



RESEARCH ARTICLE

HOW SCHOOL MIDDLE LEADERS NAVIGATE COMPETING DEMANDS

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Abstract

School middle leaders occupy an intermediary position in which organisational, professional, and relational expectations frequently intersect. This systematic review examines how school middle leaders navigate competing demands in their leadership practice and the organisational conditions shaping their responses. Following PRISMA 2020, the review synthesised ten empirical qualitative studies published between 2020 and 2026, identified through searches of Scopus and ERIC. An inductive thematic synthesis was conducted without imposing a predetermined conceptual framework. The findings show that competing demands commonly involve tensions between policy expectations and professional judgement, organisational priorities and teachers' concerns, strategic responsibilities and operational work, and institutional expectations and relational commitments. Middle leaders navigate these tensions through interconnected practices of translation, negotiation, adaptation, coordination, and relational sensemaking. These practices are shaped by role position, authority, relationships, professional culture, workload, time, resources, and the wider policy environment. The review conceptualises this process as workable alignment: a situated form of agency through which middle leaders construct provisional arrangements that enable organisational work to continue without necessarily resolving underlying tensions. This perspective reframes middle-leader agency as relational and context-dependent, highlighting the organisational conditions required for competing demands to remain workable.

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Introduction:-

School middle leaders occupy a distinctive position in school organisations: they are expected to make organisational priorities work while remaining closely connected to the professional realities of teaching and learning. Situated between senior leadership and teaching staff, they translate expectations, coordinate action, and respond to concerns that may not always align (Walk, 2023). Their positions include subject leaders, heads of department, curriculum coordinators, and other formally designated leadership roles that influence, coordinate, or direct school practices beyond their individual work as teachers. This intermediary position gives middle leaders a potentially influential role in shaping how organisational decisions are understood and enacted, but it also places them at the intersection

of competing expectations (Orkamo et al., 2025). This complexity becomes particularly pronounced when different demands do not point towards the same goals (Demerouti, 2025). Middle leaders may be expected to implement organisational priorities, respond to teachers' professional concerns, meet accountability requirements, and adapt change to local circumstances. Research indicates that how these responsibilities are enacted is shaped by the settings, resources, relationships, and contextual conditions in which middle leaders work (Attard et al., 2025). During educational disruption, for example, middle leaders may face internal and external demands simultaneously and draw on sensemaking to interpret ambiguity and determine their responses (Chaaban et al., 2025).

The challenge, therefore, lies not simply in the number of responsibilities they hold, but in how they act when different expectations converge within the same context. Empirical research illustrates several practices through which middle leaders respond to such demands. They translate policy by organising, planning, managing, persuading, and adapting policies to local school realities (Edwards- et al., 2026), and may act as brokers by connecting different actors and groups during school improvement (Melaka, 2025). Their leadership also depends on communication, trust, collaboration, and professional relationships that shape the conditions for change and learning (Liashin et al., 2026). Recent research further characterises middle leading as multifaceted and interdependent, involving practices such as negotiating, coordinating, developing teaching and learning, building teams, and evaluating evidence (Tindall-ford & Lipscombe, 2025).

Yet these studies largely illuminate particular practices or dimensions of middle leadership rather than explaining how such practices are mobilised and adjusted when different demands must be addressed simultaneously. This issue needs to be considered within a growing body of middle-leadership research. (Lipscombe et al., 2025) synthesised 35 empirical studies from 14 countries, showing substantial variation in the positions and responsibilities of middle leaders across contexts. Their updated review identified 52 peer-reviewed empirical studies from 21 countries published between 2020 and 2024 and further highlighted the relational and emotional dimensions of middle-leader work (Lipscombe et al., 2025). Other recent studies have examined middle leaders' roles in school improvement, professional learning, communication, professional relationships, policy enactment, brokerage, and instructional leadership (Bryant et al., 2020; Nehez & Sülau, 2026). However, these diverse strands have not yet been sufficiently synthesised around the specific question of how middle leaders navigate competing demands as an ongoing condition of their leadership practice.

This gap matters because middle leadership cannot be understood adequately through formal responsibilities or individual practices alone. When organisational, professional, and relational demands arise simultaneously, middle leaders must determine what to translate, negotiate, coordinate, adapt, or prioritise. Their responses are also shaped by the organisational conditions in which leadership is enacted. Research suggests that social, material, and political conditions influence middle-leadership practices, while relational coherence forms part of the conditions that enable middle leaders to lead change (Anonymous, 2020.). Understanding the relationship between competing demands, navigation practices, and organisational conditions can therefore provide a more integrated account of how middle leadership is enacted in everyday school organisations. Against this background, this review synthesises empirical qualitative research on school middle leaders to examine how they navigate competing demands in their leadership practice. Rather than imposing a predetermined framework, the review analyses findings thematically across related strands of research to identify relationships among the demands middle leaders encounter, the practices they use to respond to them, and the organisational conditions that shape those practices. The conceptual contribution is therefore derived from patterns emerging across the evidence rather than from categories established prior to the synthesis.

The review addresses three research questions:-

1. RQ1. How do school middle leaders navigate competing demands in their leadership practice?
2. RQ2. What practices do school middle leaders use to respond to competing demands?
3. RQ3. What organisational conditions shape how school middle leaders enact these practices?

Method:-

This study employed a systematic review of empirical research examining how school middle leaders navigate competing demands, following the PRISMA 2020 guidelines. Searches were conducted in Scopus and ERIC for peer-reviewed English-language journal articles published between 2020 and 2026. The Scopus search combined terms referring to school middle leadership (e.g., "middle leadership," "middle leader," "middle leading," "leading from the middle," and "middle-level leadership") with school-related terms, while a supplementary search combined the leadership terms with terms such as "competing demands," "role conflict," "role tension," "policy tension," and

dilemma. The main Scopus search yielded 93 records, the supplementary search yielded 6, and the ERIC search yielded 37 records after applying the relevant filters.

Following deduplication, titles and abstracts were screened against predefined eligibility criteria. Studies were included if they (1) focused on school middle leaders, (2) were situated in school contexts, (3) reported qualitative evidence or a substantive qualitative component of a mixed-methods study, and (4) provided empirical evidence of middle leaders encountering, interpreting, or responding to multiple, conflicting, or tension-laden demands. Conceptual papers, reviews, quantitative-only studies, non-school studies, and studies lacking relevant evidence of navigating competing demands were excluded. These criteria deliberately prioritised analytical relevance and evidential depth over the number of publications included in the review. Thus, studies addressing middle leadership more generally were not retained unless they provided substantive qualitative evidence relevant to the review focus.

Full texts were subsequently assessed for eligibility, followed by design-sensitive methodological appraisal focusing on research design, participants, data sources, analytical procedures, and the connection between evidence and conclusions. Data were extracted on study context, middle-leadership role, methodology, competing demands, navigation practices, and organisational conditions. An inductive thematic synthesis was conducted by comparing study-level patterns and developing cross-study analytical themes without imposing a predetermined conceptual framework. Ten studies met the final inclusion criteria and were included in the synthesis. The relatively small number of included studies reflects the focused eligibility criteria rather than the broader size of the middle-leadership literature. The study selection process is presented in the PRISMA 2020 flow diagram (Figure 1).

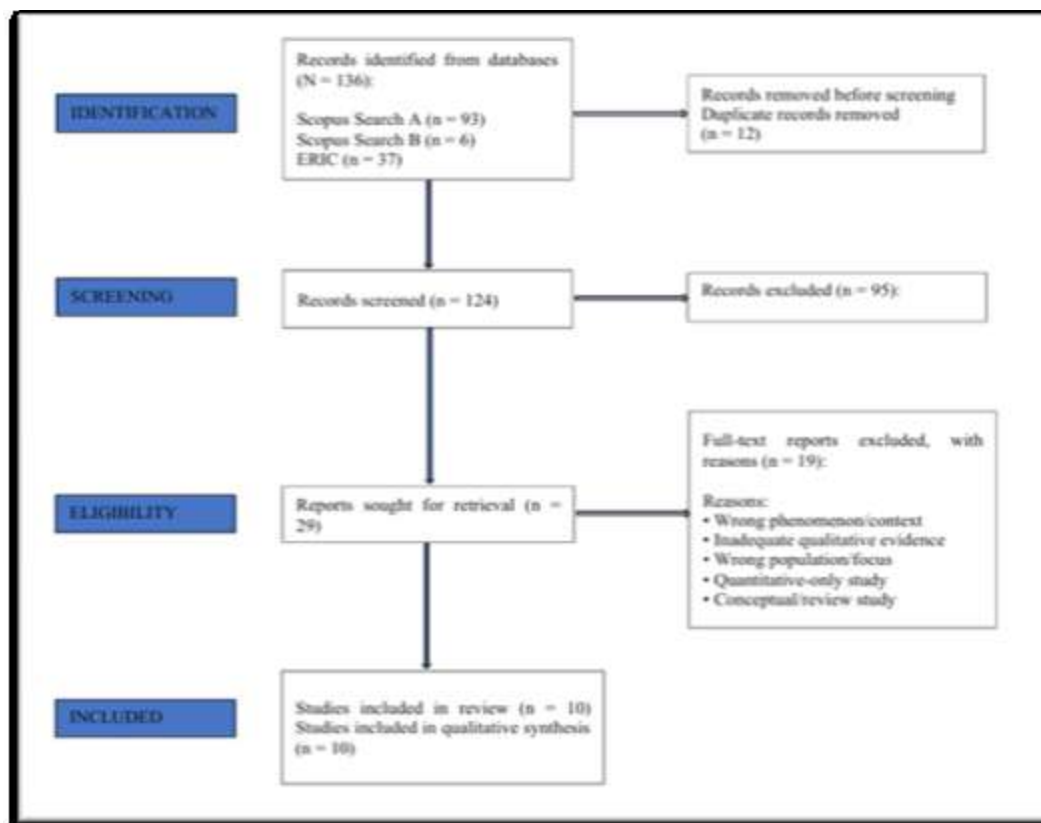


Figure 1: PRISMA 2020 flow diagram of the study selection process

The final evidence base comprised ten empirical studies that met all eligibility criteria. The studies represented diverse school contexts and middle-leadership roles, while sharing a substantive focus on how leaders encountered and responded to competing, conflicting, or tension-laden demands. This focused evidence base provided the basis for the cross-study thematic synthesis presented in the following section.

Result and Discussion:-

The review identified ten empirical studies that met the inclusion criteria. The studies varied in national context, middle-leadership roles, and methodological approaches, but consistently examined the work of leading from an intermediary position within schools. The synthesis therefore focused on cross-study patterns concerning the demands middle leaders encountered, the practices through which they navigated them, and the organisational conditions shaping their agency. Five sections follow, moving from the characteristics of the evidence base to competing demands, navigation practices, organisational conditions, and the resulting theoretical interpretation.

Characteristics of the Included Studies:-

The ten studies were published between 2020 and 2026 and covered school contexts in Singapore, England, South Africa, Sweden, Ireland, Hong Kong, and Australia. The middle-leadership roles included heads of department, subject and curriculum leaders, departmental and grade heads, and other formally positioned middle leaders. One study focused specifically on women in middle leadership, while another examined middle leadership within shared leading practices.

The evidence base was predominantly qualitative, comprising case studies, interviews, practice-oriented inquiry, and autoethnographic analysis. (Tay et al., 2020) employed a mixed-methods design with a substantive qualitative component. Data were primarily drawn from interviews, observations, reflective accounts, and practice-based sources. Across the studies, middle leaders were consistently positioned as actors working across multiple expectations rather than within a single, clearly bounded leadership function.

As summarised in Table 1, the demands encountered included tensions between policy expectations and professional judgement, organisational priorities and teachers' concerns, strategic responsibilities and classroom practice, accountability and educational purpose, and institutional expectations and relational commitments. These recurring tensions form the basis of the thematic synthesis below.

Table 1. Characteristics of the included studies

Study	Context & middle-leadership role	Method / data	Key findings relevant to competing demands
Tay et al. (2020)	Singapore; school middle leaders	Mixed methods; questionnaire, observations, interviews	Middle leaders navigated assessment accountability alongside pedagogical and ethical considerations through technical, tactical, and ethical approaches.
Perry (2021)	England; Heads of English in secondary schools	Qualitative; interviews	Policy changes were negotiated against professional values and curriculum priorities through accommodation and selective enactment.
Loh & Hu (2021)	Singapore; middle leaders / heads of department	Qualitative case study; interviews	Curriculum reform was mediated between school priorities and teachers' concerns through interpretation, influence, and mediation.
Gear & Sood (2021)	England; mathematics curriculum middle leader	Autoethnographic qualitative study; reflective journal	School-wide strategic responsibilities were balanced with classroom and practitioner roles through movement between strategic and operational work.

Fourie & Naidoo (2022)	South Africa; departmental and grade heads	Qualitative case study; semi-structured interviews	Crisis demands, continuity, and stakeholder responsibilities were managed through redistribution, communication, coordination, and adaptation.
Nehez et al. (2023)	Sweden; middle leaders within shared leading practices	Qualitative practice-based case study	Dilemmas across leadership positions were addressed through joint planning, role negotiation, and adjustment of structures and practices.
Skerritt et al. (2023)	Ireland; school middle leaders	Qualitative empirical study	Policy expectations were translated into local school and teacher realities through organising, planning, persuading, and appeasing.
Edwards-Groves et al. (2023)	School context; middle leaders	Qualitative practice-oriented analysis	Organisational and developmental demands were negotiated against situated local concerns through adaptive, relational, and collective practices.
Ho, Chiu, & Liu (2025)	Hong Kong; middle leaders and teachers	Comparative case study; questionnaires, interviews, observations	Curriculum reform goals were mediated amid divergent teacher interpretations through communication, sensemaking, and management of misalignment.
Cotter et al. (2026)	Australia; women in middle leadership	Qualitative; semi-structured interviews	Institutional, temporal, relational, and professional demands created leadership dilemmas navigated through negotiation and balancing of competing expectations.

The Nature of Competing Demands in Middle Leadership:-

The synthesis indicates that competing demands are a recurring feature of middle leadership rather than an occasional consequence of particular organisational circumstances. Across the studies, middle leaders were expected to enact organisational priorities while remaining responsive to professional concerns, maintain accountability while exercising judgement, and contribute to strategic change while remaining connected to teaching and learning. The tension therefore arose not simply from having multiple responsibilities, but from expectations grounded in different priorities, values, and sources of authority.

A prominent tension concerned policy and organisational expectations versus professional judgement. (Anonymous, 2020) showed how Heads of English negotiated policy changes against subject-specific and professional values, while (Tay et al., 2020) and (Skerritt et al., 2023) illustrated how curriculum and policy expectations had to be

interpreted and translated within local school realities. Policy was consequently not experienced as a straightforward directive; its enactment required middle leaders to reconcile external expectations with professional knowledge, teacher concerns, and existing priorities.

A related tension involved accountability and educational purpose. (Tay et al., 2020) showed that assessment requirements involved technical, tactical, and ethical judgements, indicating that compliance could not always be separated from questions of pedagogy and professional responsibility. (Cotter et al., 2025) similarly identified tensions between institutional expectations and commitments to care. These findings suggest that organisational demands may remain legitimate while simultaneously creating tensions with other values that middle leaders are expected to uphold.

The strategic–operational dimension was also recurrent. (Gear & Sood, 2021) captured this through the movement between the strategic “balcony” and the practitioner “dance floor”, while (Maren, 2019) showed how crisis conditions expanded middle leaders’ responsibilities across different organisational levels. (Nehez et al., 2022) and (Sing et al., 2025) further demonstrated that tensions may arise from different interpretations among actors working within shared organisational processes.

Taken together, competing demands were multidimensional, overlapping, and relational. They did not necessarily occur as discrete problems that could be addressed sequentially. Rather, middle leaders often had to respond to several expectations within the same situation. This helps explain why formal role descriptions alone cannot capture the practical complexity of middle leadership.

How Middle Leaders Navigate Competing Demands:-

The studies did not identify a single strategy for dealing with competing demands. Instead, middle leaders combined several forms of situated practice: translation and interpretation, negotiation and accommodation, adaptation, coordination, and relational sensemaking. These practices were analytically distinguishable but often occurred together.

Translation and interpretation were particularly evident in policy and curriculum reform. Skerritt et al. (2023) showed that middle leaders made policy workable through organising, planning, persuading, and managing, while Loh and Hu (2021) highlighted interpretation and mediation between school priorities and teachers’ concerns. Perry (2021) similarly showed selective enactment as middle leaders sought to accommodate policy while retaining professional priorities. Translation therefore involved determining what an organisational demand meant locally and how it could be enacted without simply reproducing the original directive.

Negotiation and accommodation were similarly central. Middle leaders did not necessarily choose one demand over another; they adjusted priorities, accommodated some expectations, and preserved others. Nehez et al. (2023) showed negotiation across leadership positions, while Cotter et al. (2026) demonstrated how professional, relational, temporal, and institutional expectations could be continually balanced. Fourie and Naidoo (2022) further showed how responsibilities were redistributed and practices adapted under crisis conditions.

Coordination and relational work extended these processes across organisational boundaries. Middle leaders connected senior-leadership expectations with teachers’ experiences, coordinated activities, and managed differences in interpretation. Ho et al. (2025) demonstrated that apparent agreement could coexist with deeper differences in understanding, indicating that communication alone does not resolve competing demands. Relational work was therefore part of the process through which expectations were interpreted, negotiated, and sustained in practice.

Across the evidence, navigation is best understood as an ongoing process of adjustment rather than the application of fixed leadership strategies. A middle leader may interpret an expectation, negotiate its implications, adapt it to local circumstances, and coordinate implementation while managing different responses among colleagues. Agency is therefore exercised through practice and judgement rather than through complete control over the demands themselves.

Organisational Conditions Shaping Navigation:-

The scope of this agency was shaped by the organisational conditions surrounding middle-leadership practice. Four conditions were particularly evident: role position and authority, professional relationships and trust, organisational

culture and norms, and time, workload, and the wider policy environment. First, the intermediary position of middle leaders simultaneously provided access to organisational priorities and teachers' experiences while exposing them to expectations from different directions. Gear and Sood (2021) and Skerrett et al. (2023) illustrate how this position created opportunities for interpretation and influence but also pressure to enact expectations originating beyond the middle leader's immediate professional sphere.

Second, relationships and trust affected the possibilities for negotiation and collective interpretation. Loh and Hu (2021) highlighted the relational work involved in mediating curriculum reform, while Nehez et al. (2023) showed the importance of shared leading practices. Ho et al. (2025) further demonstrated how apparent alignment could conceal divergent understandings. Relational conditions therefore shaped whether competing demands could be discussed and negotiated rather than simply transmitted.

Third, organisational culture and established practices influenced what forms of judgement and adaptation were legitimate. Edwards-Groves et al. (2023) showed that leadership practices were embedded in particular practice arrangements, while Tay et al. (2020) demonstrated how assessment practices were shaped by organisational expectations and professional norms.

Finally, time, workload, resources, and wider policy conditions influenced the feasibility of sustained navigation. Skerrett et al. (2023) highlighted the range of activities involved in policy enactment, while Fourie and Naidoo (2022) showed how crisis conditions expanded responsibilities. Cotter et al. (2026) similarly identified temporal pressures as part of the tensions experienced in middle leadership.

Thus, organisational conditions do not simply enable or constrain middle-leader agency in a general sense. They shape which forms of navigation are possible, legitimate, and sustainable. Agency is consequently situated and bounded rather than either absent or fully autonomous.

Theoretical and Conceptual Synthesis: Workable:-

The findings can be further interpreted through the lens of paradox theory. Smith and Lewis (2011) conceptualise organisational paradoxes as persistent tensions between interdependent and contradictory demands that cannot be permanently resolved. This perspective is useful for interpreting the present synthesis because the competing demands identified across the studies were rarely mutually exclusive choices. Middle leaders were expected to satisfy organisational priorities while also maintaining professional judgement, relational commitments, and responsiveness to local circumstances.

From this perspective, the central issue is not how middle leaders eliminate contradictory demands, but how they continue to act when those contradictions remain. The reviewed studies suggest that middle leaders respond through translation, negotiation, adaptation, coordination, and relational sensemaking. These practices allow competing expectations to be accommodated sufficiently for organisational work to continue, even when their underlying tensions persist.

Building on this pattern, the review conceptualises workable alignment as a situated form of agency through which middle leaders negotiate sufficient alignment among partially incompatible expectations under organisational constraints. Workable alignment differs from permanent resolution. It refers to temporary and context-sensitive arrangements in which organisational priorities, professional concerns, and local conditions can coexist sufficiently for action to proceed.

This interpretation extends the value of paradox theory to the specific intermediary position of school middle leaders. Whereas paradox theory helps explain why contradictory demands persist, the present synthesis shows how middle leaders work practically within those contradictions. Their agency lies not in resolving the paradox but in keeping competing demands workable through ongoing adjustment. Translation can alter how a policy is understood; negotiation can redistribute priorities; adaptation can modify implementation; coordination can connect actors and resources; and relational work can sustain cooperation despite differences. The process is also recursive. Organisational conditions shape the space available for navigation, while middle leaders' everyday practices can locally modify how policies, priorities, and responsibilities are understood and enacted. Workable alignment is therefore neither a final state nor a fixed leadership outcome. It is a provisional accomplishment that may need to be renegotiated as demands and conditions change.



Figure 2. A situated model of middle-leader agency in navigating competing demands.

Figure 2 represents this process as a relationship among competing demands, navigation practices, and organisational conditions, with workable alignment as the immediate outcome. The model positions agency neither as individual autonomy nor as passive compliance. Instead, middle leaders exercise bounded agency by working across persistent tensions and constructing locally workable arrangements. In this sense, the contribution of the review is not another list of middle-leadership practices, but a theoretical account of how diverse practices become connected through the ongoing task of making contradictory expectations workable.

Conclusion:-

This systematic review examined how school middle leaders navigate competing demands across ten empirical studies published between 2020 and 2026. The synthesis shows that competing demands are a recurring feature of middle-leadership practice, particularly where policy expectations intersect with professional judgement, organisational priorities with teachers' concerns, and strategic responsibilities with operational and relational commitments. Middle leaders navigate these tensions through interconnected practices of translation, negotiation, adaptation, coordination, and relational sensemaking, rather than through fixed strategies.

The review conceptualises middle-leader agency as a situated capacity to negotiate workable alignment among partially incompatible expectations under organisational constraints. Workable alignment does not imply resolving tensions permanently; rather, it refers to provisional arrangements that allow organisational work to continue while competing priorities remain. The extent to which such alignment can be constructed is shaped by role position, authority, relationships, professional culture, workload, time, resources, and the wider policy environment. At the same time, middle leaders' practices can locally reshape how organisational expectations are interpreted and enacted.

Overall, the review shifts attention from what middle leaders are formally expected to do towards how they work across persistent tensions in practice. Understanding middle leadership through workable alignment provides an integrated account of how diverse leadership practices become forms of situated agency, while highlighting that this agency depends not only on individual capability but also on the organisational conditions in which leadership is enacted.

Implications for Research and Practice:-

The findings have implications for both research and middle-leadership practice. For research, the review suggests that competing demands should be examined as a constitutive condition of middle leadership rather than as a secondary consequence of policy implementation, organisational change, or instructional responsibility. Future longitudinal and comparative qualitative research could examine how combinations of demands change over time and how middle leaders construct, maintain, and revise workable alignments as organisational circumstances shift.

For practice, middle-leadership development should move beyond training individual leaders in predefined competencies. Professional development could combine short workshops with case-based discussion, peer consultation, and reflective follow-up centred on real leadership dilemmas. At the organisational level, senior leaders can create interpretive space through protected time for policy discussion, regular forums for negotiating competing priorities, and early involvement of middle leaders in implementation planning. Clarifying non-negotiable requirements while allowing appropriate discretion in local enactment, together with channels for upward feedback, can further support middle leaders in navigating tensions without simply absorbing them at the point of implementation.

These arrangements do not eliminate competing demands but provide the conditions for middle leaders to interpret, negotiate, and adapt them. Supporting middle-leader agency therefore requires not only delegating responsibility, but also providing sufficient time, authority, dialogue, and discretion for workable alignment to be constructed in practice.

Limitations:-

This review has several limitations. First, the evidence base was relatively small. Although the search identified 136 records, only ten studies met all eligibility criteria and were included in the final synthesis. This limits the extent to which the findings can be transferred across different school systems, leadership structures, and cultural contexts. However, the small evidence base also reflects the deliberately focused eligibility criteria, which required substantive qualitative evidence concerning how school middle leaders encounter, interpret, and respond to competing demands. The synthesis should therefore be understood as an analytically focused account of patterns across relevant qualitative evidence rather than as a comprehensive representation of the broader middle-leadership literature.

Second, the review was limited to peer-reviewed English-language journal articles indexed in Scopus and ERIC and published between 2020 and 2026. Relevant studies published in other languages, databases, or forms of scholarly literature may therefore have been overlooked. Third, because the review focused on qualitative evidence, the synthesis does not capture the prevalence or statistical distribution of competing demands across school settings. Finally, the review interpreted competing demands substantively rather than requiring studies to use the term explicitly. Although this approach enabled the inclusion of conceptually relevant evidence across different strands of middle-leadership research, the resulting conceptualisation of navigation and workable alignment remains an interpretation derived from the available evidence and should be further examined through empirical research.

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