements to learning and teaching (Bush, 2023; Leithwood, 2016; Tang et al., 2022). This finding makes an additional contribution to this body of knowledge regarding the middle leadership of school improvement. The identified need for specific skills in gathering and analysing data illustrates how the practice of middle leaders is evolving to include routinely measuring the impact of their efforts to deliver improvement. It could also suggest an increasing level of middle leader awareness of the need to generate and use data which evidences their impact to inform next steps in improvement or share with relevant stakeholders. A need which illustrates and supports the assertions of Lipscombe et al. (2021) who argue that the demands placed upon middle leaders in a culture of increasing accountability adds to the complexity of their role.

Findings in theme 1, subtheme 1 illustrate the impact of policy upon the nature and availability of middle leadership posts in Scotland. However, in a further original contribution to knowledge, findings in this subtheme unearth ways in which the implementation of some Scottish education policy has resulted in a hierarchy of middle leader roles where some

entry level posts help prepare middle leaders to eventually assume roles with greater levels of responsibility. For example, some management structures include a Faculty Head and an Assistant Faculty Head who supports them in their role, as illustrated in Tables 4a and 4b. Where such hierarchical arrangements exist, this positions some middle leaders (such as a faculty head) as line manager of another middle leader, with an associated responsibility for planning and monitoring the leadership activity of that colleague.

The re-emergence of entry level middle leader roles has a particular significance in the Scottish context, where enactment of policy such as A Teaching Profession for the 21st Century (Scottish Executive Education Department, 2001) sought to streamline management structures, and saw the removal of entry level middle leader posts such as assistant principal teacher and senior teacher from school management structures. This re-emergence of these is evident in the guise of "point 1 PT" posts, the remit for which often supports the attainment of whole school priorities or supports aspects of leadership in areas where there are a number of curricular subjects or responsibilities, such as faculties. When discussing the roles and responsibilities of middle leaders, scholars allude to the delegation of leadership responsibilities from senior leaders to middle leaders due to the expanding remits of head teachers (De Nobile, 2018; Irvine & Brundrett, 2016). The re-emergence of entry level middle leader posts, several years after the removal of similar posts from management structures in Scotland, suggests potential limitations to the leadership work that can successfully be undertaken by a limited number of middle leaders with large remits, and the need for wider distribution of middle leadership responsibilities across the school. Such posts also provide beginning middle leaders with valuable opportunities to gain middle leadership experience. Where this opportunity is accompanied by support, such as a limited remit or the opportunity to collaborate with and learn from a more experienced leader, it can provide leadership learning and a scaffolded entry to middle leadership.

It is widely held that middle leaders play a significant role in shaping the contexts in which their teams work. Indeed Bennett et al. (2007, p. 462) identify the central role played by middle leaders in mediating between senior leaders and class teachers, referring to them as both "buffer and bridge". These findings shed light upon the ways in which the roles and responsibilities of middle leaders adapt, change, and evolve to accommodate constantly

shifting influences and agendas. The range of findings discussed throughout this section add additional nuance to the notion of buffer and bridge, by revealing that the mediating role of middle leaders extends beyond the agendas of senior leaders and can involve them in mitigating the impact of wider contextual factors (such as national priorities) upon teams of colleagues and pupils within the areas that they lead.

6.3.1.2 Opportunities for middle leadership development are influenced by context

Findings throughout theme 1, reveal the ways in which opportunities for middle leadership development are influenced by context. This adds to the work of Gurr and Drysdale (2013) who identify ways in which context informs the roles and responsibilities of middle leaders. These findings also provide a unique insight into how approaches to middle leadership development are enacted in practice in Scotland. The range of opportunities available in Scotland could be broadly categorised as approaches that involve learning from experience, learning from others and participating in courses, programmes and other events. These approaches align with established knowledge in this field which advocates that the development of middle leadership capacity requires an individualised package of developmental activities which is likely to include a tailored blend of long and short-term professional learning opportunities and events, formal and informal training, induction, coaching, mentoring and collaborative communities for learning in which individuals can work with and observe the practice of more experienced colleagues (Busher & Harris, 1999; Glover et al., 1998; Gurr & Drysdale, 2013).

Theme 1, subtheme 3 demonstrates the existence of a range of relevant developmental experiences, and that access to these is largely context-dependant. Indeed, access to middle leader development often relies upon being in the right place at the right time as the availability of temporary posts is inconsistent, developmental support from leader colleagues and funding to complete a course or programme is largely influenced by personal or local circumstances, and finding time to engage in part-time study whilst also fulfilling a demanding professional role is challenging and presents particular difficulties for those with caring commitments. Findings in theme 1, subtheme three also suggest the existence of inconsistent and potentially biased decision-making regarding access to leadership development opportunities. This can restrict access to opportunities for some and, in so

doing, could potentially have a negative impact upon career trajectories and, potentially, the provision of individuals who are suitably prepared of school leadership.

Scotland's system-wide approach to professional review and development (PRD) provides all teachers with an annual opportunity to engage in self-evaluation to identify professional development needs. It is expected that self-evaluation will inform a developmental PRD dialogue with a line manager which also explores ways in which professional learning needs might be addressed. The PRD process therefore offers individuals an opportunity to exercise agency in professional learning (Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002) and to lead their middle leader development (Gurr & Drysdale, 2013; Irvine & Brundrett, 2019). Viewed through the lens of the Leader Development Model (McCauley et al., 2010) PRD offers an opportunity to assess leadership learning needs, identify potential "challenges" that might help address identified areas for development, and plan support to help maximise the leadership learning gains of these opportunities. National guidelines are provided to inform and support effective PRD in schools (General Teaching Council Scotland, 2019). In addition, professional standards for middle and senior leaders articulate an expectation that they will acquire and use coaching and mentoring principles to lead professional learning in schools (General Teaching Council Scotland, 2021a; 2021b, p. 13). To address this expectation a range of opportunities to develop coaching skills has been available from national organisations, local authorities, private providers and within schools for a number of years.

In an area which has not yet been widely explored in scholarly literature, this study finds that national ambitions for PRD, and the potential of PRD to contribute to building the leadership capacity of middle leaders are not consistently understood or realised across schools in Scotland. Findings in theme 1 subtheme 3 reveal conflicting understandings of the expectation that teachers will take responsibility for their professional learning, the purpose and potential developmental value of PRD and the roles and responsibilities of all involved in the PRD process. Findings reveal that PRD meetings for middle leaders are often accorded low priority in the demanding and busy schedule of school leaders. This is illustrated by examples of regular interruptions, curtailed meetings, and a tendency in some cases to focus more upon the PRD process rather than the individual. A process-oriented rather than a coaching approach to PRD conversations is also evident in some cases. Findings in this

subtheme also reveal inconsistent understandings of how training in coaching might be applied to the leadership of professional learning or its relevance to PRD. In a climate in which resources, including staff time are limited it appears that PRD is not routinely prioritised, thus an opportunity to use it to assess and plan professional learning in leadership is not fully exploited across the Scottish system.

The benefits to learning of gaining relevant experience are well established. For those aspiring to middle leadership the availability of (paid) temporary posts in which they can gain experience depends upon several factors and can include unplanned opportunities which occur at short notice (e.g. the absence of a colleague). Findings in theme 1, subtheme 3 suggest an increase in the practice of voluntary leadership in which those aspiring to middle (and senior) leadership engage in leadership activities that are additional to their substantive remit to gain leadership experience. This study finds that engaging in voluntary leadership activities can potentially provide opportunities to build the credibility required for effective middle leadership (Bennett et al., 2007; Gurr & Drysdale, 2013), provide opportunities to gain leadership experience and develop middle leader capabilities (Irvine & Brundrett, 2019) and potentially strengthen applications for promoted posts. Findings in theme 1, subtheme 3 suggest that some voluntary activities provide an opportunity to work with and learn from the practice and advice of a more experienced leader. The insight of more experienced colleagues was found to help some aspiring middle leaders to appreciate the relevance or developmental value of an experience and thus enable them to fully benefit from the experience (McCauley et al., 2010). This re-enforces the value of guidance from a more experienced colleague, mentor, or coach to individual leader development.

Findings in theme 1, subtheme 3 also suggest that some voluntary activities within Scottish schools, and invitations to engage in them, might not be equitably shared and focus more upon the needs of the wider school than the individual. To ensure that the practice of gaining experience on a voluntary basis is developmental rather than exploitative, such experiences require careful planning and support, to ensure that the time and effort dedicated to the experience will deliver relevant, meaningful leadership learning. Given the challenges of engaging in voluntary activity in addition to fulfilling an already demanding

working role, this finding also highlights the importance to the individual of prioritising the experiences that are most likely to address their leadership learning needs.

6.3.1.3 Theoretical development: Context

The findings of this study therefore illustrate theories of distributed leadership which argue that leadership is enacted by multiple individuals within school contexts (Gronn, 2002; Harris, 2013; Spillane et al., 2004). Findings confirm theories about the nature of school middle leadership which argue that the roles and day-to-day practice of middle leaders in Scotland are diverse and multi-faceted (De Nobile, 2018), that middle leader effectiveness is influenced by aspects of context at school level (Gurr & Drysdale, 2013) and beyond (Forde et al., 2018), and that increasing accountability adds to the complexity of middle leadership (Lipscombe et al., 2021). The leadership learning opportunities available to middle leaders in Scotland broadly align with recommended approaches to leadership development (McCauley et al., 2010; Reeves et al., 2002) and middle leadership development (Busher & Harris, 1999; Glover et al., 1998; Gurr & Drysdale, 2013). This study builds upon and extends these theoretical assertions to find that context also influences the nature and availability of the opportunities available for middle leader learning in Scotland.

In a further contribution to knowledge, this study develops and extends DeNobile's (2018) theory relating to the roles and responsibilities of middle leaders. In his proposed theoretical model of middle leadership, DeNobile (2018, p. 16) argues that the "form and range" of middle leadership roles requires further study and testing through empirical research. His model adopts an overarching perspective of middle leadership, with a focus upon their contribution to learning and teaching. This empirical study adds additional dimensions to two of the proposed roles of middle leaders, both of which focus primarily upon aspects of leadership. Firstly, this study captures ways in which established, experienced middle leaders are often central to the leadership learning of those aspiring to leadership through activities such as role-modelling, collaborative working, coaching, mentoring and nurturing leadership capacity. This finding therefore extends DeNobile's theory in relation to the staff development role of middle leaders by illuminating the important role that they play in developing the next generation of school leaders and ways in which they do this.

Secondly, De Nobile defines the monitoring of competence and quality in learning and teaching practice as part of the supervisory roles of middle leaders. Findings of this study reveal that, due to a hierarchy of middle leadership roles that exists within Scotland's secondary schools, some middle leaders also hold a responsibility for monitoring the leadership of other middle leader colleagues, thus adding a further dimension to the supervisory role proposed by DeNobile.

6.3.2 Significant stages in middle leadership development

This study synthesises two theoretical approaches to leader development with research in the field of middle leadership and the findings of the study to identify key learning processes and experiences for middle leader development. These include:

Learning processes

- Self-assessment of leader learning needs (Gurr & Drysdale, 2013; McCauley et al., 2010).
- Opportunities for cognitive development to extend existing knowledge and challenge current assumptions and practice (Reeves et al., 2002).
- Experiential learning which extends practice (Irvine & Brundrett, 2019; Reeves et al., 2002) and presents challenge from which individuals can learn (McCauley et al., 2010)
- Reflection to make sense of learning experiences and consider implications for practice (Harris et al., 2001; Irvine & Brundrett, 2019; Reeves et al., 2002).
- A context that supports the social dimensions of leader learning including opportunities to engage in and learn from experiential learning, learn from others, and embed any changes in leader practice (Reeves et al., 2002).

Experiences and approaches

- Agency in planning leadership learning (Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002).
- An individualised approach tailored to the ongoing leadership learning needs and career ambitions of the individual. (Fluckiger et al., 2015; Gurr & Drysdale, 2013; Irvine & Brundrett, 2019).

- Opportunities to prepare for middle leadership (Adey & Jones, 1998; Brown et al., 2002; Irvine & Brundrett, 2019).
- Experience in the role (Irvine & Brundrett, 2019).
- Courses and opportunities to apply learning to practice (Gunter & Rutherford, 2000; Harris et al., 2001).
- Support from key individuals such as role models, mentors, peer support (Harris et al., 2001).

Drawing from a participant sample of "newly appointed" middle leaders in a private school context, Irvine and Brundrett (2016, p. 86; 2019) identify capabilities required for middle leadership and draw from theories of skills acquisition (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1980) to trace ways in which these capabilities are acquired at specific stages of middle leader development. This study builds upon and extends these findings, by adopting an alternative theoretical lens and by engaging with middle leader participants with varying levels of experience. This has allowed the study of the developmental experiences and approaches likely to facilitate leadership learning at different stages of middle leadership experience and expertise. With few empirical studies in middle leadership from the Scottish context, this study makes an original contribution to knowledge by exploring the experiences and perspectives of a range of middle leaders working within the state school sector in Scotland.

Findings in theme 2 identify three key stages in middle leader development. It is acknowledged that the stages identified are inevitably influenced by the participant sample for this small-scale study. Findings relating to "preparing for" and "beginning" middle leadership could potentially be replicated across various contexts. However, findings at the "developing" stage merit further exploration with a wider participant sample of experienced, established middle leaders. It is thought that this approach could potentially reveal further stages of development and associated leadership learning needs.

6.3.2.1 Preparing for middle leadership

Findings in theme 2 subtheme 1 surface a recognition across the Scottish system of the need to prepare teachers for middle leadership, which is often their first experience of leadership.

This recognition is illustrated by the offer of courses and programmes for those aspiring to middle leadership from national organisations, local authorities, and some higher education institutions, and also in the range of largely informal learning opportunities which are evident within school contexts. The provision of Scotland's professional Standard for Middle Leadership (General Teaching Council Scotland, 2021b) also provides individuals who are preparing for middle leadership with a framework that can be used to inform their leadership development.

Findings discussed in theme 2 subtheme 1 identify attainment of professional confidence as a classroom teacher and an ambition to progress to a leadership role as precursors to taking positive action to prepare for middle leadership. Supporting the findings of scholars who identify the significance of professional credibility to middle leadership (Bennett et al., 2007; Gurr & Drysdale, 2013), this study found that those preparing for middle leadership sought to engage in developmental experiences that would allow them to demonstrate their expertise and thus build professional credibility, and also gain relevant knowledge and experience in leadership. The identification of *preparing for middle leadership* as a distinct stage in middle leadership development as reflected in the apparent acceptance of the need to gain experiences that build leadership expertise and personal credibility are unique to this thesis and therefore make an original contribution to knowledge. These findings build upon previous research which highlights the importance of middle leadership preparation (Adey, 2000; Adey & Jones, 1998; Irvine & Brundrett, 2016; Irvine & Brundrett, 2019) and suggest that, within the Scottish context, this need to prepare for middle leadership is now more widely acknowledged.

Findings in this subtheme illustrate the range of opportunities for middle leaders to develop leadership capacities with school contexts. They also illustrate the crucial role played by many experienced, established middle leaders in the leadership learning of those aspiring to the role through activities such as role modelling, collaborative working, informal mentoring, providing information and advice, and signposting relevant developmental opportunities. Through assisting aspiring middle leaders to identify appropriate developmental challenges, and by providing support to help them learn from these challenges, the approach taken by some experienced middle leaders to developing those who are aspiring to the role aligns

with principles of the leader development model (McCauley et al., 2010). Findings discussed in this subtheme also suggest that a culture exists within the Scottish context in which some experience of leadership is now expected to achieve a substantive middle (or senior) leader post. The voluntary leadership activity in which aspiring leaders engage to gain leadership experience, and the informal support provided by more established and experienced leaders therefore results in a significant amount of leadership work being undertaken in schools on an informal, unpaid basis. This raises questions about whether such a significant reliance upon voluntary, unpaid opportunities for middle leadership development is ethical or provides fair, consistent access to opportunities for middle leadership development across the system.

6.3.2.2 Beginning as a middle leader

Findings in theme 2 subtheme 2 confirm that the experience of beginning in a middle leader role is overwhelming for many, thus supporting the assertions of scholars who have pioneered the need to prepare teachers for middle leadership (Adey & Jones, 1998; Brown et al., 2002; Irvine & Brundrett, 2019). Findings indicate that leadership learning needs at this stage can be categorised as contextual, relational and strategic. This categorisation of leadership learning needs add to the theories of Irvine and Brundrett (2016; 2019) who focus upon the supports that are needed when beginning as a middle leader and therefore offers an original contribution to knowledge.

Findings indicate that limitations in their knowledge of the context, particularly for those who have moved to a new school, contribute to the challenges faced at this stage. Referring to beginning a head teacher role Bush (2008), strongly argues for a process of induction for new leaders, highlighting the importance of providing opportunities for socialisation to allow them to appreciate the culture and core values of the school and to establish their identity as a leader. Findings in this subtheme reveal the need for middle leader induction which provides opportunities for socialisation to support the relational aspect of their role, and an introduction to various aspects of the school context including school protocols and policies, knowledge of which will allow new middle leaders to fulfil their role effectively (for example processes for supporting staff and pupils and managing resources).

In a finding that makes another original contribution to knowledge, a comparison of the school-based supports available to those preparing for middle leadership with those available when beginning a middle leader role reveals a dip in the school support available to middle leaders as they begin new substantiative posts in Scotland's schools. This indicates that, at a time when their need for leadership learning and professional support are perhaps at their greatest (Irvine & Brundrett, 2016), the in-school supports available to aspiring middle leaders (such as mentors or role models) are not routinely available when beginning the middle leader role, although some individuals try to seek out supportive middle leader peers. This is particularly significant for those who have moved to a new school and have not yet established networks of colleagues within that school whom they can consult for advice or support as needed. In addition to middle leader induction, the provision of an established, experienced middle leader mentor to those beginning in the role has the potential to offer individualised leadership learning, support and logistical advice and information. Both induction and mentoring are advocated by Gurr and Drysdale (2013) in the range of strategies that might be included in an individualised middle leadership development programme. The findings of this study reveal some evidence of informal mentoring, and little evidence of formal mentoring or induction for those beginning a middle leader role, which suggests that practice to support those beginning in middle leadership is inconsistent across Scotland.

6.3.2.3 Developing in middle leadership

Findings in theme 2 subtheme 3 reveal that the leadership approach of experienced, established middle leaders (PT/FHs) is characterised by their well-developed professional values, professional confidence and their self-assurance when leading colleagues and making professional judgements, although it is acknowledged that some conversations and situations involving colleagues constitute the most challenging aspects of the role. Discussing the challenges of beginning in the role, Irvine and Brundrett (2019) highlight the central role of experience in developing from novice to master in middle leadership. The well-developed professional values, confidence and capacities of experienced middle leaders help illustrate their significant progress towards achieving mastery in middle leadership. Leadership learning needs at this stage vary but appear to focus upon further development of professional and strategic expertise.

Contrary to the findings of older studies which argue the need for middle leaders to be more involved in wider school issues (Adey & Jones, 1998), findings in this subtheme demonstrate that middle leaders develop an increasing understanding of what their department contributes to the work of the school as their experience grows and thus illustrates significant developments in middle leaders' perceptions of their roles and responsibilities in the ensuing decades. They are keen to ensure that their team shares this understanding, that the wider school community is fully aware of their contribution and is kept abreast of their success. The need to actively promote the success of the department or faculty also demonstrates another way in which a culture of accountability contributes to adding complexities to the work of school middle leaders as argued by Lipscombe et al. (2021).

Findings in theme 2 subtheme 3 indicate that some middle leaders actively sought to be involved in wider-school matters, although opportunities to do so were not consistently available. This confirms and illustrates findings of Gurr and Drysdale (2013) who argue that the agency of middle leaders, including the extent to which they can contribute to whole school matters depends upon senior school leaders. Within this study, contribution to the work of the wider school was primarily considered in terms of its potential for leadership development. In findings that help re-enforce the need for individualised approaches to leadership development (Fluckiger et al., 2015; Gurr & Drysdale, 2013; Irvine & Brundrett, 2019), some middle leaders assumed responsibility for whole school or senior leadership activities on a voluntary basis to gain experience of working at a more senior level. Those who were not focussed upon promotion to senior leadership viewed a responsibility for a whole-school activity as a means of enhancing their knowledge and understanding of aspects of the school context with which they were unfamiliar (such as pupil support). The enhanced understandings gained further informed their middle leadership practice. The increasing expectation that applicants for promoted posts will have gained some relevant leadership experience was also evident in the transition from middle to senior leadership. One participant spoke of trying to assume voluntary senior leadership responsibilities whilst simultaneously fulfilling a demanding middle leader role and maintaining their teaching commitment. This presented significant challenges due to the limited time available to fulfil any of these roles successfully, or to reflect in any meaningful way upon the experience and therefore fully exploit its learning potential. It again raises ethical questions for school and

system leaders about the extent to which schools can reasonably rely upon colleague volunteers to fulfil an increasing number of leadership duties, particularly when no additional time, payment, or support to learn from the experience is provided.

Findings in theme 2 subtheme 3 also reveal that opportunities to further develop curricular and pedagogical knowledge and skills were thought to be central to developing the leadership capacity of experienced, established middle leaders (PT/FHs). They were keen to keep abreast of developments within their area of responsibility to maintain their credibility as a leader in their field and to also ensure the best possible educational provision for pupils. To this end they engaged with subject-specialist networks or with national organisations that offered the potential to impact positively upon practice, for example, some were part-time markers for the SQA and encouraged their colleagues to do likewise. These developmental experiences enabled experienced, established middle leaders to keep abreast of subject developments.

It is generally accepted that professional learning should be viewed as a process and that one-off professional learning courses and events are less likely to deliver changes to practice than activities that are sustained over time (Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002; Desimone, 2009; Guskey, 2002b). In a finding that challenges this assertion, findings in theme 2 subtheme 3 identifies how one experienced and established middle leader benefitted from an inspirational one-off event which became the catalyst for a significant change to practice across their department and school. This demonstrates the potential value of external inputs to challenge existing thinking and potentially deliver new or refreshed practice as discussed by Reeves et al. (2002).

Also valued was the opportunity to engage with middle leader peers for mutual support, and to gain knowledge that could further develop leadership capacities or enhance practice within the areas that they lead. Where available, the support of a trusted middle leader peer within the school environment provided developmental critical friendship in which participants had support to make sense of new challenges that they encountered in their leadership and could draw from individual and collective experience to plan next steps. This again exemplifies an approach to support which is consistent with the principles of the

leader development model (McCauley et al., 2010). It also aligns with well-established views of learning from experience (Irvine & Brundrett, 2019; Reeves et al., 2002). The potential to enrich developmental dialogue by deploying a coaching approach where appropriate, is recommended by national organisations in Scotland. This finding suggests that coaching approaches, and the time to use them could help facilitate constructive peer support for experienced, established middle leaders. Forde et al. (2018) argue that the central positioning of middle leaders (connecting upwards, downward and across leadership layers) is crucial to the effective functioning of schools, and thus middle leader development must explore ways of establishing and sustaining these connections with senior leaders, other middle leaders and teacher colleagues. Providing opportunities to sustain meaningful professional, critical friendship with middle leader colleagues provides an opportunity for the leadership development of individual middle leaders and also to strengthen connections across the middle leader layer of the school and thus, potentially, support wider school improvement.

6.3.2.4 Middle leader development matrix

Informed by the leader development model of McCauley et al. (2010) and the stages of middle leader development identified in theme 2, the following matrix captures findings from the study to propose key features of middle leader development.

Table 6a

Middle leader development matrix

	Assessment of leadership development needs	**Challenge** Experiences to extend leadership knowledge and skills	**Support** to facilitate learning from leadership development experiences
Preparing	Identification of leadership learning development needs.	Experiences to address two key aspects: ***Personal development*** - Opportunities to explore the middle leader role, learn from others, gain experience of leading. ***Personal profile*** **-** Opportunities to demonstrate pedagogical expertise and leadership potential and thus develop credibility.	• Support to identify leadership learning needs and relevant development opportunities. • A planned programme of activities tailored to individual needs. • Mentors, role models, collaboration with experienced middle leader colleagues in leadership activities. • Experience of leading with support from relevant individuals and opportunities for reflection. • Courses /programmes in leadership.
Beginning		***Relational*** – experiences that will help establish positive productive relationships, cultivate trust with and among colleagues, establish credibility. ***Contextual*** - learning about the requirements of the role and the context including structural, organisational and policy matters. ***Strategic*** – gradually widen vision from departmental to whole school focus.	• A tailored package of support. • Formal process of induction addressing role/ context. • Formal and informal opportunities to build relationships and credibility. • Middle leader mentor and/or coach and role models. • Time to learn role and reflect upon leadership practice. • Courses/ programmes to develop understanding of leadership, management, administration.
Developing		Continued development of **professional** and **strategic** expertise. Experiences that develop, enhance and refresh knowledge and practice in relation to pedagogy and curriculum, leadership and management, and context. Participation in courses, programmes, or events to provide external inputs to extend knowledge, refresh practice and inspire. School-wide involvement, to help understand/ deliver contribution of department/ faculty to school/ improvement.	Tailored approach to meet individual needs. • Those remaining in ML roles – leadership learning to inspire and develop practice. • Mutually supportive networking opportunities and critical friendships with middle leader peers. • Opportunities to contribute to whole-school work where appropriate, ideally in collaboration with other leaders. • Those progressing to senior leadership – opportunities to develop at senior leadership level. • For those aspiring to senior leadership, opportunities for senior leadership experience, ideally supported by a senior leader mentor/ coach /role model.

6.3.2.5 Theoretical development: stages of middle leader development

The findings of this study therefore confirm theories relating to the leadership learning and development of middle leaders, particularly those which argue that individuals bring a unique blend of strengths and development needs to their middle leadership (Irvine & Brundrett, 2016; Irvine & Brundrett, 2019) and therefore require an individualised package of leadership development activities to develop in their role (Gurr & Drysdale, 2013).

Irvine and Brundrett (2016; 2019) examine the leadership learning needs of teachers beginning in middle leadership, and the findings of this study support assertions that there are specific leadership learning needs associated with beginning in the role. However, a central claim to knowledge and a theoretical development offered by this study is the identification of three significant stages of middle leader development: aspiring, beginning and developing. The leadership characteristics that help define each stage and the specific purposes of learning experiences at each stage and associated approaches that can nurture leadership development are also identified (summarised in Table 6a). These findings add an original contribution to knowledge to the field of middle leader development and leadership preparation. The identification of the 'aspiring' stage at which individuals actively seek experiences that will allow them to develop leadership knowledge and skills, showcase their skills to others and help build their professional credibility also demonstrates ownership of leadership learning and constitutes a further development since Gurr and Drysdale (2013) found that some middle leaders did not appreciate the value of leadership learning.

Consistent with the assertions of Fluckiger et al. (2015) this study finds the need for differing leadership learning approaches for experienced, established middle leaders seeking promotion to senior leadership, and those wishing to remain in post. However this study extends the repertoire of recommended approaches to leadership learning for all experienced middle leaders by illuminating the potential of peer support and critical friendship from middle leader colleagues and of the potential benefits of offering opportunities for them to engage in leadership activities at whole-school level as a means of further enhancing their contextual understanding. In terms of De Nobile's theory of middle leadership (2018, p. 6), these leadership learning approaches contribute additional knowledge of the developmental "inputs" that might allow middle leaders to be successful in their role.

6.4 Limitations of the study

With a sample size of nine, it is recognised that the study is small in scale. Creswell (2017) proposes that the purpose of qualitative research is not to generalise, but to explore specific aspects. Thus, the size of the sample must be considered along with its capacity to provide the information needed to explore the phenomenon. Volunteer participants were sought from the MEd Educational Leadership in the university in which the researcher works. Further snowball sampling was used to include participants who were not engaged in part-time award-bearing learning to provide a range of perspectives and experiences regarding the development of middle leadership capacity.

As this study illustrates, many of the experiences and opportunities available to develop middle leadership capacity are contextually located. Drawing from the work of Lincoln and Guba (1985), Merriam and Tisdell (2016) address the notion of transferability in qualitative studies, proposing that the relevance of findings is best determined by those who seek to use or apply the findings. Within a Scottish context, this study seeks to draw from the perspectives of middle leaders and those aspiring to the role to identify available developmental experiences and opportunities that are helpful in developing their leadership capacity. It is hoped that readers of this study will be able to draw from findings to identify those most relevant to their individual circumstances and contexts.

Data was gathered from May-August 2020, during the early months of the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown. This resulted in a change to the anticipated approach to data collection from in person engagement to an online approach using a video conferencing platform. Lo-Iacono et al. (2016) argue that online research interviews which allow both visual and audio engagement help ensure the observation of non-verbal cues and body language during the interview, which are identified as an important aspect of research interviews (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018). This was found to be the case. Any difficulties that were anticipated due to a lack of participants' familiarity with video conferencing technology was unfounded as the national lockdown had resulted in a recent growth in their confidence and familiarity with online communication platforms and they were happy to engage with the researcher in this way. Furthermore, both the researcher and the participants appeared to find it easier to include an online meeting in their normally busy schedules. The unforeseen impacts of the ongoing

pandemic and further national lock downs resulted in the researcher having significantly less time to devote to part-time doctoral study. The process of analysing data, identifying findings, and drafting the thesis thus took longer than had been initially planned. It is recognised that a longer timescale means that findings are less current, and that a similar study conducted within the current socio-economic climate may yield different participant perspectives and findings. However, changes to context do not invalidate these findings, rather they are offered as the perspectives and experiences of a specific group of middle leaders at this specific point in time.

6.5 Recommendations

This study identifies three key stages of middle leader development, with specific leadership learning needs and potentially helpful approaches to leadership development at each stage. The findings of this study also illuminate ways in which aspects of context can impact upon the leadership learning of middle leaders. Within the fields of middle leadership and leadership preparation and development, few studies explicitly explore the leadership learning of middle leaders and those aspiring to this role. Those that do often draw from the perspectives of several stakeholders, whereas this study focusses solely upon the experiences and perspectives of middle leaders and thus gives a voice to middle leaders themselves. The findings offer a distinctive contribution to the fields of middle leadership and leadership preparation and development by extending current theory about middle leadership practice, preparing for middle leadership and developing in leadership throughout the middle leadership career. It offers key messages for middle, school and system leaders regarding approaches to middle leadership development and insights into the contextual factors which are likely to support leadership learning and development for school middle leaders.

The following section draws from key findings and conclusions to identify recommendations for further study and practice.

6.5.1 Recommendations for further study

Drawing from this participant sample, this study identifies three key stages of middle leader development. Further research, particularly of experienced and established middle leaders

could potentially reveal further stages of middle leader development and the associated development needs. It could also potentially help address the paucity of research in the ongoing development needs of experienced, established middle leaders.

Within the generic sample of this qualitative study, several participants had particularly interesting experiences and perspectives that might merit more in-depth study. Further study using a case study approach could explore some aspects of middle leader learning in more depth, e.g. to provide a more nuanced understanding of the ways in which middle leadership capacity is developed through specific contextual experiences.

6.5.2 Recommendations for practice

The findings of this study have the potential to contribute positively to the professional learning of middle leaders by surfacing the developmental value of the leadership learning experiences available to middle leaders in Scotland, and the supports required to fully exploit the learning potential of these experiences. The findings could therefore offer insights that middle leaders can use to inform their professional learning in leadership, that school communities can use to help shape contexts in which leadership capacity can be developed, and that professional learning providers can use to inform their leadership development provision for middle leaders and those preparing for the role.

Recommendation 1*: System-level leaders should consider ways in which a fair and consistent approach to providing middle leader learning can be implemented.*

The findings of this study suggest that the professional Standards for Middle Leadership (General Teaching Council Scotland, 2012b, 2021b) contribute to a system-wide understanding of what is expected of middle leaders in Scotland's schools. This is likely to be due to their status as the recommended tool for self-evaluation in regulatory processes such as Professional Update. However, the findings of this thesis reveal that opportunities to learn and develop in middle leadership are inconsistent due to the influence of more local contextual factors and circumstances and varied understandings of the developmental potential of existing protocols. Having implemented a systematic and well-considered approach to head teacher preparation and development, system level leaders could now

consider how a similarly systematic approach to middle leadership preparation and development might be implemented. This could include a nationally agreed set of expectations for middle leadership learning which outlines a range of developmental experiences available within schools and beyond and would also require an allocation of funding to support their implementation. The developmental experiences should include all of those discussed throughout the study including some which are highlighted in the recommendations that follow.

Recommendation 2*: Middle leaders, school leaders and system-level leaders should work together to ensure a consistent understanding of the developmental role of PRD and other nationally promoted approaches such as coaching and use these to help facilitate meaningful leadership learning*.

The findings of this study suggest that the annual process of Professional Review and Development (General Teaching Council Scotland, 2024) has the potential to fulfil a developmental as well as a regulatory function. In addition to playing a central role in the process of maintaining professional accreditation as a teacher, it can be a vehicle for promoting self-evaluation and professional reflection. Coaching approaches are also recommended nationally to support meaningful, developmental professional dialogue in situations such as PRD and in mentoring student and probationer teachers (General Teaching Council Scotland, 2012b, 2021b).

However, variable practice across participants' contexts suggests inconsistent understandings of the developmental potential of PRD, and of how coaching approaches (in which many school leaders across Scotland have been trained) can be used to support and inform the development of colleagues. There is therefore scope to evaluate the extent to which training in these approaches is sufficient to deliver a change in leadership practice, and the use of the findings to inform future professional practice. Further system-wide work to achieve a shared understanding of the developmental potential of regulatory and nationally supported approaches is also recommended to ensure that the potential of these approaches for developing leadership capacity is fully exploited in schools.

***Recommendation 3**: School leaders at all levels should help to ensure that individuals who engage in voluntary leadership activity have time and support to help them learn from the experience.*

An apparent increased engagement in voluntary leadership activity across schools, provides opportunities for aspiring middle or senior leaders to gain experience that can inform future leadership practice and support applications for promoted posts. In order to ensure that these activities are developmental, it is recommended that such opportunities are accompanied by support that will enable the individual to appreciate the relevance of the leadership activity to their development needs. This should include time to reflect upon the experience and opportunities to engage with a mentor or coach (such as a suitably trained middle leader peer who is also provided with time) who can help them make sense of and learn from the experience.

***Recommendation 4:** School and system-level leaders should ensure that relevant and meaningful induction is provided as standard practice for all who are beginning a new middle leader role.*

The findings of this study reveal that the leadership learning needs of those beginning a middle leader post are relational, contextual and strategic. Supporting the transition of a new middle leader as they begin in the role could potentially reduce the time required for them to become effective, credible middle leaders. The provision of meaningful middle-leader induction could support this process, particularly for those who have moved to a new school and should include relevant social activities and opportunities to build contextual and procedural knowledge. To achieve consistency of approach and to signal its importance, a national induction template outlining suggested information and relevant developmental experiences could be considered .

***Recommendation 5**: School and system-level leaders should work to ensure the provision of an appropriate mentor as standard practice for those beginning in middle leadership.*

It is widely argued that teaching and leadership are different skills. The transition to middle leadership is often the first experience that teachers have of a leading colleagues, yet this stage often coincides with a drop in the availability of in-school support, particularly for those who have moved to a new school. In addition to the need for social, contextual, and procedural knowledge, there are other challenges associated with undertaking the role for the first time. In-school support from colleagues is identified as potentially helpful at this stage such as opportunities to engage with middle leader peers. The support of an experienced, established middle leader to mentor, coach and role model for the first 1-2 years in post could assist a new middle leader in fulfilling their role effectively and also maximise the leadership learning potential resulting from the challenge (McCauley et al., 2010) of beginning the role.

Recommendation 6: *School and system-level leaders should facilitate opportunities for middle leaders to provide peer support and critical friendship to middle leader colleagues*.

For experienced, established middle leaders, opportunities to engage in professional networks, programmes and one-off events can inspire, challenge, and develop their thinking and their practice. A key feature of these experiences is the opportunity to engage with and learn from middle leader peers. This study identified an initiative within one school, which had been beneficial in nurturing formal critical friendships among middle leader peers. Critical engagement with trusted peers facilitated the sharing of good practice and joint problem-solving of more challenging situations. This opportunity therefore enhanced the leadership practice of experienced, established middle leaders. It also provided an opportunity to strengthen the middle leader layer of the school as described by Forde et al. (2018) and thus contribute to school improvement. The nurturing and facilitation of critical friendship among experienced, established middle leader peers within schools is therefore recommended as an approach to support their ongoing leadership development as part of an individualised range of activities which also includes appropriate external inputs.

Recommendation 7: *Experienced and established middle leaders and school leaders at all levels should be aware of the developmental potential of leading wider school activities.*

The opportunity to contribute to the wider school through supporting or leading a whole school area of responsibility or initiative was identified as a helpful leadership learning opportunity for experienced, established middle leaders. Such opportunities are viewed by some who wish to remain in a middle leader role as an opportunity inform and enrich their leadership practice and may also have the potential to sustain and refresh their professional motivation and engagement. It also provided relevant experience for those aspiring to a senior leader role. Findings of this study concur with those of Gurr and Drysdale (2013), that the opportunity to contribute at whole school level depends upon senior leaders in a number of ways. Further work at system level is recommended to facilitate a wider recognition of the beneficial value of sharing relevant wider school responsibilities with willing middle leaders, with consideration of how they might be provided with time and support as appropriate to enable them to fulfil the role effectively and learn from the experience.

6.6 Final reflections

This study sought to explore the experiences and perspectives of middle leaders in Scotland in relation to the development of their middle leadership capacities and the opportunities available for them to do so. The findings make an original contribution to knowledge in the fields of middle leadership and leadership preparation and development by extending current theory about middle leadership practice, preparing for middle leadership and developing in leadership throughout the middle leadership career. Findings confirm scholarly assertions about the highly individualised nature of the leadership learning of middle leaders due to the wide range of knowledge, skills and experience that each person brings to the role. The findings also contribute an original contribution to knowledge by identifying specific stages of middle leader development, specific learning needs and purposes at each stage and the approaches that middle leaders and those aspiring to the role find helpful in addressing these.

Scholarly assertions about the influence of context upon the roles and responsibilities of middle leaders are confirmed by the findings of this study. In a further contribution to knowledge, this study identifies ways in which context influences the leadership learning of school middle leaders in Scotland. It illuminates the impact of the national Standard for Middle Leadership (General Teaching Council Scotland, 2021b) as an overarching framework

outlining the roles, responsibilities and expectations of middle leaders in Scotland's schools which can be used an evaluative tool in middle leader development. Evidence from this study suggests that the Standard for Middle Leadership (General Teaching Council Scotland, 2021b) has also contributed to a shared understanding of key responsibilities of school middle leaders across the Scottish education system.

This thesis offers key messages for middle, school and system leaders regarding approaches to middle leadership development and provides insights into the contextual factors which are likely to support the leadership learning and development of school middle leaders. Within Scotland, considerable efforts have been made to support the professional and leadership learning of teachers. This study has found that further work is required at national, local and school level to achieve a shared understanding of the developmental benefits of approaches such as coaching and the annual PRD dialogue. A shared understanding of the potential of these opportunities to empower individuals to take ownership of their leadership learning, reflect upon their leadership and be supported in their leader development could help achieve a more consistent and effective use of these approaches by middle and senior leaders in schools. This could thus contribute to achieving greater consistency of practice and to enhancing the quality of leadership learning for middle leaders and others.

The findings of this study reveal the central role played by experienced, established middle leaders in the leadership development of those preparing for middle leadership. Another new insight emerging from this study is the potential for middle leaders to support each other in their leadership development; mentoring those beginning in the role, and critical friendship amongst middle leader peers who are more experienced. A national template for middle leader induction and an appropriate middle leader mentor could ensure that individuals have the information and support they require when beginning to role. It is also recommended that school and system leaders consider how ongoing peer support and critical friendship focussed upon leadership development might be nurtured and supported in schools to facilitate ongoing middle leader development. Such opportunities offer the potential to strengthen middle leader capacities and to also enhance the collaborative culture of the school. This in turn could facilitate the effective learning of colleagues and pupils and thus contribute to school improvement.

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Appendices

Appendix 1	Literature Search Protocol
Appendix 2	Documentation for Ethical Approval 2a Confirmation of Ethical Approval 2b Participant Information Documents 2c Participant Consent Form
Appendix 3	Data Collection Instruments 3a Interview Schedule 3b Focus Group Schedule

Appendix 1: Literature Search Protocol

Title: Learning to Lead: the leadership learning of secondary school middle leaders in Scotland

Research objectives of the literature review
To explore the perspectives and experiences of secondary school middle leaders in relation to

1. their leadership learning
2. the leadership development opportunities available to them in Scotland

Aims of the literature review
To identify and analyse research and theory in relation to

- the expectations of middle leadership in schools,
- the skills that middle leadership require to meet these expectations,
- the learning needs of middle leaders (and aspiring middle leaders) in relation to their leadership role,
- proposed approaches to leadership learning and development that may address the needs of middle leaders.

Literature search questions

- What is expected of middle leaders in (secondary) schools?
- What knowledge and skills are required fulfil these expectations?
- What are the leadership learning needs of middle leaders?
- What approaches to leadership learning are proposed to address these needs?

Scope of the literature review
The literature search focussed upon the following aspects of the literature. The findings of the search inform content and discussion in the literature review and introductory chapters.

Topic	Aspect/ area	Purpose	Chapter
Middle leadership	• Definitions of middle leadership. • The contribution of middle leaders to the school community	Historical, theoretical and conceptual context for the field of middle leadership	Introduction
Middle leadership	• Roles and responsibilities • Knowledge and skills required • Leadership learning needs	Conceptual foundation for discussion of the leadership learning needs of middle leaders	Literature review
Building leadership capacity	Research and theory relating to • building leadership capacity, • approaches to leadership learning and development for middle leadership	Theoretical and conceptual context for discussing leadership learning	Literature review

Search locations

Database	Reason for Choice
Proquest Academic	This database was reviewed first as it comprises of a collection of databases relating to Arts and Social Sciences. It also has good facilities for recording search histories etc. which supported the process of record-keeping.
Educational Administration Abstracts	This database focusses upon areas related to "educational administration", including educational leadership, educational management, and educational research relevant to this field.
Google Scholar	Provides details of a wide range of published scholarly materials. This resource was used as an additional source to identify any relevant literature that may not have been identified in previous searches.

The initial scoping review

The initial scoping review allowed the researcher to gain an understanding of the key features of the field such as the volume and nature of available literature, the timeframe over which middle leadership in schools had been studied and key themes and terminology within the field. A dominance of discussion regarding the roles and responsibilities of middle leaders was observed. A limited number of papers that focus solely upon the leadership development of middle leaders was noted, although a number of papers consider aspects such as implications for professional learning in their discussion of findings or conclusions.

A number of previous literature reviews in the field of middle leadership were identified. Reading these at an early stage allowed the researcher to be more alert to sources that added new perspectives to the field. Again, it was also noted that none of the reviews focussed solely upon the leadership learning of middle leaders, some addressed it briefly and some did not discuss it at all. Some sources of relevant grey literature were identified, such as doctoral theses or conference papers. Where the findings made a significant contribution to the field it was found that they were subsequently published as peer-reviewed research article. This contributed to a decision to focus primarily upon peer reviewed sources for the second phase of the literature search.

The literature review

As a result of the scoping review, it was determined that literature regarding the leadership roles and responsibilities of middle leaders was relevant to the study as it informed subsequent discussion of the leadership learning needs of middle leaders. A more in-depth review of abstracts was undertaken in which the following parameters were applied to identify potentially relevant sources.

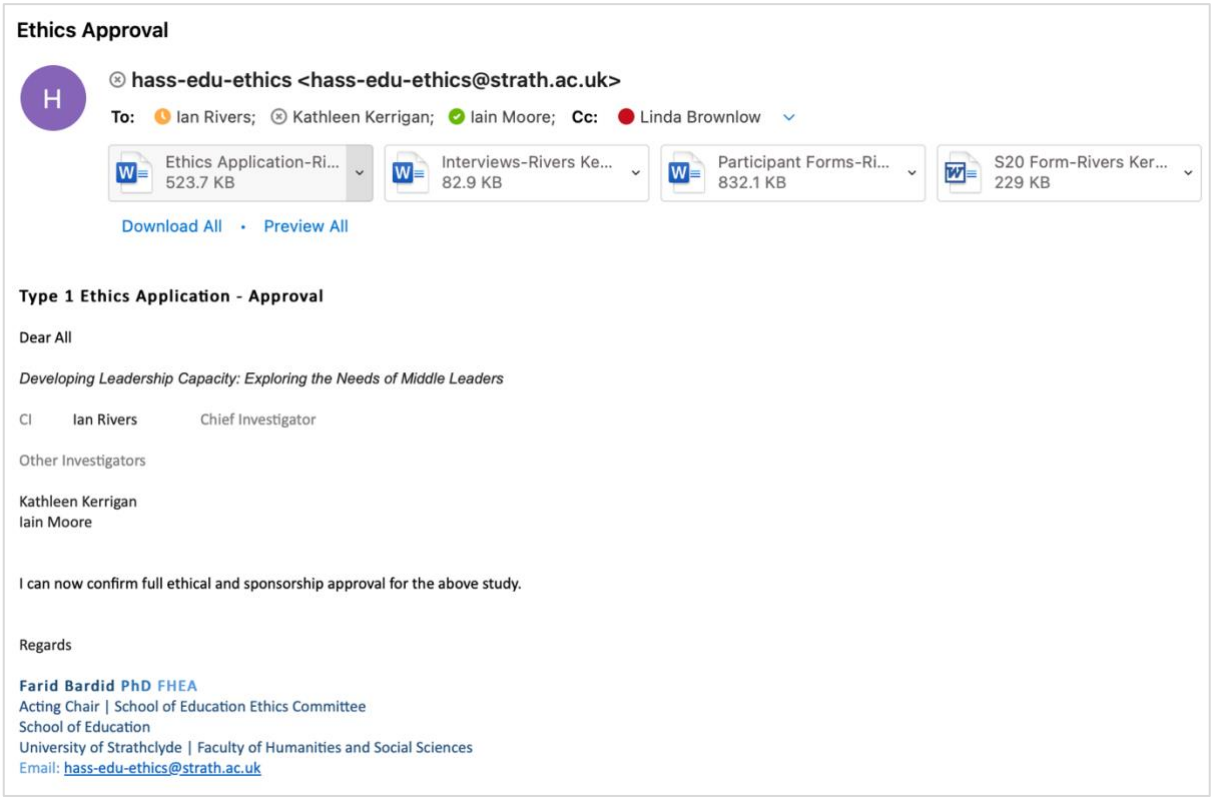
Parameters applied when reviewing abstracts

Sources were selected based upon their exploration of the professional learning needs of middle leaders. In a study that explores the experiences and perspectives of middle leader, studies that reported upon the voices of MLs were privileged. Inclusion and exclusions criteria were as follows

Inclusion Criteria	Excluded
Middle leadership in schools including the significance of middle leaders to school communities	middle school, early learning contexts, further or higher education contexts
Definitions of middle leadership in schools	teacher leadership, headship
Roles and responsibilities of middle leaders in schools	teacher leadership, headship, middle school, early learning contexts, further or higher education contexts
Knowledge skills and abilities required by middle leaders in schools	
Approaches to leadership learning, development and/or developing leadership capacity of middle leaders and those aspiring to middle leadership	teacher preparation

Appendix 2: Documentation for Ethical Approval

2a Confirmation of Ethical Approval



Ethics Approval

H

hass-edu-ethics <hass-edu-ethics@strath.ac.uk>

To: Ian Rivers; Kathleen Kerrigan; Iain Moore; **Cc:** Linda Brownlow

Ethics Application-Ri... 523.7 KB | Interviews-Rivers Ke... 82.9 KB | Participant Forms-Ri... 832.1 KB | S20 Form-Rivers Ker... 229 KB

Download All • Preview All

Type 1 Ethics Application - Approval

Dear All

Developing Leadership Capacity: Exploring the Needs of Middle Leaders

CI Ian Rivers Chief Investigator

Other Investigators

Kathleen Kerrigan
Iain Moore

I can now confirm full ethical and sponsorship approval for the above study.

Regards

Farid Bardid PhD FHEA
Acting Chair | School of Education Ethics Committee
School of Education
University of Strathclyde | Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences
Email: hass-edu-ethics@strath.ac.uk

2b Participant Information Documents

Participant Information Sheet
Middle Leader Interviews

Name of Department: Humanities and Social Sciences: School of Education

Title of the study: Developing Leadership Capacity: Exploring the Needs of Middle Leaders

[FOR USE WITH STANDARD PRIVACY NOTICE FOR RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS see below]

You are being invited to take part in a research study. The following information is designed to provide information about why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the information, discuss it with others if you wish and don't hesitate to ask me about anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Thank you for reading this.

Introduction

The research study is being conducted by Kathleen Kerrigan, a part-time EdD student of the University of Strathclyde. Kathleen is an experienced schoolteacher, school middle leader and university educator. She can be contacted at Kathleen.kerrigan@strath.ac.uk

What is the purpose of this research?

This research is being conducted in part fulfilment of a Doctorate in Education (EdD). The study seeks to explore the experiences and activities which help develop the leadership capacity of middle leaders.

Do you have to take part?

Participation in the study is completely voluntary. If you decline to participate or decide to withdraw during the study, it will not affect your treatment by, or relationship with the researcher in any way. In addition, if you are a student who is taught by the researcher, such a decision will have no bearing upon your university progress.

What will you do in the project?

You are being invited to participate in an online research interview, during which you will be asked a series of questions that are relevant to the research. The interview will take place online using the *Zoom* video conferencing platform and will last approximately 1 hour. The Zoom interview will be recorded and a transcript created. When the transcript has been checked for accuracy the Zoom recording will be destroyed and the transcript anonymised. Transcripts will then be used to allow the researcher to identify significant research information.

In the event that any information is not clear, the interviewer may contact you again by email or arrange a further conversation to clarify the issue.

The researcher will also invite you to participate in a focus group discussion at a later date, which will also use Zoom

Why have you been invited to take part?

The research seeks to explore the perspectives of school middle leaders regarding their leadership learning. You have been asked to participate as you have school middle leadership experience.

What information is being collected in the project?

During the interview you will be asked to provide some information about your teaching and

middle leadership experience. You will also be asked to reflect upon your experiences of personal and professional development in relation to leadership.

Who will have access to the information?
What you say in the interview is completely confidential and the data will be anonymised. Participants will be referred to by a code, rather than by name, a password-protected key for the code will be stored in a separate secure location and will be used in the event that you wish to withdraw consent to use your data. Only the researcher and her two university supervisors will have access to the anonymised data.

Where will the information be stored and how long will it be kept for?
Video files will be stored on the password-protected laptop of the researcher until the transcript is produced and checked and the video will then be destroyed. Anonymised transcripts will be stored on a password protected, secure drive of the University of Strathclyde. Any paper copies of the data will be stored in a locked drawer. Data will be retained until after the award of the EdD after which time it will be secured stored in a research data repository managed by the University of Strathclyde for a period of 10 years and it will then be securely destroyed.
Thank you for reading this information – please don't hesitate to ask any questions if you are unsure about what is written here.
Please also read the Privacy Notice for Research Participants (also attached below)

What happens next?
If you would like to participate or would like to know more, please contact Kathleen at kathleen.kerrigan@strath.ac.uk You will be asked to sign a form to indicate your consent.
If you do not wish to participate, thank you for your attention.

Sharing information from the research study
When the research is completed it will form part of a thesis submitted to the University of Strathclyde in part fulfilment of the Doctorate in Education (EdD). It will be possible to obtain a summary of the findings from Kathleen on request. In addition, it is possible that Kathleen will share the findings of the research for academic purposes e.g. in research papers, conference presentations, journal articles or book chapters. No participants will be identified in any of these documents.

Researcher contact details:
kathleen.kerrigan@strath.ac.uk

Chief Investigator details:
Professor Ian Rivers,
School of Education,
University of Strathclyde, Lord Hope Building, 141 St James Road, Glasgow G4 0LT
Telephone: 0141 444 8362. Email: ian.rivers@strath.ac.uk

This research was granted ethical approval by the University of Strathclyde Ethics Committee. If you have any questions/concerns, during or after the research, or wish to contact an independent person to whom any questions may be directed or further information may be sought from, please contact:
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School of Education Ethics Committee
University of Strathclyde, Lord Hope Building, 141 St James Road, Glasgow G4 0LT
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Please note that this standard information should be considered alongside information provided by the researcher for each project, which is usually in the form of a Participant Information Sheet (PIS). The PIS will include further details about how personal information is processed in the particular project, including: what data is being processed; how it is being stored; how long it will be retained for, and any other recipients of the personal information. It is usually given to participants before they decide whether or not they want to participate in the research.

Data controller and the data protection officer
The University of Strathclyde is the data controller under data protection legislation. This means that the University is responsible for how your personal data is used and for responding to any requests from you in relation to your personal data.
Any enquiries regarding data protection should be made to the University's Data Protection Officer at dataprotection@strath.ac.uk.

Legal basis for processing your personal information
If you are participating in a research project, we may collect your personal information. The type of information that we collect will vary depending on the project. Our basis for collecting this information is outlined below:

Type of information	Basis for processing
Personal information and associated research data collected for the purposes of conducting research.	It is necessary for the performance of a task carried out in the public interest.
Certain types of personal information such as information about an individual's race, ethnic origin, politics, religion, trade union membership, genetics, biometrics (where used for ID purposes), health, sex life, or sexual orientation are defined as 'Special Category' data under the legislation.	It is necessary for the performance of a task carried out in the public interest and It is necessary for scientific or historical research purposes in accordance with the relevant legislation (Data Protection Act 2018, Schedule 1, Part 1, Para 4).
Criminal conviction / offence data	It is necessary for the performance of a task carried out in the public interest and is processed in accordance with Article 10 of the General Data Protection Regulation and the Data Protection Act 2018, Schedule 1, Part 1, Para 4.

Details of transfers to third countries and safeguards
For some projects, personal information may be processed outside the EU. This will normally only be done when research is taking place in locations outside the EU. If this happens, the University will ensure that appropriate safeguards are in place. You will be fully informed about any transferring of data outside the EU and associated safeguards, usually in the Participant Information Sheet.

Sharing data
If data will be shared with other individuals or organisations, you will be advised of this in the PIS.

Retention of consent forms
If you participate in a research project, you may be asked to sign a participant consent form. Consent forms will typically be retained by the University for at least as long as the identifiable research data are retained. In most cases they will be retained for longer, the exact time frame will be determined by the need for access to this information in the unfortunate case of an unanticipated problem or a complaint. 5 years after the research is completed will be suitable for many projects, but beyond 20 years will be considered for any longitudinal or 'high risk' studies involving children, adults without capacity or a contentious research outcome.

Data subject rights
You have the right to: be informed about the collection and use of your personal data; to request access to the personal data we hold about you; you are entitled to request to have personal data rectified if it is inaccurate or incomplete; you have the right to request to object to your data being processed and you can request to restrict the processing of your personal information. To exercise these rights please contact dataprotection@strath.ac.uk.
However, please note - in some research projects, it may **not be** possible to provide these rights because doing so would prevent or seriously impair the achievement of the research purpose. For instance, if you are participating in a focus group with multiple participants, if the research has progressed to a later stage of analysis, or findings have been published, it may not be possible to remove any one individual's personal data without having an adverse effect on the entire dataset.

Right to complain to supervisory authority
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Participant Information Sheet
Middle Leader Focus Group

Name of Department: Humanities and Social Sciences: School of Education

Title of the study: Developing Leadership Capacity: Exploring the Needs of Middle Leaders

[FOR USE WITH STANDARD PRIVACY NOTICE FOR RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS see below]

Name of department: Humanities and Social Sciences: School of Education

Title of the study: Developing Leadership Capacity: Exploring the Needs of Middle Leaders

You are being invited to take part in a research study. The following information is designed to provide information about why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the information, discuss it with others if you wish and don't hesitate to ask me about anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Thank you for reading this.

Introduction

The research study is being conducted by Kathleen Kerrigan, a part-time EdD student of the University of Strathclyde. Kathleen is an experienced schoolteacher, school middle leader and university educator. She can be contacted at Kathleen.kerrigan@strath.ac.uk

What is the purpose of this research?

This research is being conducted in part fulfilment of a Doctorate in Education (EdD). The study seeks to explore the experiences and activities which help develop the leadership capacity of middle leaders.

Do you have to take part?

Participation in the study is completely voluntary. If you decline to participate or decide to withdraw during the study, it will not affect your treatment by, or relationship with the researcher in any way. In addition, if you are a student who is taught by the researcher, such a decision will have no bearing upon your university progress.

What will you do in the project?

You are being invited to participate in an online research focus group, during which you will take part in a group discussion that is relevant to the research. It is anticipated that the meeting will last approximately 1 hour. The focus group meeting will take place online using the *Zoom* video conferencing platform The Zoom discussion will be recorded and a transcript created. When the transcript has been checked for accuracy, the Zoom recording will be destroyed and the transcript anonymised. Transcripts will then be used to allow the researcher to identify significant research information.
In the event that any information is not clear, the interviewer may contact you again by email or arrange a further conversation to clarify the issue.

Why have you been invited to take part?

The research seeks to explore the perspectives of school middle leaders regarding their leadership learning. You have been asked to participate as you have school middle leadership experience.

What information is being collected in the project?
During the focus group discussion you will be asked to discuss aspects of middle leadership, particularly aspects of personal and professional development in relation to leadership.

Who will have access to the information?
What is said in the focus group discussion is completely confidential and the data will be anonymised. Participants will be referred to by a code, rather than by name. Only the researcher and her two university supervisors will have access to the anonymised data. It is hoped that audio recordings of the discussion will be converted to text using voice recognition software. In the event that this is unsuccessful the audio recording may be accessed by an audio-typist who will transcribe the recording.

Where will the information be stored and how long will it be kept for?
Video files will be stored on the password-protected laptop of the researcher until the transcript is produced and checked and the video will then be destroyed. Anonymised transcripts will be stored on a password protected, secure drive of the University of Strathclyde. Any paper copies of the data will be stored in a locked drawer. Data will be retained until after the award of the EdD after which time it will be secured stored in a research data repository managed by the University of Strathclyde for a period of 10 years and it will then be securely destroyed.
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2c Participant Consent Form

Participant Consent Form

Title of the study: Developing Leadership Capacity: Exploring the Needs of Middle Leaders

- I confirm that I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet for the above project and the researcher has answered any queries to my satisfaction.
- I confirm that I have read and understood the Privacy Notice for Participants in Research Projects and understand how my personal information will be used and what will happen to it (i.e. how it will be stored and for how long).
- I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw from the project at any time, up to the point of completion, without having to give a reason and without any consequences.
- I understand that I can request the withdrawal from the study of some personal information and that whenever possible researchers will comply with my request.
- I understand that anonymised data (i.e. data that do not identify me personally) cannot be withdrawn once they have been included in the study.
- I understand that any information recorded in the research will remain confidential and no information that identifies me will be made publicly available.
- I consent to being a participant in the project.
- I consent to being video recorded as part of the project. YES/ NO (please circle as appropriate)

(PRINT NAME)	
Signature of Participant:	Date:

Appendix 3: Data Collection Instruments

3a Interview Schedule

Developing Leadership Capacity: Exploring the Needs of Middle Leaders
Research in part fulfilment of the Doctorate of Education (EdD)

Schedule for Semi-Structured Interview

Researcher preamble will include

- Discussion of consents including a verbal explanation and completion of consent forms (including permission to record), with further verbal assurances of confidentiality and anonymity.
- Interview information such as the anticipated duration and purpose and any relevant reassurances.

Introductory questions (to put participants at ease and acquire personal details)

1. **Tell me about yourself**
   Prompts
   - current role,
   - length/nature of experience in education,
   - qualifications.

2. **Can you provide a brief outline of your professional journey to middle leader?**
   - Promoted and unpromoted posts

Research question 1

3. **What would you say are the key areas for personal and professional development as a (middle leader)?**
   - Knowledge? Skills? Experience?
   - Anticipated needs, current needs or (reflecting back), needs at various stages of middle leadership.

Research question 2

4. **Can you describe professional development experiences and activities in which you have engaged to support your development as a (middle) leader?**
   - Formal learning?
   - Informal learning?
   - Experiential learning?

5. **Which were most helpful?**
   - Why?
   - What was the impact?
   - Did any further opportunities arise as a result?
   - Were there any particular challenges associated with the experience?

6. **Which were least helpful?**
   - Why?
   - What was the impact?
   - Did any further opportunities arise as a result?
   - Were there any particular challenges associated with the experience?

3b Focus Group Schedule

Developing Leadership Capacity: Exploring the Needs of Middle Leaders
Research in part fulfilment of the Doctorate of Education (EdD)

Schedule for Focus Group Discussion

Researcher preamble will include

- Discussion of consents including a verbal explanation and completion of consent forms (including permission to record), with further verbal assurances of confidentiality and anonymity.
- Focus group information such as the anticipated duration and purpose and any relevant reassurances.
- Reminder of some guiding principles such as one speaker at a time, maintaining confidentiality, all views are valid.

Introductory task (to put participants at ease)

1. **Brief introductions**

Research question 1

2. **What are the key areas for personal and professional development as a (middle) leader?**
    a. Knowledge, skills, experience
    b. Anticipated needs, current needs or, reflecting back upon leadership experience, needs at various stages of middle leadership.

Research question 2

3. **Which professional development experiences and activities are available to support development as a (middle) leader?**
    a. Formal learning, informal learning, experiential learning

4. **Which were most helpful?**
    - Why?
    - Impact?/ Further opportunities?
    - Challenges?

5. **Which were least helpful?**
    - Why?
    - Impact?/ Further opportunities?
    - Challenges?

Prompts can be re-phrased or additional questions added if specific themes have emerged from the analysis of data from semi-structured interview.