

REVIEWER'S REPORT

Manuscript No.: IJAR-59098

Title: Navigating Competing Demands: A Systematic Review of School Middle Leadership Practice

Recommendation:

Accept as it is
Accept after minor revision.....
 Accept after major revision
 Do not accept (*Reasons below*)

Rating	Excel.	Good	Fair	Poor
Originality		X		
Techn. Quality		xx		
Clarity		X		
Significance		X		

Reviewer's ID: JPR- 212

Detailed Reviewer's Report

General Assessment:

This is an excellent, timely, and well-executed systematic review that makes a significant contribution to the field of educational leadership. The paper addresses a critical gap in the literature by synthesizing qualitative evidence on how school middle leaders navigate competing demands—a topic of increasing importance given the complex, intermediary position these leaders occupy. The use of PRISMA 2020 guidelines, the focused eligibility criteria, and the inductive thematic synthesis demonstrate methodological rigor and a clear commitment to producing an analytically robust account of middle-leadership practice.

The review's conceptual contribution—the notion of "workable alignment"—is particularly valuable. It reframes middle-leader agency as a situated, relational, and context-dependent accomplishment rather than a set of fixed competencies or strategies. This theoretical insight advances our understanding of how middle leaders operate within persistent tensions and provides a more nuanced account of leadership practice than much of the existing literature. The paper is well-structured, clearly written, and engages thoughtfully with the evidence base. The findings have important implications for both research and practice, and the limitations are honestly acknowledged. The manuscript is in very good shape and requires only minor revisions before publication.

Minor Issues (to be addressed in revision):

1. Clarity and Consistency in the Research Questions:

- The research questions are stated in the introduction (RQ1, RQ2, RQ3), but there is some redundancy in the text preceding them. For example, the sentence "Rather than imposing a predetermined framework..." is followed by a sentence that begins "The conceptual contribution is therefore derived from patterns emerging..." and then the RQs are introduced. This transition could be smoother.
- RQ1 ("How do school middle leaders navigate competing demands in their leadership practice?") and RQ2 ("What practices do school middle leaders use to respond to competing demands?") appear to overlap significantly. The distinction between "navigating" and "using practices to respond" is not entirely clear. The author might

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consider merging these or clarifying the distinction. For example, RQ1 could focus on the *process* of navigation, while RQ2 could focus on the *specific practices* involved. Alternatively, RQ1 could be reframed as the overarching question, with RQ2 and RQ3 as sub-questions.

2. Presentation of the PRISMA Flow Diagram:

- The PRISMA flow diagram (Figure 1) is referenced but the figure itself is not fully visible in the provided manuscript. The author should ensure that the diagram is clearly presented, with all relevant numbers (records identified, screened, excluded, included) clearly labeled. This is a key element of a systematic review and should be presented with precision.

3. Clarity of the "Characteristics of Included Studies" Section:

- The section describing the characteristics of the included studies (Page 4-5) is informative, but it could be strengthened by providing a summary table (Table 1 is referenced but not fully visible in the provided text). This table should include key details for each study: author(s), year, country, middle-leadership role, methodology, and key findings relevant to competing demands.
- The description of the studies' contexts is useful, but the author could briefly note any patterns or variations across contexts (e.g., are competing demands more pronounced in certain national contexts or policy environments?).

4. Terminology and Definitions:

- The term "workable alignment" is introduced and developed well, but the author could provide a more precise definition earlier in the paper to guide the reader. A brief definition in the introduction or immediately after the research questions would be helpful.
- The term "competing demands" is used consistently, but the author could clarify whether this includes "tensions," "dilemmas," "conflicts," and "contradictions," or whether these are distinct concepts. The review seems to use these terms somewhat interchangeably, which is acceptable, but a brief note on terminology would enhance clarity.

5. Engagement with Paradox Theory:

- The use of paradox theory (Smith & Lewis, 2011) as an interpretive lens is appropriate and insightful. However, the author could strengthen this section by more explicitly connecting the findings to the paradox literature. For example, how do the navigation practices identified (translation, negotiation, adaptation, coordination, relational sensemaking) relate to the strategies for managing paradoxes identified in the broader organizational literature (e.g., acceptance, differentiation, integration, reframing)? A brief discussion of these connections would deepen the theoretical contribution.

6. Implications for Practice:

- The implications for practice are valuable, but they could be more specific. For example, the recommendation to "create interpretive space through protected time for policy discussion" is good but could be operationalized further. What might this look like in practice? How much time? What form should these discussions take? Providing more concrete examples would make the recommendations more actionable for school leaders.

7. Minor Typographical and Formatting Issues:

- There are a few minor typographical errors and formatting inconsistencies. For example, the text on Page 2 has "Anonymous, 2020" as a citation, which is unusual. The author should ensure that all citations are properly attributed.
- The reference list has some inconsistencies. For example, some entries include DOIs, while others do not. Some journal titles are abbreviated, while others are not. The author should ensure consistency in the reference list according to the journal's style.

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- The table on Page 5 has some formatting issues (e.g., merged cells, lack of clear column headers). The author should ensure that the table is clearly formatted and easy to read.

8. Limitations:

- The limitations section is well-written and honest. The author acknowledges the small evidence base, the restriction to English-language peer-reviewed articles, and the focus on qualitative evidence. These are all appropriate limitations to acknowledge. The author could also acknowledge the potential for publication bias (i.e., studies with positive or clear findings are more likely to be published) and the challenge of synthesizing qualitative studies with diverse methodological approaches.

Specific Comments for the Authors (for a Minor Revision):

This is an outstanding systematic review that makes a significant contribution to the field of educational leadership. The concept of "workable alignment" is a valuable theoretical contribution that advances our understanding of middle-leadership practice. To prepare the manuscript for final publication, the author should address the following minor points:

1. **Clarify the Research Questions:** Consider refining RQ1 and RQ2 to more clearly distinguish between the overarching process of navigation and the specific practices involved. Ensure that the research questions are clearly linked to the review's aims.
2. **Ensure the PRISMA Flow Diagram is Clearly Presented:** The figure should be clearly labeled and include all relevant numbers.
3. **Strengthen the Presentation of Included Studies:** Provide a clear summary table with key details for each study. Briefly note any patterns or variations across contexts.
4. **Define Key Terms:** Provide a brief definition of "workable alignment" early in the paper. Clarify the relationship between "competing demands," "tensions," "dilemmas," and "conflicts."
5. **Deepen the Engagement with Paradox Theory:** More explicitly connect the navigation practices identified to the strategies for managing paradoxes in the broader literature.
6. **Make Practice Implications More Specific:** Provide concrete examples of how recommendations could be operationalized.
7. **Correct Minor Typographical and Formatting Errors:** Proofread the manuscript carefully. Ensure consistency in the reference list.
8. **Expand the Limitations Section:** Briefly acknowledge the potential for publication bias and the challenges of synthesizing diverse qualitative studies.

Conclusion:

This manuscript presents a rigorous, insightful, and original systematic review of how school middle leaders navigate competing demands. The concept of "workable alignment" is a significant theoretical contribution that reframes middle-leader agency as a situated, relational, and context-dependent accomplishment. The review is methodologically sound, clearly written, and engages thoughtfully with the evidence base. The findings have important implications for research and practice, and the limitations are honestly acknowledged. With the minor revisions outlined above, this manuscript will be ready for publication and will serve as a valuable resource for researchers, school leaders, and policymakers. The recommendation is for acceptance after minor revision.