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Centre for
School Leadership

Building Middle Leadership Capacity in Irish Schools

***The Evaluation Report of the
Middle Leadership Action Research
Pilot Programme Project for the Centre
for School Leadership, Ireland***

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February 2023

A leader...

is like a shepherd. He stays behind the flock, letting the most nimble go out ahead, whereupon the others follow, not realizing that all along they are being directed from behind.

— Nelson Mandela

There is growing recognition of the increasingly complex nature of school leadership, and of the fact that sustained school improvement depends on the leadership of many rather than few. In the Irish context, key Department of Education (DE) circulars 03/2018 and 44/2019 highlight the potential for a school's development of middle leadership. The purpose of the Middle Leadership Action Research Pilot Project (MLAR), which was funded by the Teacher Education Section (TES) of the Department of Education, was to develop understandings around building middle leadership capacity in Irish schools. The collaborative nature of the programme was pivotal, whereby the principal, deputy principal, middle leaders, and teachers could learn together to strengthen leadership capacity for the benefit of students and the school community. The pilot project also set out to learn about system-level development of leadership capacity across schools.

The Centre for School Leadership (CSL) team designed a programme that comprised several different components including Online Competency Workshops to be undertaken by leaders in school, leadership visits, and school-cluster twilight sessions facilitated by a CSL facilitator. In addition, each leadership team in school undertook a practice-based leadership development project. The team appreciated the enthusiasm of the 32 schools that volunteered for this project at a time when the Covid-19 pandemic put additional demands on both senior and middle leaders.

This evaluation report recognises the central role that the external facilitators played in the pilot project. Their skills and experience as a school principal and as an external person building connections across the leadership teams, facilitating critical and productive discussions, were a key driver of the project. CSL is indebted to these system leaders. CSL collaborated with Clare and Kildare Education Centres, which promoted the programme in their regions and encouraged schools to participate. The Irish Primary Principals' Network (IPPN), National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals (NAPD), Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST), and DE Inspectorate provided guidance throughout the project. Professor Christine Forde is an invaluable asset to CSL and her vast international experience in the area of school leadership helped the team to shape the project. We would like to thank Professor Forde for her generosity of time and commitment to the project.

We look forward to sharing the learning from this pilot with the education system to inform professional learning for leadership.



Mary Nihill
National Director Centre for School Leadership
February 2023

Building Middle Leadership Capacity in Irish Schools: The Evaluation Report of the Middle Leadership Action Research Pilot Programme

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Part One: Overview

Introduction

Part One provides an overview of the Middle Leadership Action Research Pilot Programme (MLAR), the purposes and outline of the programme, and the evaluation of the pilot project. This section begins with a summary of key findings.

1.1 Summary of Key Findings

Overwhelmingly, there was a very positive response to the MLAR Pilot Programme from the different groups of leaders in schools and from the facilitators. Areas of strength were consistently highlighted, and while there were some challenges, predominantly the participants valued the MLAR Pilot Programme as a school-led, collaborative, practice-based leadership development programme from which substantial benefits accrued, for both the development of middle leaders and the strengthening of collaboration across the leadership team. This dual focus helped to foster distributed leadership and augmented the leadership capacity of the school. Participants reported a need to develop leadership across all roles in the school, including teachers, in order *“to develop the untapped potential”*.

- The MLAR Pilot Programme made a significant system-level contribution, providing a vehicle for the implementation in schools of various policy developments around leadership, including the improvement of teaching and learning.
- The MLAR Pilot Programme is a powerful professional learning programme which supports the development of middle leaders – API and APII post holders and non-positional teacher leaders.
- The school-led, collaborative, practice-based learning approach provided powerful learning experiences that enhanced practice.
- There was a significant development in understandings about the purpose and contribution of middle leadership, supporting a move from a task orientation to seeing these posts as leadership roles.
- The programme helped to increase the leadership capacity of schools.
- The programme built connections across leadership teams and helped develop middle leadership practice in working with and leading others.
- The collaborative nature of the programme strengthened teamwork, developing skills to enable all leaders to contribute to the work of the school leadership team.
- Working together as a leadership team fostered among participants a greater appreciation of the team dynamics, the contribution of different roles, and a better understanding of each other as leaders.
- Principals reported changes to their role, notably working with a leadership

team to take school development forward, supporting the participation of different leaders, and providing leadership opportunities in leading change initiatives.

- The competency workshops were highly regarded, but some flexibility in their use by schools/clusters was suggested.
- Facilitators were highly regarded, and working with the facilitator was seen by school staff as very productive, supporting leadership teams to develop as leaders and as a team.
- School cluster working was an important development opportunity, sharing ideas and practice and building networks.
- The CSL team played a critical role in overseeing and managing the MLAR Pilot Programme.
- The Education Support Centres played an important role in maintaining the local connection to schools.
- The Education Support Centres made several important contributions to the organisation of the MLAR, through advertising and recruiting schools for the MLAR at the outset and liaising with CSL, ensuring that the logistics and accommodation were in place.
- The vision and design for the MLAR was based on an identified area of need in leadership development and was informed substantially by research conducted in the Irish system and the wider international literature on middle leadership development.
- Further development of the beginning and closure of the programme was suggested by participants.
- The resourcing of the MLAR Pilot Programme in terms of time was an issue raised by all groups of school participants and facilitators.

1.2 The Middle Leadership Action Research Pilot Programme: Purposes

The focus of the MLAR Pilot Programme was to develop understandings around building middle-leadership capacity in Irish schools. Key circulars 03/2018 and 44/2019 highlight the importance for a school's development of middle leadership, collaborating with the principal and deputy principal.

Kavanagh (2020) conducted research in the Irish system on the professional needs of middle leaders in post-primary education. A number of her recommendations provided a foundation for the MLAR, such as "*combined training*" (p. 159), where a key focus is the building of shared understandings of leadership in the leadership team and strengthening understandings and practice around distributed leadership and collaboration across the school. Another recommendation was that a facilitator as an "*independent person*" can facilitate "*authentic conversations and real engagement with changing the status quo*" (p. 159). The study also identified several areas of

leadership practice that were drawn on in designing the MLAR, including “*time management skills, relationship management, conflict management and support to support the pastoral care of students*” (p. 159).

The project was also influenced by De Nobile (2018), who suggested six categories of middle leadership roles (pp. 403–405) and the five main ways that middle leaders may carry out these roles (pp. 406–408). The research from both Kavanagh (2020) and De Nobile (2018) provided a strong underpinning for the project’s rationale and guided the CSL team in terms of the learning modules provided.

The purpose of the MLAR Pilot Programme was to explore the process of leadership in school, identify areas of effective leadership development, facilitate professional learning opportunities, and highlight areas of further development in the building of leadership capacity across Ireland.

The collaborative nature of the programme was pivotal, whereby the principal, deputy principal, middle leaders in API and APII roles, and teachers could learn together to strengthen leadership capability and capacity in their schools. The project looked to further the collaborative dimension by building school cluster working. The final key aspect of the MLAR Pilot Programme was to learn about system-level development of leadership capacity across schools.

1.3 Middle Leadership Action Research Pilot Programme Outline

Table 1.1: Participating Schools

TEACHER CENTRE	PRIMARY	POST-PRIMARY	TOTALS
Kildare	7	9	16
Clare	7	9	16
Totals	14	18	32

Table 1.2: MLAR Pilot Programme

ACTIVITY	DETAIL
CSL Self-Reflection Tool	<i>Looking at Our School (2022):</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Domain One: Leading learning and teaching through the lens of Standard Two, Domain Four: Empowering staff to take on and carry out leadership roles.
Leadership Development Project	Leaders in each school work collaboratively on a leadership development project – senior leaders, middle leaders, and teacher leaders.
Online Competency Workshops	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building Relationships • Minding Myself • Leading Productive Meetings • Effective Communication • Leading Effective Pedagogy: Primary • Leading Effective Pedagogy: Post-Primary • Conflict Management • Leading Partnerships with Parents • Project Management
CSL Facilitator Leadership Visits	Each facilitator did four leadership visits to each of their schools, meeting individual leadership teams, to support the initiation, development, and closure of the project.
Cluster meetings	CSL facilitator-led meetings: Four Twilight sessions in Clare or Kildare Education Support Centres, with 2–3 schools coming together to work in clusters to share understandings, experiences and practice in leadership and build on the Competency Workshops.

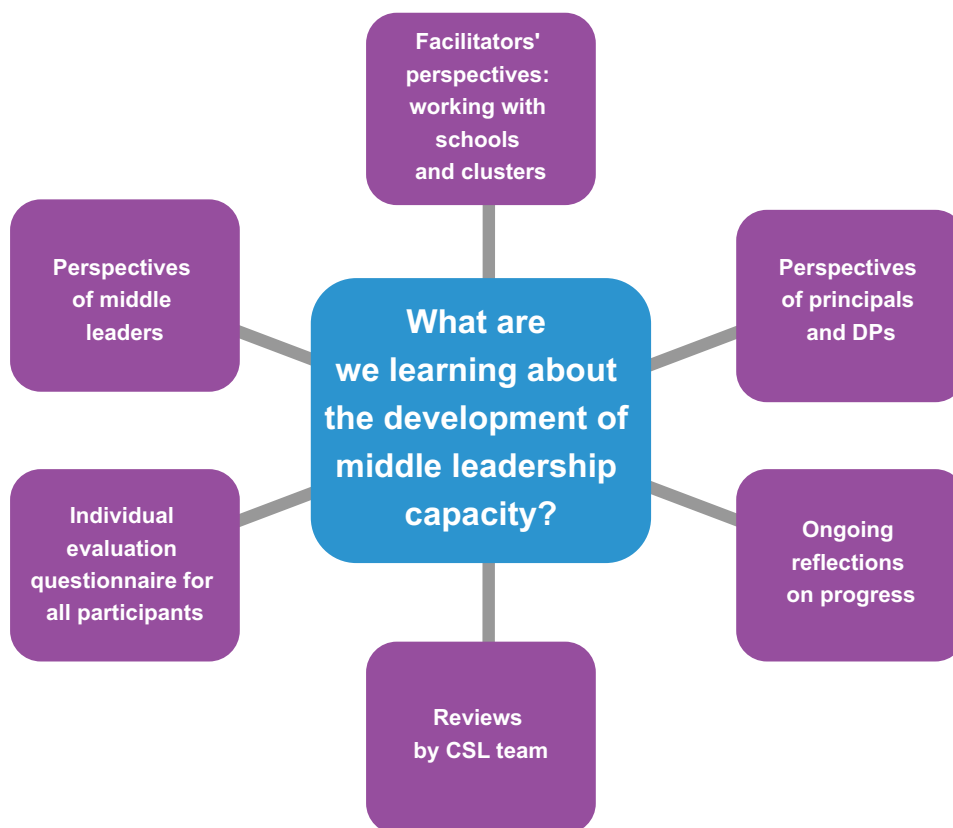
1.4 Overview of the Evaluation: Formative and Summative

The evaluation of the MLAR Pilot Programme combined both formative and summative evaluation. The methods were designed to support reflection and review in schools, provide feedback, and build understandings cumulatively over the course of the programme.

The data from the summative evaluation, the final participant questionnaires, and the focus groups were analysed alongside the data that had been previously gathered and analysed as part of the formative evaluation. Substantially, the same broad themes emerged across the data from both primary and post-primary sectors. Where there are specific-sector issues, these are included. Differences in the participation and impact of the MLAR Pilot Programme on school sectors are discussed further in a later section.

This report draws from the different data sets collected in the course of the MLAR Pilot Programme. Each data set was thematically analysed and summarised. These summaries were reviewed and synthesised for this report.

Figure 1.1 Overview of formative and summative evaluation



Part Two: Impact of the Middle Leadership Action Research Pilot Programme

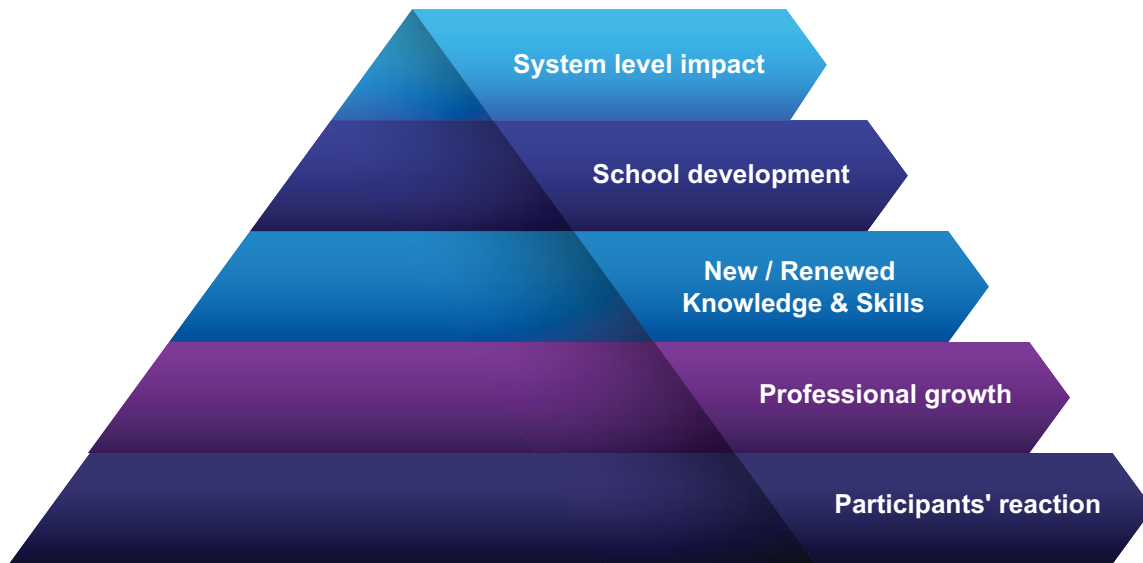
Introduction

Part Two reports on the impact of the MLAR Pilot Programme. The section sets out the framework used to chart different levels of impact, and then discusses the overall impact of the MLAR Pilot Programme sustainability. It presents findings on the impact of the MLAR Pilot Programme on five levels.

2.1 Framework for Exploring the Impact

The impact of professional learning of teachers and leaders is a major concern in both education policy and research. The impact of a specific set of professional learning experiences on the practice, and consequently on outcomes for learners, is difficult to measure (O'Brien and Forde 2016), given the range of factors that shape the conditions for learning in a school. Guskey's (2000) exploration of the impact of professional learning at different levels across an education system, provides a useful starting point. An adapted version of Guskey's framework was used in the study of the impact of the CSL National Mentoring Initiative (Forde 2022) to track the impact of the mentoring programme on the participants, on schools, and on the wider system. This adapted framework has been used as part of the evaluation of the MLAR to identify evidence of impact on a number of different levels.

Figure 2.1 Levels of Impact



The levels of impact in the adapted framework are as follows:

- the reaction of the participants: school principals, deputy principals, middle leaders
- the impact on the professional growth of the participants, with evidence of areas of learning
- the development of new (renewed) skills and knowledge for the leadership practice of the participants in school
- school development – impact on the school’s culture and improvement
- impact on the wider Irish education system.

2.2 Overall Impact and Sustainability

The response of the school participants and facilitators to the MLAR Pilot Programme was overwhelmingly positive. The programme was deemed by principals as essential: *“People need training rather than simply be appointed and then do the task.”* The principals cited several issues to do with the shortage of candidates for school leadership, the calibre of school leadership, and burnout among principals. Therefore, they saw a need for investment to scale up the MLAR Pilot Programme: *“It needs to be embedded with funding for substitutes.”*

The MLAR Pilot Programme is a way of embedding policy developments around distributed leadership, Looking at Our School (DE 2022), and School Self-Evaluation (SSE). Further, the MLAR Pilot Programme underlines the importance of school leadership teams and their contribution to the school. The principals suggested that *“the programme could be expanded to build leadership across the full staff, so teachers have some experience and understanding before going for a post.”* The middle leaders reported that participation in the programme had several benefits individually, and for many the MLAR Pilot Programme was the *“first time they had officially had training, and it was a very positive experience”*.

2.3 Impact of the Middle Leadership Cluster Project Pilot Programme

2.3.1 *The reaction of the participants: school principals, deputy principals, middle leaders*

The reaction of the different groups of participants to the MLAR Pilot Programme was highly positive. While the MLAR Pilot Programme was a demanding programme, in which participants had to engage in many activities before or after the school day, it was seen as very worthwhile and, indeed, essential for developing leaders. Involvement in the MLAR Pilot Programme “*was affirmation of the work we are doing*”. Many dimensions of the programme were commended:

- collaborative working in school:
 - *“The chance to sit down with other leaders and discuss best practice, get ideas, and have time for professional conversations was invaluable.”*
- working with the CSL facilitator:
 - *“their experience and skills . . . keeping us moving along”; “wealth of experience . . . very helpful . . . reaffirming.”*
- working in school cluster groups:
 - *“the camaraderie, the bonding . . . sharing practice”; “hearing from people in other schools was also enjoyable, useful, and enlightening”.*
- working on the competency workshops:
 - *“I loved the modules. Excellent listening to experts in their field; is good CPD”; “Hopefully I can access these indefinitely!”*

2.3.2 *The Impact on the Professional Growth of the Participants*

The focus groups explored the question of the benefits of the MLAR Pilot Programme, and the evaluation questionnaire asked participants about what they had learned from their participation. The evidence records the different ways that the MLAR Pilot Programme had an impact on all leaders involved, with substantial benefits for the participants, middle leaders, principals, and deputy principals.

Across all groups of participants, there was substantial evidence of professional growth, with different groups recording their leadership learning across a range of areas. Overall, the programme raised awareness of the importance of leadership and the contribution of those in different posts. A more nuanced aspect of this growth was evidence of positive team dynamics, with the importance of all voices being welcomed and greater appreciation among members of a team of their different traits and experiences, and how this influenced their leadership approach.

Figure 2.2: Professional Growth



Principals

Primary and post-primary principals recorded areas of their own growth as a school leader. They reported their increased understanding of “*an incredibly complex and multi-faceted and onerous role*”, highlighting several changes: “*changed my own view of in-school leadership, not school management*”. Principals described their practice as “*a lot more hands-off*”, fostering distributed leadership across the school and leadership development. The principals saw the programme as helping to build better relationships between senior and middle leaders.

From the MLAR Pilot Programme, the post-primary principals valued the more collaborative approach to their role and the greater focus on building leadership in others. For the primary principals, the MLAR Pilot Programme created greater awareness of distributed leadership: “*taking forward the new distributed leadership model*” and “*the need to build leadership capacity*”.

Deputy Principals

Responses from primary and post-primary deputy principals (DPs) pointed to an increased awareness of their leadership role in building commitment and teamwork across all leaders in schools. They pointed to their greater understanding of working with middle leaders and building their leadership skills. Learning from others highlighted the diversity of stakeholders’ views and their role in responding. They appreciated learning about “*the common struggles and challenges*” faced by leaders. For the primary DPs, a key area of professional growth related to distributed leadership: “*I learned that school leadership can be distributed and does not have to be top-down.*”

Assistant Principal I (API)

Middle leaders in API posts recorded different areas of professional growth. One common theme across primary and post-primary was greater awareness of the role of middle leaders in connecting with other leaders and teachers: *“It is a responsibility to liaise with all teachers in school”*; *“The relationship between the classroom teacher and Principals/Deputies can be enhanced when the middle leaders are given greater autonomy.”* The MLAR Pilot Programme underlined the importance of teamwork: *“the team is imperative to success”*, with greater understanding of distributed leadership, communication, and collaboration.

The post-primary APIs referred to their experiences of being involved in the change initiative and to their increased awareness of change leadership: *“importance of a common vision amongst staff for the benefit for the student community”*; *“I learned that new ideas and initiatives sometimes need to grow and develop slowly.”* The change initiative laid foundations for ongoing development: *“The need to clarify our mission and responsibilities and to be clear on the projects for the year.”*

Assistant Principal II (APII)

A key theme from primary and post-primary APIIs was the growing sense of themselves as leaders and the responsibilities of enacting this role: *“School leadership is about showing example. It is about how you present yourself. People need to model the behaviours you wish to embed in the staff.”* The APIIs noted the importance of collaboration: *“team efforts and honesty among staff and of relationships”*; *“A key piece of learning from this programme is that relationships I build with colleagues, how I treat my colleagues, is more important than my list of duties.”* Similarly: *“I learnt that APII is not just meetings in-house, that we play an active role in management on a daily basis. That we need to guide and support staff where necessary and guide them as best we can and help defuse situations that crop up along the way.”*

The post-primary APIIs also referred to their experience of being involved in a school change project, citing an increased awareness of the *“importance of strategies of developing and approaching initiatives with colleagues”*; *“importance of clearly outlining rationale and objectives”*; and *“the need for time to be given to implement such measures”*.

Non-Post-Holders – Primary Sector

The small number of non-post-holder staff who participated in the MLAR Pilot Programme highlighted several areas of professional growth and learning, which chimed with other roles: *“styles of leadership, conflict management and communication”*, as well as practical skills, including *“meeting efficiency”*.

2.3.3 The Development of New (Renewed) Skills and Knowledge for the Leadership Practice of the Participants in School

Figure 2.3 Enhancing Leadership Practice



All participants were asked about what they would incorporate in their practice in school. There is substantial evidence that the MLAR Pilot Programme impacted on the development of practice across all leadership roles. Some areas were highlighted consistently, such as the planning and running of effective meetings and a more participatory approach. The MLAR Pilot Programme provided a vehicle for school leadership teams to take forward development initiatives which enabled middle leaders to participate in and lead change. The engagement of the middle leadership team led to greater reflection on Looking at Our School (DE 2022) to underpin practice, the leadership of effective teaching and learning, more systematic monitoring, and the building of relationships and effective communication with teachers.

Principals

Principals from both sectors highlighted areas where they had renewed or changed their leadership practice. The programme allowed a focus on the team rather than on individuals, providing the setting for “*some honest discussions, honest conversations*”. The MLAR Pilot Programme was “*a safe space*”. These conversations built reflection and enabled the leaders involved to appreciate that “*the school needs them as leaders*” and that “*they can and do contribute to the school*”.

In the primary sector, the focus of leadership development was on fostering among middle leaders a sense of teamwork, and “*making sure everyone’s voice is heard and opinion valued*”. Further, primary principals looked to continue with the changes, such as: “*formalised practice around scheduling and recording of ISM meetings*”; “*involving all my leadership colleagues much more in decision-making, goal setting, and review of programmes*”; and “*trusting groups to complete changes*”.

Deputy Principals

Deputy principals (DPs) in both sectors pointed to substantial change in their practice. For the primary DPs, key aspects were the development project to build effective teamwork and structured meetings: *“We have formalised our meeting structure at middle management, we started tracking it on Excel and now have it on teams; we have a template for meeting minutes and an action list from the minutes”*; *“regular leadership meetings and encourage open discussion about issues”*. Areas of learning from the MLAR Pilot Programme now formed the basis of their practice, such as exercising their communication skills and being aware of *“how I approach conflict”*.

The post-primary DPs noted several key concepts now embedded into their leadership practice. Some of these areas relate to their personal and interpersonal leadership skills, *“open, honest communication”*, and *“listening to their input and feedback”*. Other areas related to their style of leadership, exercising *“distributive leadership”*; *“continue to work with the APs and encourage them to expand their roles”*.

Assistant Principal I (API)

For post-primary APIs, the experience of collaborating on a school development project was highly productive in developing their leadership practice: *“The fact that we are now working as a leadership team and not just as individuals with separate leadership roles/tasks. This is a fundamental change to practices in our school.”* APIs looked for this collaborative approach to continue: *“I would hope that the middle leadership team are afforded greater autonomy and empowered to lead more initiatives and projects in the future.”* The development project focused on areas related to teaching and learning, where again the APIs looked to sustain such practice: *“continue to practise peer observation and collaboration, as I see these as an essential tool in enhancing teaching and learning”*; *“gathering baseline data, getting feedback from colleagues and students in how effective teaching and learning practices are”*.

The responses of the primary APIs were similar: *“I will be more proactive in sharing expertise with others and also in promoting my area of responsibility more regularly.”* One of the very few negative comments recorded *“more effective time management. Very little else.”*

Assistant Principal II (APII)

The post-primary APIIs highlighted the continuation of collaborative practice: *“working as a team and sharing ideas”*; *“importance of teamwork and a positive frame of mind”*. Skills derived from the change project were another area: *“the confidence in communication and delivery, how to deliver similar initiatives in future”*, and the continuation of *“regular visits to other classes”* which had been part of the change project. The greater value placed on the APII role promoted dialogue and sharing practice.

Primary APLs cited enhanced leadership skills: *“Definitely more active listening and continued communication across the team and school staff. Continue to meet regularly and prioritise time to meet.”* They recorded areas of changed practice: *“Invitational approach being weaved into all I do. Empowerment and being able to accept different viewpoints and creativity. Being open to different opinions and improving listening skills, especially when feeling passionate about projects.”* Here, the APLs had a greater sense of leadership across the school: *“Work collaboratively with the team so that we can prioritise plans and actions for the school that are beneficial for the whole school and not specific to one’s duties”*; and *“working with all staff members for the betterment of the school”*.

Non-Post-Holder – Primary

Similar to the APLs in the primary sector, the primary non-post-holders identified several aspects of practice, including collaboration and effective meetings: *“teams are stronger, and this will enhance projects together”*; and *“planning ahead and sticking to agenda”*.

2.3.4 School Development – Impact on the School’s Culture and Improvement

O’Donovan (2015), in her study of distributed leadership in Irish post-primary schools, found that though distributed leadership was broadly supported, this idea was not *“part of the discourse”* in the case-study schools. The degree to which teachers could act as leaders was variable. A critical element of the MLAR was not only the legitimisation of the concept of distributed leadership but also the development of practice in school.

For the schools engaging in the MLAR Pilot Programme, there was a clear sense of the connection between the professional learning of middle leaders and the enhancement of the school’s culture and improvement processes.

Figure 2.4: Impact on School Culture and Improvement



From the baseline study, there were two key reasons for post-primary schools participating in the MLAR Pilot Programme: the development of leadership capacity, and the professional learning of the middle leadership team. The MLAR Pilot Programme was an opportunity to move away from the previous focus on administrative tasks comprising the bulk of posts of responsibility, to developing these posts as leadership roles in the school's leadership team.

For primary schools, participation was about building and strengthening the leadership team of the school: *"consolidate the team"*; or, for a newly formed team, the project was providing *"a strong start"*. There was merit in learning together as a team and reflecting on practice through this project: *"as a team, inform ourselves on how best to develop and promote positive leadership in school"*, enabling team members to develop best leadership practice. The evaluation data highlights several areas where the MLAR Pilot Programme had a substantial impact on the school's leadership culture and change management.

Fostering distributed leadership

The evidence points to changes in the role of senior leadership of principals and DPs in each sector:

- building or consolidating distributive forms of leaders
- building better relationships and more effective communication between senior and middle leaders
- working collaboratively with other leaders.

Enhancing the role and work of the leadership team

The data highlights the ways that greater significance is accorded to the role and contribution of the school's leadership team:

- more effective and regular discussion, with ideas and opinions shared
- all voices encouraged; dialogue developed
- greater understanding of team dynamics
- teamwork across leadership roles
- creating a systematic approach to meetings and discussion
- development of a shared language around leadership and leadership practice.

Change management

In each sector, greater coherence in strategies and skill in change management processes:

- in the post-primary sector, the skill of designing and implementing policy development initiatives across the school
- in the primary sector, the focus on collaborative leadership processes rather than a series of tasks.

Discussions were fostered on core areas of teaching and learning

Building confidence in decision-making by leaders and leadership teams was seen as important by the facilitators: *“huge value of having schools confident to say, This is how we do this here, we’re serious about middle leadership”*; recognising the potential for improvement of teaching and learning by increasing the leadership capacity and capability in a school:

- a common vision for the school and for change initiatives
- focusing together on highly effective practice in teaching and learning and how they would lead this
- structured approach to monitoring
- reinforcing the importance of middle leaders working with and guiding teachers.

The use of key policy documents to support practice

The starting point for the MLAR Pilot Programme is the CSL reflection tool based on Domains 1 and 4 of Looking at Our School (LAOS) (DE 2022). There are examples of how school teams engaged with and used key policies to evaluate their practice, plan, implement change, and reflect on progress:

- using LAOS to self-evaluate, plan, and reflect upon practice was a consistent thread across the programme
- developing systematic monitoring as part of the School Self-Evaluation (SSE) process
- building distributive forms of leadership.

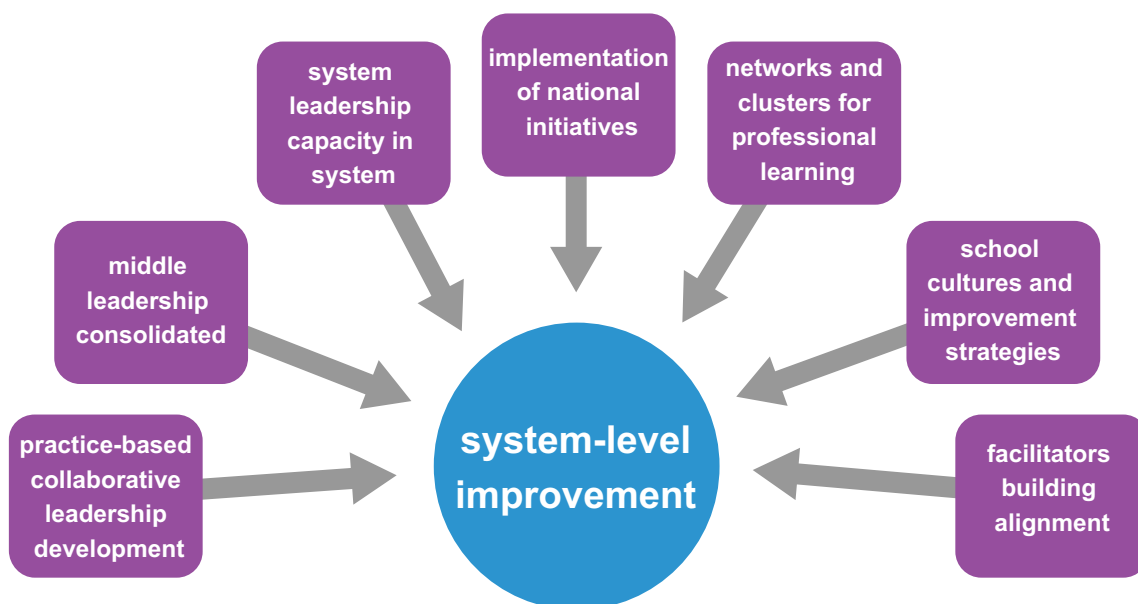
Embedding professional learning as an essential element of the school’s improvement

- collaborative school-based professional learning as a vehicle for change
- practice-based learning through self-evaluation, planning, practice, and reflection embedded in the school
- underlining the school’s role in developing future leaders
- opportunities for mentoring across leadership teams.

2.3.5 Impact on the Wider Irish Education System

There is an increased policy focus on the performance of national education systems and how systems improve achievement and outcomes through various international benchmarking programmes. Attention is being focused on the way education systems operate to realise improvement. In their study of cohesive leadership systems, Augustine et al. (2014) track coherence from policy development through the levels of education decision-making to the school and classrooms. They argue that it is only through such cohesive systems that a system-wide focus on the improvement of teaching and learning can be realised.

Figure 2.5: System-level impact of the MLAR Pilot Programme



The MLAR Pilot Programme was a pilot project involving 32 schools. However, there is evidence to suggest that the design, components, and implementation of the programme could contribute to a cohesive leadership system. Two dimensions of system alignment have been identified by Looney (2011): structural/technical, and social. While policy tends to focus on structural alignment to ensure cohesion between policy, leadership roles, school performance, and accountability, equally important is social alignment. This form of alignment points to the importance of social relationships through collaboration and the sharing of ideas and practices.

The programme has helped build greater relationships across the education system, supporting both structural and social alignment in a number of different ways.

Building networks

An important element of social alignment is the building and use of networks fostering collaboration, professional learning, and building the capacity for policy implementation at school level. There were two important dimensions of the building of networks:

- System-level networks

The collaborative nature of the project was evident in the collaboration between CSL and The Education Support Centres, combining system-wide development with local networks and expertise.

- The use of school clusters to build networks

Cluster working was seen as very positive, a way for leaders to learn from one another; in some instances, these relationships are to be continued. The school clusters met at “*Twilight Sessions*” in Kildare and Clare Education Centres.

Increasing leadership capacity across the system

The recruitment and retention of senior leaders in school is a significant international concern. The MLAR Pilot Programme, as a leadership pipeline (Fink 2011), can contribute to succession planning by building leadership confidence and capability systematically.

Implementation of national policy and initiatives

The MLAR Pilot Programme is a vehicle for change management and the implementation of policy in schools: LAOS, SSE, effective teaching and learning, and policy on leadership roles.

The role of the facilitator

As a cadre of highly skilled leaders, the facilitators’ role as change agents supported the professional learning and practice of leaders, augmenting leadership capacity across schools and contributing to the structural and social alignment of leadership systems.

Practice-based collaborative leadership development

For a pilot project, a key task was testing a particular approach: school-led, collaborative, practice-based leadership development. The data underlines the potential of this form of professional learning as a system-improvement strategy.

Examples emerged of the effective practice of middle leaders collaborating to bring about school improvement and leading teachers across the system.

Part Three: Collaborative, School-Led, Practice-based Leadership Development: Emerging Issues

Introduction

Part Three reviews the MLAR Pilot Programme as a professional learning programme. The programme was designed as a school-led, collaborative, practice-based professional learning programme to support the development of middle leadership through the participation of all leaders. The programme is complex, comprising several different components, including Online Competency Workshops to be undertaken by leaders in school, leadership visits, and school-cluster twilight sessions facilitated by a CSL facilitator. In addition, each leadership team in school undertook a practice-based leadership development project.

This section uses the data to review the design and process of the MLAR Pilot Programme as a professional learning programme. The data was analysed to identify key processes of professional learning: the structure of the programme, the range of learning opportunities, the facilitation of learning, and aspects of collaborative learning and practice-based learning.

3.1 Recruitment and Early Stages

Recruitment

An important element of the recruitment process was the collaboration between CSL and the two Education Centres involved in the MLAR, Clare and Kildare. These Education Centres, having been involved in developing the MLAR, were then able to advertise the programme locally and recruit schools.

Early stages

The recruitment of schools and the early stages of the programme were critical in building interest and ownership across leadership teams. Some middle leaders perceived the programme to be more work, and so there needed to be more clarity about the expectations and the level of commitment required of the school and of leadership team members. It was essential that principals built ownership with staff before committing to the programme. The use of an application form was suggested, to be signed by all potential participants in a school. A whole-school staff presentation or even a training session were also proposed as ways of encouraging the involvement of the staff.

The facilitators cited several examples where the principal signed up for the MLAR Pilot Programme with “*no opportunity for consultation with staff*”. The facilitators worked to tease out the implications of the programme with the leadership team and the principal. A primary facilitator described the initial stage as “*sluggish*”, and it took

“quite a while for teams to really get involved on the online forum”.

There were some instances of a post holder not attending. For other post holders, though the programme was *“seen as more work”*, they became fully involved. The face-to-face meeting between the team and the facilitator was a tipping point, from which *“the momentum was built that hadn’t been achieved through the online meetings”*. Staff needed to work through the purpose and implications of the MLAR Pilot Programme over a long period, and *“then there was almost an aha moment . . . about understanding the importance of working together”*. The early stages were described as *“a slow burner”*, but *“there was a sense of organic growth”* in engendering the perception in school that middle leaders are not *“doing jobs”* but have a leadership role. The context of the school could have an impact on these early stages.

Getting going was the next important stage. The primary schools *“dovetailed towards the same idea of developing a consistent approach to leadership meetings”*, building team discussions and regular recording of meetings. In post-primary schools, decisions had to be made about the purpose and focus of a school development project and of the role of middle leaders in planning and leading the project. Enhancing teamwork meant less of *“the idea of jobs”* and more of *“a sense of wearing a leadership hat”*. At this point, the participants began to get more from the twilight discussions.

3.2 Working with the Facilitator

There was a universally positive response to working with the facilitator: *“The facilitator was the best part of the programme.”* For the primary principals, central to the success of the twilight sessions and cluster working meetings was the role of the facilitator as *“a neutral chair”*. The facilitator was *“an external voice”* who focused the discussions, *“providing food for conversations”*. The facilitator’s skill in asking open questions was crucial, with leadership teams becoming more comfortable in contributing and giving opinions. Similarly, in the cluster sessions, the facilitator-led discussions prompted exploration of emerging issues. The facilitator’s experience and insights as a school principal helped to build trust in these leadership team discussions. Similarly, for the post-primary principals, the role of the facilitator was regarded as vital: *“providing advice and experience as well as helping to reinforce ideas, practice”* and *“build the team”*. The facilitator built trust using their skills in coaching and mentoring. The principals saw this as a good opportunity to see the value of coaching approaches.

For the primary-level middle leaders, the role of the facilitator was pivotal in ensuring that the in-school sessions and the cluster activities were positive and productive. Facilitators were described as *“the glue to bring it all together”*. They brought *“a wealth of experience”* and were *“very helpful”*, *“reaffirming”*, *“a listener”* who brought *“wisdom”*. Further, the facilitators knew *“what it was like on the ground”*. For the post-primary middle leaders, the facilitator helped schools with a large team to develop a clear focus. They were not directive but instead *“asked really good questions, set*

boundaries, provided guidance but were not prescriptive”, which enabled the middle leaders *“to figure out ways forward”*.

3.3 The Facilitators’ Experiences

The facilitators reflected on their role and highlighted the strengths in being *“a neutral, independent person”*, *“a support and guide, not a judge”*. A key task was *“to build trust and relationships”* – initially trust between themselves and the leaders, and then trust in relationships between the members of the team. In some instances, the facilitator worked initially with the principal, *“pulling them back and enabling them to be more part of the team”*. As a result, the middle leaders became more involved in team discussions. For the facilitators, *“the meetings, including the cluster activities, were where the real thinking got done”*. These were excellent opportunities for leaders to mix with other leaders.

The facilitators saw themselves *“as a sounding board”*, helping the group to explore issues. Their role was *“not to inspect but instead to raise questions”*; *“they were not there to evaluate or assess practice, but to help in the exploration of and the development of ideas”*. An important part of their role was *“to build confidence in the teams”*, and *“it was about making the right decisions in their own context and understanding how they are best placed to make such decisions”*.

3.4 Online Competency Workshops

The response to the Online Competency Workshops was predominantly positive. Different leaders saw these as a useful source for their own and the team’s continued professional learning. The areas covered by the workshops were consistently cited by participants as areas of significant learning that shaped their leadership practice. The post-primary principals reported that although some workshops were better than others, staff gained personal professional development from these. The online provision was generally found to be accessible and flexible, with the videos deemed *“excellent”*. Further, participation in the workshops brought the team together, an important outcome for all schools, but especially useful where there had been changes in the school leadership team.

For the facilitators, the competency workshops provided useful material, but they suggested that, given the range of workshops, *“perhaps too much was expected”*. In future, schools and clusters might select specific workshops pertinent to their development – a theme which chimed with school participants’ responses.

3.5 Working in Clusters

The cluster meetings for primary schools were beneficial, with opportunities to explore how each school and leadership team was dealing with specific issues. While the goals might be different for each school, these conversations enabled the different leadership teams to appreciate the importance of *“the process of leadership”*. These meetings were described as *“vital communication”*, with some primary principals

hoping to continue the link in the future. For the post-primary principals, working in the cluster was an important professional development opportunity for the middle leaders, a *“space talking to colleagues, comparing notes, visiting other schools”*. Cluster working could be developed further, with each school working on a common project: *“context different, but useful for all”*.

For middle leaders from both sectors, working in the cluster was very positive: cluster meetings were a further opportunity to work with and learn from other leaders; the in-person cluster group sessions were *“great learning”*. The meetings were greatly enjoyed and provided an opportunity to share practice and ideas with other schools, and to network. *“Learning from each other”* was important, but equally important was *“the camaraderie”* across the school groups in *“a safe space”*.

A concern was raised about clustering schools of significantly different sizes, where it was felt that the leadership issues were very different. Further, the varying levels of interest in a school could impact upon progress made in the cluster.

3.6 Building a Framework from Recruitment to Completion

The role of the CSL team

The role of the CSL team highlights the importance of programme management for the MLAR Pilot Programme. The data from the CSL team illustrates their role in overseeing and managing the programme, both in planning next steps and in working with the facilitators. Discussions between their work and experiences in school, and ensuring progress with the MLAR Pilot Programme discussions between the CSL team and the facilitators, were critical in addressing issues, identifying forthcoming tasks and deadlines, and receiving feedback.

The role of The Education Support Centres

For the MLAR, CSL worked collaboratively with Clare and Kildare Education Centres. The Education Support Centres played an important role in providing a local dimension to the programme established by CSL. They could draw on their local knowledge to make connections with schools, advertising the MLAR, provide accommodation for cluster meetings, and propose likely mentors. In the course of the programme, Education Support Centres were able to check in with the participating schools to ensure that support was available. This partnership working is a vital element in building school-led, collaborative, practice-based learning.

Inviting schools

At the outset, information needs to be provided about the nature of the programme, the expectations placed on those who participate, and the level of commitment demanded of a school. One possibility suggested was a presentation about the programme held at the Education Centre, with an invitation to all schools. An application process and form also need to be developed, whereby the principal and all other leaders involved

are aware of the expectations and agree to participate.

Preliminary stages

Given the role of the facilitator in the MLAR Pilot Programme, the recruitment and selection of facilitators is a critical first step in delivering the programme. The data highlights the importance of the experience of the facilitators as school principals and their skills in facilitation, mentoring/coaching, and leading groups.

The MLAR Pilot Programme: schedules and activities in school

The structure of the MLAR Pilot Programme with scheduled meetings and deadlines was an important element in keeping the programme moving forward in schools. However, *“making the arrangements was time consuming”*. To make this aspect more efficient, facilitators suggested *“a fixed calendar of commitments for the year”* and *“a link person in each school”* to help make the arrangements.

Changed timelines

Some principals reported difficulties with the extension of the MLAR Pilot Programme into a second year because of Covid-19. While fluidity and flexibility were important, there was a general feeling that the project in school had been completed and that this extension was *“moving the goalposts”*.

Closing the programme and recognising achievement

The closing of the MLAR Pilot Programme was described as a *“blunt ending”*. Facilitators and principals felt the work undertaken should be recognised: *“There was a feeling that we and the other schools had invested so much time, and then the programme finished.”* Recommendations were made for a planned closure, including rounding off the programme with some sort of sharing event, showcasing leadership development and the completed practical projects, and some sort of certification for all staff who participated.

3.7 Primary and Post-Primary Perspectives

A key focus of the MLAR Pilot Programme in both sectors was the enhancement of the role and practice of middle leaders. The role of middle leadership is contextually dependent (Forde and Kerrigan 2022), shaped by the school’s size and existing leadership structures and cultures. Middle leadership has evolved in the different sectors. In the post-primary sector, management roles in leading subjects and year groups can reinforce a management hierarchy. In the primary sector, and as Hammersley-Fletcher and Strain (2011: 8) argue, middle leadership can be seen as cutting across *“established norms of collaboration and collegiality”*. As was observed in the interim review, these norms can be conflated with *“getting on well together”*, and so there is a need to build genuine collaboration across middle-leadership teams at both primary and post-primary levels. In both sectors, distributed leadership, collaboration across the leadership teams, and working collectively to bring about

change were worked on. There were also some sector-specific issues.

Post-primary sector

One issue in the post-primary sector related to the size of the leadership team, which posed challenges in organising meetings; much work had to be done around building consensus on the development project. Some schools also reported tensions where some post holders did not participate in the programme. The principals adopted an invitational stance, where such post holders could participate at any time. This small number of incidences points to the continuation of a “*task orientation*”, where some post-holders define their role as a set of management duties which they individually complete and then report on.

The most significant area of difference between the sectors was the change initiative. In the post-primary sector, the focus was on a school improvement project, and areas included a review of the tutor system, classroom behaviour management, peer observation and collaboration, and building cross-curricular links. An important aspect was the degree of agency that middle leaders had, to plan, lead, and review these developments.

Primary sector

In the primary sector, the focus was on building a leadership culture where post holders worked collaboratively as a leadership team. Therefore, the main focus was on enhancing the work of the leadership team through more effective meetings. Middle leaders took on responsibility for planning, leading, and recording meetings. This approach enabled the leaders to share ideas and explore issues of effective teaching, learning, monitoring, and their role in leading effective practice.

One specific issue in the primary sector relates to the teaching principal. In the primary sample, there were three teaching principals. The interim review reported that “*smaller primary schools with teaching principals are struggling the most with engagement*”. There was a “*slower start of smaller primaries: need for specific support, more nuanced guidance, expectations and areas for development*”. This raises the question of whether specific requirements and support are needed for smaller primary schools.

The teaching principals, like other principals, reported pressure in finding the time for the MLAR Pilot Programme: “*While the video content was very worthwhile, it was difficult to fit into an already busy schedule. Making time for reflection and engagement with the content was rewarding, but often had to be done during personal hours, which made it less inviting.*” They highlighted elements of the MLAR Pilot Programme that had been worthwhile, particularly working with the facilitator and the Competency Workshops. The evaluation data also highlights the impact on leadership development in smaller primary schools. Several areas of learning were cited by primary teaching principals:

- *“Importance of strategies of developing and approaching initiatives with colleagues. Importance of clearly outlining rationale and objectives.”*
- *“[Leadership] should be seen as a team working together, not a list of duties How to work with conflict, parents, staff.”*
- *“I learned a great deal about my role as a leader in the new distributed leadership model. Our project was based around setting up a new model for Assistant Principal meetings taking this new approach. I learned about proper conflict management techniques, communication and how that will help me in my new role.”*

Further, teaching principals identified specific aspects that were now part of their practice in school. Building distributed leadership and improving team meetings led to the following:

- *“Greater teamwork, planned meetings, more communication”*
- *“Change to meeting practice, different voices (not just principal) leading different events – wellbeing week, assemblies, etc.”*
- *“Regular meetings and more delegation”*
- *“We have started using open agendas via Google Docs for staff meetings and are sharing responsibility for minuting, chairing, etc.”*

3.8 Facilitating and Hindering Factors

School participants and facilitators were asked to identify factors that enabled the school to make progress, and factors that hindered progress.

Facilitating factors

The respondents highlighted a range of facilitating factors, including elements of the MLAR Pilot Programme and in-school factors.

- Elements of the MLAR Pilot Programme
 - *The role and skills of the facilitators: their experience as a school principal, as an external person building connections across the leadership teams, facilitating critical and productive discussions.*
 - *Cluster working with another school or other schools: “opportunity to network and learn”, “fruitful discussions”, “sharing of knowledge and expertise immeasurable”.*
 - *The competency workshops – “excellent resource”, valuable within the programme and as an ongoing resource; “these could be accessed at a time of convenience”.*
 - *Face-to-face meetings prompted “valuable conversations, sharing of experience and ideas”.*
- In-school factors
 - *supportive principal*

- *principals making some time available for meetings*
- *teamwork and peer support*
- *“supportive and engaged leadership team” ready to participate in the programme*
- *space to “sit down with middle leaders to get their opinions, views, and thoughts”*
- *collaborative learning approach to the competency workshops, helping to strengthen teamwork*
- *the project’s focus on practice*
- *principal and deputy principal engagement to support middle leaders*
- *middle leaders having the opportunity to collaborate and lead the project.*

Hindering factors

Only a small number of hindering factors were identified, and again these were a mix of elements of the MLAR Pilot Programme and in-school factors. The dominant theme across all participants in school and the facilitators was time (discussed further below).

- Elements of the MLAR Pilot Programme
 - *online zoom meetings seen as less effective than in-person*
 - *cluster arrangements in one instance – the clustering of two schools of significantly different sizes*
 - *varying levels of interest across schools in a cluster*
 - *the impact of the Covid pandemic and the demands made on school staff*
 - *extending the length of the pilot project*
 - *technical problems experienced by a small number of participants in accessing the online Competency Workshops.*
- In-school factors
 - *lack of clear commitment of senior leaders*
 - *challenges of deciding on the focus of the school-based development project*
 - *lack of understanding by a small number of post holders of the purpose of the MLAR Pilot Programme and their participation as part of the school’s leadership team: they “did not see themselves as part of the leadership team”.*

3.9 The Issue of Time and the Role of the Principal

Research on the role of middle leadership in the post-primary education sector in Ireland found that issues of time and workload hindered the development of distributed leadership (Lárusdóttir and O’Connor 2017; Kavanagh et al. 2021). The question of time was raised consistently by participants in school and by the facilitators. Participants

in the MLAR argued consistently that for schools *“to derive maximum benefit from participation in a programme”*, such as the MLAR Pilot Programme, it needed to be resourced.

The programme *“was a big ask, with time needed for, firstly, school meetings on the project, secondly in school meetings with the facilitator, and finally, cluster meetings”*. In addition, time was needed to engage with the Competency Workshops. Given the larger numbers involved in some post-primary schools, making the arrangements was complex. Time was also needed for the middle leaders to work with others, take on roles in the change initiative, and make full use of the Competency Workshops. Restrictions on time meant that *“the middle leaders and the school did not get full value out of the project”*.

The different time allocations in post-primary for middle leader posts in different contexts meant that for some middle leaders, there was no time available during the school day. The lack of provision for non-contact time in the primary sector also meant that there was no specific time for leadership. A particular issue related to the role of middle leaders in primary SEN classes, with challenges in balancing the demands of teaching and engaging in a leadership role.

Participation in the programme was *“highly dependent upon goodwill”* of leaders in schools. Though there was *“a bit of give and take”*, participation was demanding. Within existing constraints, the principals viewed the programme as valuable for developing middle leadership and building leadership capacity. They took steps to find as much time as possible to support participation. The primary principals said they looked for creative ways to make time: *“I wanted it to be seen as important and meet with the facilitator during the school day.”* Prioritising such discussions underlined *“the importance of the leadership role of the middle leaders as part of their everyday work”*. Other schools opted for before the school day or evening meetings, including online meetings, with a clear purpose and schedule: *“end when we said we would”*. Any off-site meetings that could be arranged had a positive impact.

Overall, the programme was highly valued, but time was a critical issue. The facilitators summed up the concern: *“If leadership is to be valued, time and substitution are necessary, as well as time for leadership development”* – echoing the response of principals: *“If we want to make change, support and time are essential to realise this.”* Proposals included consolidating substitute time to create space for the participants to work together in school.

3.10 Reflections from the Participants

Reflections from a School Principal

I was sitting in my office one afternoon and an email arrived in my inbox from Kildare Education Support Centre, and it was in essence, a lightbulb moment. Our middle management team was in a state of flux. At the same time, I realised that while I had

guided staff through Covid, online learning and a successful return to school very effectively, I had become more isolated as a leader. So, when I received the email from KEC about the Middle Leadership Project, I realised this was an opportunity for me to kick start and revitalise the school management team and to develop a focus on working together.

Involvement in the project has developed my confidence as a leader who collaborates with others, is conscious of their well-being, who has built trust with staff and who is building leadership capacity across the school. I have a greater understanding of the concept of distributed leadership and how empowering this is for me and for my staff when distributed leadership is a foundation stone of my leadership style and that of my middle management team.

Having an external facilitator was central to this development. One of our early discussions was on the concept of distributed leadership and this was very enlightening – as a team, we identified things such as ‘open and honest conversations based on trust and accountability, collaboration and sharing, respect and tolerance of each other’s views, having relevant and authentic conversations, delegation, team accountability to each other, creating opportunities for other staff to lead and share their expertise and follow up to get things done. I think this discussion was important in helping me realise that we could do great things together, that as a team we could make a difference to teaching and learning in the school and that I really needed to take the elements of distributed leadership on board and nurture a sense of team.

Reflections from a Primary Middle Leader

Our school has undergone a huge transition in just a few short years. We felt that taking part in the Middle Leadership Pilot Project would be the perfect opportunity for us as a leadership team to consider our new roles in management and look at where we were and where we needed and wanted to go in the future and how we were going to work a newly formed team together going forward.

The project enabled me to gain an insight and an understanding of the role of the principal and deputy principal and see and hear things from their perspective, not just as a class teacher or APII post holder. The project really opened my eyes to distributive and collaborative leadership and what it means in theory but also, more importantly, in practice.

The Middle Leadership Project really encouraged us to take a deep dive into issues around relationships and communication and look at our roles and how effective we were individually, within our own roles and collaboratively as a leadership team. Was there trust within the middle leadership group? Were we communicating coherently? Were we listening to genuinely understand or simply listening to respond?

There is no doubt that schools are extremely busy, so it was no surprise that prior to our engagement with the Middle Leadership Project, we simply didn’t have the time

to meet very often as a leadership team. That all changed after our first meeting with our CSL facilitator. After just one meeting, we could really see the benefit and value of prioritising time to sit down as a leadership team, not just to work on the calendar of events for the next month, but to look at our school environment, our leadership roles and to take the time to look at where we were, decide on what we needed to work on and create achievable targets to work towards.

I feel very lucky to have been given the opportunity to be part of the Middle Leadership Pilot Project and it has benefitted our school and management team exponentially. It has given the middle leaders a chance to have their voices heard, it has garnered confidence so that if there is a changeover of leadership in the future, that there are processes in place to ensure a smooth and effortless transition.

Reflections from a Post-Primary Middle Leader

The principal asked all AP1 holders if they would like to join in a school project with CSL. It would involve working together as a team consisting of the SLT and AP1s on an initiative of our choosing. Even though I was busy with a range of responsibilities and studying part-time, I could see the value in taking part in such a project. I could see engagement in this project would be a great opportunity for on the job learning and putting some leadership theory into practice. It was for these reasons I was eager to join the project and take on the role of leading it in the school.

One benefit of being involved in this project was meeting other schools and learning about their area of focus. It gave me an insight into the running of other schools, their practices, norms, and challenges.

One of the most valuable learning experiences I had in this project is probably in the area dreaded by most school leaders, chairing a dynamic and robust meeting. The mission and values of a school are very important to the stakeholders of a school, thus all of those who engaged with the project had strong opinions on different aspects.

Robust and dynamic meetings are often a valuable part of the journey. Before this project I was one who would avoid conflict. There were strong opinions in every meeting and people wanted to make sure what they saw as the most important values of or vision for the school were included. Managing a meeting in this atmosphere was challenging. However, I saw that being part of the team and with the support of the SLT these situations are easier. Reflecting after these meetings with other team members and with the CSL resources also made me realise the value in these discussions, their importance in the process and most importantly that I can survive them.

Leading this project was instrumental in my decision-making process to take the leap from the classroom into the role of Deputy Principal.

Part Four: Technical Report

Introduction

Part Four sets out the evaluation process used in the review of the MLAR Pilot Programme. Details are provided, of the frameworks used to analyse the data in relation to two aspects: (1) the impact of the MLAR Pilot Programme, and (2) the appraisal of the MLAR Pilot Programme as a professional learning programme.

4.1 Formative and Summative Evaluation

The evaluation of the MLAR Pilot Programme used a cyclical format, combining both formative and summative evaluation, designed to support reflection and review in schools, provide feedback, and build understandings cumulatively over the course of the project. At the completion of the MLAR Pilot Programme, summative evaluation gathered evidence from the facilitators and the different groups of school staff (principals, deputy principals, APIs, APILs, and non-post-holders) to chart the ways that this process has had an impact – firstly, on the role and practice of middle leaders in school, and secondly, on the leadership team and the development of the school. Each participant was also asked to review their experiences individually and to provide evaluative comment on the MLAR Pilot Programme and professional learning.

The following questions provided a broad framework for the evaluation.

Table 4.1: Key questions

- What type of leadership activities have been undertaken in the course of this project?
- What, to date, do you think has been the outcome of these leadership activities in terms of:
 - *your development as a middle leader;*
 - *the development of the middle leadership team;*
 - *building and sustaining leadership capacity across the school;*
 - *school policy and practice?*
- What has facilitated the development of these leadership activities?
- What has hindered these leadership activities?
- What are the next steps for your school/the schools you have been working with?

4.2 Data-Gathering and Analysis

Qualitative data was collected from different samples from school, including school principals, deputy principals, Assistant Principals I and II, and non-post-holder teachers. In addition, data was collected from the CSL team, directors of The Education Support Centres, and the facilitators. Various methods were used, including school baseline questionnaire, reports from group discussions, documentary evidence, questionnaires, and focus groups.

Each set of data was analysed using Clarke and Braun's (2018) six-stage thematic analysis framework to identify key themes. The different data sets were reviewed to identify key issues relating to two aspects reported in this evaluation:

- the impact of the MLAR Pilot Programme
- the review and evaluation of different elements of the MLAR Pilot Programme as a school-led, collaborative-practice-based leadership development programme.

Table 4.2: Impact Framework

LEVEL	ASPECT	QUESTIONS: WHAT EVIDENCE FOR:
1	The reaction of participants in school: principals, deputy principal, API, APII, and, where included, non-post-holders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • initial reactions • reactions in later evaluations
2	The impact on the professional growth of the mentees and mentors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • increased appreciation of leadership • increased emphasis on teamwork and collaboration • fostering of the leadership of different roles
3	The development of new skills and knowledge for the leadership practice of participants in school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • development of understandings of leadership in school • development of aspects of practice to build collaborative leadership • use of skills in practice
4	School development – impact on the school's culture and improvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • supporting the enhancement of school culture • evidence of building leadership capacity • development opportunities • distributed leadership
5	Impact on the wider Irish education system	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • embedding school-led, collaborative, practice-based learning • engagement with policy • networking and cluster working

4.3 Author Biography

Professor Christine Forde is an Emeritus Professor in the School of Education at the University of Glasgow, where she was Associate Dean and held a personal chair in Leadership and Professional Learning. Professor Forde continues to work with policy communities in Scotland, Wales, and Ireland, including the Centre for School Leadership (CSL), on the development of professional learning and leadership. She is a member of the Future of Headship Research team at the University of Glasgow and continues to supervise doctoral studies. Professor Forde publishes widely on professional learning and educational leadership. Current research includes social justice leadership, middle leadership in schools, life histories and headship, and governance in small systems. She is a Fellow of the International Professional Development Association and a lifetime member of the Scottish Educational Research Association. She received the Robert Owen Award for services to Scottish education in 2019 and was made a fellow of the Educational Institute of Scotland in 2022.

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