

Pressure management: Factors influencing the turnover intentions of school middle leaders in Scotland

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Abstract

This research examines what influences middle leaders' intention to leave or remain in teaching, through analysis of data from 273 Principal Teachers (PTs) in Scottish schools who participated in the national Teacher Workload Research project, 2024. By integrating turnover theories with educational leadership research, the study identifies key drivers of turnover intentions among this critical yet understudied occupational group. Findings reveal that intentions to leave consistently align with four interrelated challenges – workload, student conduct, parental expectations and learner needs – regardless of geographical location, sector or individual characteristics, indicating systemic issues requiring policy attention. The analysis demonstrates that contextual conditions undermine policy aspirations for middle leaders to function as change agents and leaders of learning, instead positioning them primarily as operational support for senior management. PTs effectively serve as institutional dampeners, absorbing job shocks that may reduce turnover intentions among classroom teachers while triggering their own. Their role as key nodal actors places them in constant reactive mode, adversely affecting professional identity and occupational well-being. The findings suggest that aspirations for instructional leadership must critically consider how changed working conditions impact professional capacity.

Keywords

Middle leadership, trust, turnover, workload

Introduction

Global concerns about the fragility of the school leadership pipeline have emerged across multiple policy contexts. International organisations have documented widespread challenges, with UNESCO (2024) and the World Bank (2021) highlighting diminishing interest in leadership roles and growing recruitment difficulties. This pattern is evident across the United Kingdom and

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Europe. Analysis of the *Working Lives of Teachers and Leaders* in England (DfE, 2024) identified declining promotion applications, while parallel studies in Scotland (Dempster, 2024) and Wales (Aleynikova et al., 2024) exposed similar challenges, with the Welsh context showing a significant increase in unfilled vacancies following the pandemic. These national findings are reinforced by concern across European Union member states to support leader career pathways (European Commission, 2020). The loss of experienced teachers and damage to the leadership succession pipeline matters because of the cumulative erosion of professional capacity within school sites and school systems.

Within this context of leadership shortages, middle leaders represent a critical but often overlooked cohort in the leadership pipeline. These professionals occupy a pivotal position between classroom teaching and senior leadership, making them both vulnerable to attrition pressures and essential to addressing the leadership succession crisis. Middle leaders have roles as curriculum and instructional leaders, teacher mentors and pastoral care stewards. They are a key node within the school ecology connecting main grade teachers and senior leaders, and orchestrating the translation and enactment of policy in the local context.

This study focuses specifically on school middle leaders because they constitute the primary talent pool from which future senior leaders emerge. Understanding the factors that influence their career decisions is therefore crucial to addressing the broader leadership pipeline challenges documented across educational systems. Research on experienced teacher attrition has traditionally examined discrete factors in isolation rather than their interconnected effects (Borman and Dowling, 2017). These include personal factors (e.g., demographic characteristics), school environment factors (e.g., peer relationships and leadership quality), and professional factors (e.g., workload and salary). Middle leaders occupy a unique position bridging teaching and leadership roles, where career decisions involve both teacher retention factors and leadership advancement considerations. Understanding middle leader turnover requires examining how these traditionally separate research streams intersect, as dissatisfaction may lead to various career decisions: downscaling (i.e., reduced hours or returning to main scale classroom teaching), pursuing senior leadership elsewhere, or leaving the profession entirely. This study combines quantitative measurement of turnover intention with qualitative accounts from school middle leaders to better understand what drives their decision to potentially leave their current role voluntarily for reasons other than retirement.

While research has established that flatter career structures with limited hierarchical advancement contribute to early-career teacher attrition (Struyven and Vanthournout, 2014), there remains a significant gap in understanding how the distribution of roles and responsibilities within differentiated career pathways affects mid-career departure decisions. By investigating local and contextual influences on work lives and how this affects the organisational and occupational commitment of experienced teachers in promoted posts, this research contributes to deliberation on potential protective factors that may help to retain middle leaders. Gaining better insight into how teachers develop either professional commitment or 'withdrawal states of mind' (Hom et al., 2012) – the psychological mindsets that either retain employees or precede their departure – could help school systems design more effective, evidence-informed retention strategies specifically targeted at strengthening the critical middle leadership layer of schools.

The article is structured in four sections. First, we outline the theoretical and conceptual framework. We situate our work with recent advances in turnover theories and review a small and emerging body of interdisciplinary work that is beginning to examine the intersection of turnover theories and educational leadership. Specifically, we extend prior work by focusing on retention dynamics among middle leaders in school (MLs). Second, the research design is presented and contextualised in the Scottish policy context. Third, we present findings on middle leaders' turnover

intentions and their rationales for staying or leaving. Finally, we discuss limitations, implications and future research in relation to existing literature and policy direction.

Theoretical framework

Turnover theories

Turnover research is an evolving interdisciplinary field. Approaches to turnover have their origins in twentieth-century organisational psychology and human resource management (McMahon March and Simon, 1958). More recently, the field has been enriched by the inclusion of sociological perspectives that place a stronger emphasis on contextual forces and relational dynamics (Bolt et al., 2022). In this article, we connect turnover theories with theorising in educational sociology that has emphasised how processes of responsibilisation are shaping experiences of professional accountability, with implications for leader succession and sustainability.

We approach turnover as a dynamic, staggered withdrawal process. We define turnover as voluntary employee-initiated exit and turnover intention as employees self-reported willingness to leave an organisation within a defined period (Hom et al., 2017). While we focus on elective withdrawal, we retain the possibility of ‘reluctant leavers’ (Hom et al., 2012, p. 835) or ‘forced choice’ (Rawolle et al., 2017, p. 113). While turnover intention should not be treated as a proxy for *actual* turnover, it is an important antecedent. Generally, job attitudes (e.g., intention to leave, move or stay) are correlated with job behaviours (e.g., downscaling i.e., moving from higher to lower leadership grades, inter-organisational transfer or occupational exit) (Cohen et al., 2016).

Central to understanding turnover is the concept of equilibrium between individual and organisational needs. McMahon March and Simon’s, (1958) *theory of organisational equilibrium* established this foundational principle, arguing that turnover decisions are shaped by ease of leaving and its desirability. This focus on balance was further developed through *social exchange theory* (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005), which frames workplace relationships as rational exchanges where individuals weigh costs (time and effort) against rewards (material and emotional). These theories converge around the critical importance of maintaining equilibrium in the employment relationship. When employees perceive inequity between their contributions and rewards, or experience violations of expected reciprocity, turnover becomes more likely. *Self-determination theory* (Gagné and Deci, 2005; Ryan and Deci, 2017) reinforces this perspective, emphasising how disruption to core needs – competence, relatedness, and autonomy – can destabilise the individual-organisation relationship and prompt departure.

Recent advances in turnover theory have shifted focus from static individual measures to the broader cultural and structural dimensions of employment relations. This shift addresses Bolt et al.’s (2022) critique of the ‘psychologisation of turnover research,’ which they argue has ‘hollowed out turnover as a concept, dissociating it from the wider political economy of the labour process in which such employment issues are embedded’ (p. 570). Employment relations operate through both formal transactional contracts and unwritten relational contracts that encompass expectations of professional growth, trust, and mutual respect. This ‘relational turn’ integrates *psychological contract theory* (Rousseau, 1995) with evolving employment relations shaped by the interplay of calculative and relational trust (Fink, 2016). As Rousseau et al. (1998, p. 393) argue, trust functions as a ‘meso concept, integrating micro-level psychological processes and group dynamics with macro-level institutional arrangements.’ Within this framework, employees emerge as both accountable and agentic actors, continuously calibrating their commitment and motivation through situated trust calculations.

Turnover and retention are related but distinct phenomena with different factors potentially driving decisions to leave or stay (Hom et al., 2020). This insight led to new theoretical developments focused on retention dynamics. *Job embeddedness theory* (Mitchell et al., 2001) explains why employees remain through three key factors: Job-fit, organisational and community links, and potential sacrifices involved in leaving. Building on this foundation, researchers developed more nuanced understandings of workplace attachment. The concept of *affective organisational commitment* emerged as a ‘dynamic, malleable construct’ reflecting emotional connection to one’s occupation (Houle et al., 2022, p. 2), acknowledging that commitment levels fluctuate over time. This temporal dimension is prominent in Lee and Mitchell’s (1994) *unfolding model*, which introduced the concept of ‘shocks’ – jarring events that trigger turnover deliberation. Expanding this more dynamic view, *proximal withdrawal states theory* (Hom et al., 2012) moved beyond simple stay-or-leave dichotomies to examine how different employee sub-populations approach withdrawal decisions. This framework helps to explain variations in departure types, timing, and destinations, while recognising that withdrawal paths are recursive and amenable to intervention.

Enthusiastic stayers remain because they want to stay and feel no external pressure to stay or leave, whereas *reluctant stayers* remain because they feel they cannot leave (although they would prefer to do so). *Enthusiastic leavers* want to and can leave, and *reluctant leavers* leave because they must. (Hom et al., 2012, p. 835)

Intersection of turnover theories and educational leadership models

The above turnover theories have begun to inform analyses of the teacher labour market. Analyses are beginning to consider the relationship between school governance structures, workplace relationships and organisational commitment. Studies drawing on job embeddedness theory have explained higher turnover rates in charter schools (i.e., publicly funded, independently operated schools) versus traditional public schools (McCluskey, 2024), while exchange theory has illuminated how principal-teacher relationships influence teaching commitment (Price, 2021). Berkovich and Bogler’s (2021) developmental review revealed how *transformational* and *distributed leadership* affect teachers’ organisational commitment through socio-affective factors and psychological capital. This relationship is further supported by studies of the influence of *learning-centred leadership* on turnover intentions, and the mediating role of collective teacher efficacy and shared vision (Qadach et al., 2020).

Recent theoretical developments connect affective organisational commitment with personal engagement and affect in teaching (Crawford, 2018; Zembylas, 2021). This approach links the ‘psychology of staying’ (Hom et al., 2020, p. 130) with teacher agency and volitional control. James et al. (2019) highlight an underexplored dimension in educational leadership: how affect and cognition drive action, noting that ‘motivation to act is produced by the feelings we have about what we know cognitively; we are moved to act’ (p. 618). This understanding has been enriched by studies of the emotional work of school leaders (Heffernan, 2021; McKay and Mills, 2022; Sanfuentes et al., 2024) and classroom teachers (Karakus et al., 2024), particularly in response to pandemic-related stressors (Matthews et al., 2022). Critical approaches to teacher resilience have helped to shift attention from individualistic to situational and ecological perspectives (Ainsworth and Oldfield, 2019; Drew and Sosnowski, 2019).

The ethical dimensions of teaching add another critical layer to understanding turnover. Psychological contract theory aligns closely with *moral leadership* approaches (Keddie, 2016), highlighting how violations of professional principles can lead to ‘moral injury’ (Headrest, 2023,

p. 5). DeMatthews and Serafini's (2019, p. 336) concept of 'bounded ethicality' explains how resource constraints and competing demands force ethically compromised decisions, leading to 'moral distress' (Stelmach et al., 2021, p. 834) when educators cannot act in accordance with their professional values. This ethical dimension extends to accountability systems, with emerging research connecting performance appraisal and school inspection to turnover intentions through psychological contract breach (Dahle and Ustrad, 2024; Perryman et al., 2024).

School middle leadership

This research addresses a specific occupational group that is neglected as recent attention has turned to school-to-school collaboration networks and dispersed teacher leadership (Harris et al., 2019). MLs occupy a key mediating role within school settings, positioned between senior leadership (headteachers/principals and deputy/assistant headteacher) and main grade classroom teachers. School middle leadership is a complex multifaceted role, blending curriculum and pedagogical expertise and the leadership of learning for school improvement (Highfield and Rubie-Davies, 2022). Middle leaders are defined by de Nobile (2017) as 'teachers (and some non-teachers) who have, or assume, responsibility for the maintenance, development or improvement of some aspect of school organisation including student welfare, curriculum area(s), policy, teacher development and various other activities, often through teams or committees' (p. 398). In Scotland, school middle leaders are a critical occupational group combining a large teaching commitment with significant management responsibilities but without the positional authority of senior leaders.

Despite the significance of this formal, wide ranging (and often ill-defined) role, empirical investigation of middle leadership remains relatively limited (Harris et al., 2019). Tang et al. (2022) note, 'little research has focused on the boundary-spanning role of middle leaders ... there is still limited knowledge about how middle leaders function as teacher capacity builders' (p. 522). Research suggests many practitioners are appointed without support for professional preparation, induction or mentoring, with leadership development remaining largely self-managed (Gurr, 2019; Lipscombe et al., 2025). The evidence base on pathways to middle leadership is thin, with routes including strategic career planning but also 'accidental' or 'anointed' progression through unexpected opportunities or senior leader persuasion (Grootenboer et al., 2023; Hirsh and Bergmo-Prvulovic, 2019). These varied pathways influence role identification, leadership preparedness, and ultimately career satisfaction and retention intentions. The disconnect between appointment practices and systematic development creates pipeline vulnerabilities as middle leaders navigate competing teaching and leadership demands (Hirsh and Bergmo-Prvulovic, 2019).

Research aim, context and approach

The aim of this research is to identify the main drivers of intentions to leave or remain in teaching among Principal Teachers (PTs), the middle leadership cohort in Scottish schools. Extant research is largely limited to the outward movement of school principals or main grade registered teachers (Brandenburg et al., 2024; Tekleselassie and Choi, 2021). There is a dearth of research examining factors that help to hold middle leaders within the profession or prompt their departure. In Scotland, in particular, there is little research on middle leadership despite the significance of the role in fulfilling policy aspirations that promoted teachers should lead learning (Forde et al., 2019).

The analysis draws on the push-pull-moorings framework (Mombaers et al., 2023) to address the following questions.

- RQ1.** What proportion of PTs have considered leaving the profession in the last two years?
RQ2. What reasons do PTs give for considering leaving? (push factors)
RQ3. What are the reasons for PTs' intention to stay? ('mooring' factors)

Context: Middle leaders in Scotland

PTs were established in Scottish secondary schools in the 1970s and later introduced to primary schools (SED, 1971, Scottish Executive, 2001). By 2024, PTs earned £55,000–£71,000 annually, representing 14% of Scotland's teaching workforce (22% in secondary, 7% in primary), with 70% being female. PTs typically allocate 85% of their time to teaching, with the remainder for management duties. The Scottish Negotiating Committee for Teachers (SNCT, 2007) outlines PTs' core responsibilities: Leading colleagues, curriculum development, behaviour management, professional development support, and implementing school-wide policies. The General Teaching Council for Scotland includes leadership and management within the Standard for Middle Leadership (GTCS, 2021). PTs serve three main functions: Curriculum/Subject leadership, Guidance/Pastoral Care, and Support for Learning. Secondary schools have maintained dedicated pastoral leaders since the 1970s, while primary schools operate with smaller staff where middle leadership is at greater risk of conflation with senior management (Forde et al., 2019).

Approach and analysis

This study makes use of data generated through the national Teacher Workload Research project (Hulme et al., 2024) which was funded by the Educational Institute of Scotland. The main study involved an online time use survey with supplementary questions completed by 1834 teachers (including 273 PTs) employed in publicly maintained schools across the 32 local authorities of Scotland in the week commencing 4th March 2024. A link to the survey was sent via workplace email by the funder to teachers employed in Scotland's schools. Submissions were checked for implausible responses, for example, working above the number of hours available in a week. In addition, the online survey platform blocked multiple entries by individuals. Respondent inattention was mediated by permitting progression only through completed answers. The main study established that teachers in Scotland work 46 h across weekdays, 11 hours above their contracted 35 h.

To address the RQs, the analysis for this article was undertaken in two stages. First, the scale of turnover intention was established by extracting the responses of PTs as a subpopulation to the question, 'Have you considered leaving the profession in the last two years?' The second stage involved extraction of qualitative data in response to the question, 'Why have you considered leaving the profession in the last two years?' or, if no intention to leave, 'What holds you in the profession?'

The qualitative analysis employed a hybrid deductive-inductive approach to code open-ended responses from 273 PTs (Proudfoot, 2022). Initial line-by-line coding drew on established themes from workload research literature (e.g., the multidimensional nature of workload – cognitive, affective, relational and physical) while remaining open to emergent patterns specific to middle leadership. Through iterative refinement, a hierarchical coding framework was developed, organising data into primary themes (such as working hours) and associated subthemes (including work-life interference and health implications). Data analysis emphasised thematic density (frequency, distribution across participants), examined cross-theme relationships (e.g., to explore the interaction of different workload dimensions on turnover intentions), and employed repeated text searches until

saturation was achieved. For example, the ‘student conduct’ code captures references to disciplinary challenges and behavioural incidents that PTs experience, respond to, or cite as factors influencing their professional satisfaction and turnover intentions. This theme frequently co-occurs with ‘working hours’ in a mutually reinforcing relationship. One PT noted: ‘The disrespect from pupils is often very gruelling and ever harder to cope with when you are worn out managing a heavy workload’

Ethics

This study was approved by the University of the West of Scotland Education and Social Sciences ethics committee, approval number 2024-22252-17355. The consent procedure emphasised informed voluntary participation. The survey opening page (Question Pro) contained project details, sponsorship information, researcher contacts and a mandatory downloadable participant information sheet that had to be verified before proceeding. In addition, the final submission page emphasised that clicking ‘Submit’ constituted formal consent. Code numbers in parentheses are used to anonymise PT respondents. Selected data extracts without identifying details are used to illustrate typical responses.

Sample

The survey sample comprised 273 PTs from 31 of Scotland’s 32 local authorities. The gender distribution was predominantly female ($n=208$, 76.2%), with fewer male participants ($n=63$, 23.1%), one non-binary participant (0.4%), and one participant who preferred not to disclose their gender (0.4%). Participants had a mean age of 44 years ($SD=8.85$). The majority worked in secondary schools ($n=202$, 74.0%), followed by primary schools ($n=67$, 24.5%), and special schools ($n=4$, 1.5%). Regarding geographical distribution, PTs worked in urban settings ($n=122$, 44.7%), small towns ($n=102$, 37.4%), rural areas ($n=44$, 16.1%), and island communities ($n=5$, 1.8%). The demographic and professional characteristics of the sample, including gender distribution, age, and school type broadly aligned with the national profile of PTs in Scotland (Scottish Government, 2024).

The median teaching experience among this sample of PTs was 17 years. A substantial majority ($n=269$, 98%) had five years or more teaching experience. This indicates that most PTs in the sample had accumulated significant classroom expertise before taking on leadership positions.

Findings

RQ1. What proportion of PTs have considered leaving the profession in the last two years?

Analysis of survey responses revealed that 210 (76.9%) PTs had considered leaving the profession within the past two years, while 63 (23.1%) had not ($n=273$). The analysis revealed no significant differences in teacher characteristics or school settings between those who expressed leaving intentions and those who did not.

RQ2. What reasons do PTs' give for considering leaving?

Analysis of qualitative data found strong convergence in reasons for considering exiting teaching among middle leaders. Four interrelated factors most cited by PTs who had considered leaving the profession in the last two years were: (1) prolonged working hours; (2) challenging student conduct; (3) parental engagement; and (4) complex learner needs.

Prolonged working hours. Eighty-seven PTs (41.4%) who indicated that they had considered leaving teaching cited 'workload' as a key reason. Respondents described the volume and pace of PT workload as 'intense', 'massive', 'excessive', 'constant' and 'relentless', such that it was reported to be 'intolerable', 'insurmountable' and 'unsustainable'. PTs reported that the increased demands, complexity and scope of the middle leader role were not commensurate with the resource available. Extended working hours were attributed to seven interrelated causes: (1) Pressure from senior leaders in school or Quality Improvement Officers at local authority level to achieve improved student outcomes, (2) required responses to changing national assessment arrangements, (3) pressure from preparing for or responding to school inspections, (4) staff absence, understaffing and staff turnover, (5) expanding job remit without access to specialist support, (6) more complex learner needs with declining ringfenced resource, (7) a rise in challenging behaviour among learners, and also parents/carers. After working hours, 'behaviour' and learner needs were the most frequently cited reason for considering leaving.

Staff sickness levels are extremely high, creating additional workload issues for those left standing. There is not enough time to work collegiately, to share good practice and enjoy the job. Tasks cannot be done to the best of my ability due to time constraints.

Lack of money to provide the service that I have previously been able to provide. More expectations in my role and less time to do it. An expectation that you will get everything done, no matter if it impacts on your life outside work.

PTs reported that their work-life balance had deteriorated due to work pressure. Working beyond contract hours and taking work home most nights meant that PTs experienced social withdrawal and inter-role conflict as many felt they were neglecting kinship responsibilities and missing the childhood of their own children.

I go in ninety minutes earlier in the morning and often stay two hours later at night. There is still not enough time to stay on top of my tasks by even fifty per cent. When I go home, I don't want to do anything but stay in and go to bed. I don't meet up with friends due to lack of energy and I'm distracted by work thoughts.

I now stay up late almost every night. I have two young children so I cannot start work until they are in bed. I work from 8pm until 12pm most nights, including weekends, and generally get less than 5 h sleep.

The intensification of working hours has profound implications for physical and mental wellbeing. Among those considering leaving the profession, 46 (21.9%) cited work-related stress as a primary factor. Respondents characterised their stress levels as 'immense' and 'increasing', with many expressing deep personal impacts. These manifested as feelings of being 'overwhelmed' and 'inadequate in my job and personal life', while others reported being 'unable to cope' with the demands of their role. The toll on physical health was particularly evident, with 22 PTs (10.4%) reporting

specific adverse health conditions. These ranged from chronic stress and sleep disruption to persistent fatigue and increased susceptibility to infections. Notably, physical exhaustion emerged as the most frequently reported health concern, cited by 18 PTs (8.6%).

My physical health and wellbeing are being battered. Even with therapy, which I pay for out of my own pocket, I find that my workload is unsustainable in terms of meeting the needs of all the young people. Parent/carers make unrealistic demands, we have little resourcing, and staff are on their knees with exhaustion.

I don't have the ability to leave work at the door. It comes home with me and plays on my mind. I can't switch off. Stress leads to poor sleep.

Pupil conduct. The conduct of pupils was the second most common reason given by PTs for considering leaving teaching. Seventy-seven respondents (36.6%) specifically mentioned declining standards of pupil behaviour. Behaviour was approached by PTs in terms of a wide range of conduct-related behaviours observed in classrooms, corridors, the lunch hall and yard areas. This included learner difficulty in following instructions, delayed social-emotional maturity, struggling with self-regulation, 'distressed behaviours', conduct that is below age-appropriate expectations, poor attitudes to learning ('apathy', 'indifference' 'outright defiance'), disrespectful interactions with staff (including daily low level and serious disruptive behaviour and verbal abuse directed at teachers), and elective absence from class (in-school as well as out of school absences). PTs were concerned by a rise in referrals for discriminatory conduct and the presentation of 'violent, racist, homophobic and ableist behaviour'. The escalation of behavioural issues in schools was described as a 'serious problem'. The regularity with which PTs managed concerning pupil conduct and the scale of the problem was described as 'systemic and overwhelming'.

A minority of PTs (22, 10.4%) commented on the challenges of operating in a workplace environment where they are subject to 'physical abuse', 'violence' or 'aggression' from learners, particularly the challenge of responding adequately to the 'unpredictability of violent learners'. One PT suggested, 'it is simply increasingly dangerous to be in the job. We are failing to support pupils properly through whatever is at the root cause of the behaviour'. As a result, break and lunch times are spent supervising school space, and PTs are constantly drawn into managing incidents throughout the day and after school ends, in addition to maintaining a class commitment. Being 'on call' at all times meant PTs had little discretion over time use and were operating in constant responsive mode.

I am regularly verbally abused. I have been hurt in school several times. Filling out violence at work forms has had no impact. Phoning the police has not helped. Staff are absent due to these problems.

Increased behavioural needs among pupils were consistently associated with: (1) Under-resourcing of support for pupils in school; (2) reduced support in statutory areas such as additional support needs, including speech and language therapy; (3) a reduction in Education Welfare Officer services (regarding attendance); (4) pressure from local authorities not to formally exclude pupils, leading to a rise in within-school exclusion/isolation; and (5) teacher absence and turnover, creating higher levels of temporary cover arrangements by less experienced and non-specialist teachers.

Parental engagement. Thirty-one PTs (14.7%) cited parents/carers in their explanation for considering leaving the profession. Participants reported that 'parental demands' and complaints from parents had significantly increased, with communication marked by 'disrespect', 'hostility' or

tantamount to ‘verbal abuse’. At the same time, there was a perception that support from parents had declined, including a lack of trust in teachers’ professional judgment and parental refusal to believe accounts of incidents offered by school staff. PTs commented on an ‘unrealistic’ expectation that they would be readily available, ‘on call 24 h a day’ and able to swiftly action all parental requests for additional support. Some PTs reported feeling increasingly disempowered as parental influence grew in schools. One participant directly stated that ‘too much time and power is allocated to parents/guardians’, reflecting a broader sentiment of eroding professional autonomy. PTs noted poor interaction with families in their mediating role. Examples included PTs reporting they had become a ‘verbal punch bag for angry parents’, ‘constantly made to feel that every challenge from a child or parent is something that I have done or not done’ and expressed frustration at ‘repeatedly seeing colleagues upset and angry’. Others noted a lack of support from senior leaders. One PT noted, ‘teachers are being shamed for not being nurturing enough when the reality is it’s an easy “cop out” so SLT (senior leadership team) don’t have to challenge parents’. PTs described facing a culture where parental accountability was diminishing. As one participant observed, ‘Many parents opt to shift the blame onto teachers for their children’s behaviour or completely ignore the problem’. This reflected a broader trend where schools were perceived to be capitulating to ‘all parental and pupil demands regardless of circumstance at the expense of staff wellbeing’.

Support to address learner needs. Nineteen PTs (9%) reported a growing disconnect between escalating student needs and the resources available to address them adequately. An increase in the number of children and young people with complex barriers to learning (physical, communicative, sensory, and cognitive) educated in mainstream classes left PTs ‘feeling unable to provide appropriate and adequate support’. As one PT expressed, ‘I cannot win as there are increasing numbers of pupils with complex additional support needs in the classroom with no support and yet there is an expectation that I raise attainment’. Another commented that forty percent of the S1 cohort (aged 11–12 years) in their school have a recorded need in 2023/2024, while the number of classroom assistants had halved over the last 2 years. PTs sought to sustain an emotionally supportive environment as much as addressing pandemic-related learning loss. Middle managers felt compromised – even ‘set up to fail’ – by being unable to provide an optimal learning environment that would meet diverse needs (medical, sensory, physical, communication, and learning needs) effectively, and support the engagement and progression of all learners. Resource concerns centred on staffing budgets, flexibility in deploying staff, access to specialist services, professional development opportunities, and the affordances/adaptability of the physical environment/school space.

There are more pupils with learning needs but less support within the classroom, so it rarely feels like I am actually getting it right for every child despite every effort being made to do so.

I am constantly juggling workload, pushing forwards against a storm of unrealistic expectations and the management team’s lack of engagement with the core workers. Trying to educate with few resources, more complex learning needs and no support for the young person or teachers is burning my energies. It’s exhausting trying to keep up the momentum and be positive all the time.

The levels of staffing have decreased by half in the last few years, while the pupils have increasingly complex needs, so there is far less time and support to meet these needs. When support staff are absent, we are managing with a patchwork of inexperienced and often unwilling staff from other parts of the school, which increases my workload immeasurably.

RQ3. What are the reasons for PTs' intention to stay?

Sixty-three (23%) of the 273 PTs who participated in this study offered reasons for *not* considering leaving teaching in the last two years. Their qualitative responses indicate a mix of intrinsic motivation (love of teaching, positive student relationships) alongside practical considerations (benefits, career constraints), suggesting both emotional and pragmatic reasons for electing to stay in the profession.

It's the pupils that drive you, the wee gains, the open honesty and the sheer delight in seeing them understand concepts and grow.

I enjoy my work and consider my role to be important in having an influence on society in the future. The young people I work with are challenging and inspiring and I never have a day when I don't come away having learned something new or having shifted my perspective on an issue.

It's a secure job. I would find it difficult to get another job that pays this salary and contributes to pension in the same way.

Five main themes for remaining were identified: (1) *Passion for teaching and subject matter* including enjoyment of curriculum design, classroom interaction and personal satisfaction from the work; (2) *Student impact and relationships*, including making a positive difference in young people's lives and enjoying daily interaction with pupils; (3) *Practical employment benefits* such as salary and pension benefits, job security and holiday entitlement; (4) *Career investment/constraints* such as proximity to retirement, perceived difficulty finding comparable salary elsewhere and existing skills specialised to teaching; and (5) *Professional roles and relationships* including positive support from colleagues, leadership opportunities and departmental responsibilities.

Discussion

The findings of this study identify significant stressors that threaten the efficacy and sustainability of the ML role as it is currently configured in Scotland's schools. Seventy-seven per cent (210) of PT participants in this study had considered leaving the profession voluntarily before retirement in the last two years. Escalating conduct issues, growing parental pressures and rising learner needs lead to heavy caseloads, extended working hours and a reduced sense of efficacy with a detrimental impact on middle leader occupational and personal wellbeing. Workload pressures are accentuated for middle leaders whose vertical and lateral intermediary role places them as buffers between classroom teachers and senior management, parents and troubled students. Middle leaders act as institutional dampeners absorbing, moderating and dissipating organisational tensions and pressures from multiple directions. They engage in and moderate experiences of 'dataveillance' (Holloway and Lewis, 2022, p. 2), work with and mediate the heightened expectations of parents/carers, liaise with and stand in for contracting external agency services, while acting as caring advocates for teachers and pupils facing challenges (and presenting challenges for others in school). While middle leaders try to mediate job shocks to protect organisational stability and workforce sustainability, they themselves become repositories of accumulated strain.

However, in this study job attitudes had progressed to turnover intention not simply due to expanding job scope (i.e., increasing job demands) but also due to psychological contract violation resulting from perceived repeated breaches of trust and declining mutual obligation among stakeholders (i.e., declining protective job resources). Middle leaders' sense of occupational

professionalism was diminished where there was a perception of an erosion of supportive relational ties and, for a minority, reported experiences of autonomy-thwarting leadership. Job satisfaction was negatively affected by successive emergent demands that trapped MLs in constant reactive mode, reducing control and efficacy (embedding forces). Middle leaders carry the operational responsibility for schools' relationships and behaviour policies and manage uncomfortable compromises when unable to ensure that all adults and children feel safe and supported in the learning environment. In challenging conditions, equity-centred 'relational leadership' (Odell, 2023) becomes more difficult to sustain. Trust is violated when expectations of professional support are not forthcoming or when fatigue is interpreted by senior leaders as a problem of 'over commitment', 'dispositional perfectionism' (i.e., perfectionistic strivings and concerns), a failure of self-care resulting from the 'wrong' choices (Hoppe et al., 2023). The evident strain on PTs in absorbing work pressures may stimulate a contagion effect as main grade teachers witness the cost of progression.

This study finds that organisational embeddedness helps MLs to weather job shocks and sustain a commitment mindset. Job resources include autonomy-supportive leadership and positive peer relationships. Organisational equilibrium was evident where there is reported job-fit, alignment between personal and organisational goals, and expected return on employees' investment. This study also provides evidence to strengthen claims that different factors may drive decisions to leave or stay (Hom et al., 2020). Among those demonstrating a commitment mindset, expressions of professionalism were also accompanied by pragmatic employment considerations such as salary, holiday entitlement, pension benefits which were influenced by proximity to retirement, career mobility and the transferability of skills to comparable graduate employment at mid/late career stage. Turnover intentions in accounts of motivations to stay *and* leave contained responses that aligned with the category of 'reluctant stayers' (Hom et al., 2012, p. 835). The high percentage of middle leaders considering voluntary departure reflects a systemic vulnerability in the leadership pipeline that extends beyond individual career decisions. The lack of systematic development opportunities identified in the literature (Gurr, 2019; Lipscombe et al., 2025) appears to compound the operational pressures middle leaders face, creating a perfect storm of increased demands and insufficient support. This combination threatens not only the sustainability of middle leadership roles but potentially the stability of school leadership structures more broadly.

Limitations and future research agenda

This study relies on self-report from a relatively large but self-selecting sample. The time use diary provided a context and license to articulate knowledge (cognition), feelings (affect), and intentions (volition). However, feelings are complex and may be difficult to articulate, and the quality of data depends on individual self-awareness (James et al., 2019). Nevertheless, the absence of an interlocutor in the form of an academic interviewer may have enhanced rather than diminished the likelihood of authentic responses from those who appreciated the distance and enhanced sense of anonymity afforded by remote engagement.

The data generated addresses intentions not actual exit. However, the antecedents to exit are important because disengaged employees may exhibit withdrawal acts or 'quiet quitting' (e.g., reduced participation, weariness, absence). Senior teachers who are considering leaving the profession may begin to withdraw their participation and engagement, affecting peer relationships and pupil experiences at school.

Future research would benefit from longitudinal studies examining fluctuations in organisational commitment, job satisfaction, and turnover intention over multiple time points (Collie and Carroll,

2023; Gillet et al., 2022), enabling empirical investigation of the ‘unfolding model’ (Lee and Mitchell, 1994). Additionally, more research is needed on the career trajectories of teachers who transition to education-related roles or leave the sector entirely (Devers et al., 2024; Heffernan et al., 2023; Mombaers et al., 2023).

Implications for policy and practice

Consideration of middle leader professional capacity is timely as policymakers in Scotland consider system-level reform of the school curriculum, national assessment, pupil support and school inspection amid escalating service demands and budgetary pressures (Audit Scotland, 2025; Hayward, 2023; Muir, 2022). The international challenge of teaching intensification (Thompson and Hogan, 2024) makes understanding embedding and estranging forces critical for middle leadership sustainability.

The findings suggest significant systemic implications of sustained pressure on middle leaders. At the institutional level, the prioritisation of operational urgencies over strategic responsibilities may compromise curriculum development, mentoring effectiveness, and research-informed practice. The reduced capacity for proactive intervention in complex student needs could potentially undermine institutional support mechanisms and further strain home-school relationships. At the systems level, these constraints may impact the implementation fidelity of national initiatives and inhibit meaningful school improvement. The limitation of opportunities for strategic skill development among middle leaders could affect leadership succession planning. Moreover, the persistent prioritisation of immediate operational demands over preventative strategic work may create self-perpetuating cycles of crisis management.

The tension between middle leaders’ expected role as pedagogical experts and their operationally constrained reality warrants further investigation. International implications include the need for sustainable workload models that recognise dual teaching-leadership responsibilities. Middle leaders’ change capacity is embedded in systemic structures and relational contexts – policy reforms ignoring these conditions risk undermining leadership capacity and system resilience.

Conclusion

Creating a resilient education workforce requires a holistic approach that prioritises job quality, workplace support, and meaningful professional environments that restore teachers’ sense of purpose and autonomy. As the demands made of teachers intensify, middle leaders risk being reduced to institutional shock absorbers rather than curriculum makers, leaders of learning and agents of change. By focusing on situational conditions rather than individual traits, this study identified factors that may help to foster or endanger organisational and occupational commitment among school middle leaders. Without greater policy attention to key agents and enabling forces, the fundamental conditions for learning – safety, belonging, support – may become compromised.

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Ethical considerations

This study was approved by the University of the West of Scotland, School of Education and Social Sciences ethics committee, approval number 2024-22252-17355 January 9, 2024.

Informed consent

All participants provided written informed consent prior to participating. The online survey included a downloadable Participant Information page (PIS) which contained the purpose and nature of the research study, data handling procedures and confidentiality measures, information about data storage, retention and future use, contact information for the research team and ethics committee. Following review of the PIS, participants were required to provide explicit consent by checking items on a mandatory consent form before proceeding, which was revisited at the end of the survey before submission.

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Declaration of conflicting interests

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Data availability statement

The dataset analysed during this study is not publicly available due to confidentiality guarantees provided to participants during the informed consent process and the sensitive nature of disclosures.

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