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## **Leading for sustainable improvement: middle leadership revisited**

### **Introduction**

Education systems globally continue to pursue educational reform as a means of improving the quality of learning outcomes. This opinion piece argues that middle and teacher leaders have a crucial role to play in leading and sustaining these improvements. Sustainability is essential for consistent improvements in student learning (Lambert, 2007). However, in order to succeed in playing these vital roles middle leaders need empowerment, through professional development to deal with the complexity of their role, and schools need to improve the conditions which support and facilitate learning and change. This opinion piece suggests three significant approaches to empowering middle leaders. The first approach relates to the professional development (PD) available to them. Second is the amount of senior leadership support and its impact on the learning culture. The final approach relates to the benefits and rewards attached to the middle leadership role. These practical recommendations are necessary to increase the impact middle leadership can provide in leading and sustaining school improvement.

### **Middle leadership arena: contested definitions and agreed significance**

Middle leaders are defined as the ~~the group~~ of school staff who work in the middle area between senior leaders and classroom teachers. This group of staff plays a vital role in improving education systems (Harris and Jones, 2017). Unlike school principals whose responsibilities may take them away from the classroom, middle leaders work closely with teachers and students as they lead teachers and departments in schools.

Teacher leadership is equally important in facilitating and leading change in schools. Teacher leadership refers to the informal role of teachers in leading both within and beyond their classrooms (Nguyen et al., 2019). Teacher leadership has a central role in influencing the process of school transformation and educational change (Harris and Jones, 2019). Thus, it is important to emphasise that both middle and teacher leaders have, under the right circumstances, the potential to lead and sustain school improvement. The rationale of the potential impact middle and teacher leaders can make as change agents stems from the

fact that they are in the position of instructional leaders who can lead their colleagues by example through their expertise and subject knowledge.

This think piece will focus on middle leadership staff, in particular subject leaders, who maintain formal roles in leading school departments. Nevertheless, taking into consideration the common sphere of influence between middle and teacher leadership arenas, many of the introduced recommendations are applicable to teacher leaders.

The significant role of school senior leaders as instructional leaders is well-established in the literature (Kaparou and Bush, 2016). However, senior leaders' responsibilities increasingly keep them away from classrooms (Hallinger, 2011); this entails the necessity that middle leaders exercise this vital type of leadership in schools. Considering their role in teacher PD as well as modelling and sharing successful pedagogy with their department colleagues (Gurr, 2019), middle leaders are able, under the right circumstances, to lead and facilitate a sustainable improvement. The next sections will discuss the circumstances necessary to enable middle leaders to successfully lead and sustain school improvement.

### **Differentiated professional development**

The first proposed improvement approach relates to the PD available to teachers and middle leaders. The purpose of this section is two-fold; the first is to propose a greater role for middle leaders in teacher PD and to recommend ways to help them in leading and sustaining improvements in teacher performance and student learning. The second advocates specialised PD training for middle leaders, appropriate to their leadership role, which would further qualify them to become a source of sustainable improvement.

Lipscombe, Tindall-Ford and Lamanna (2021) have demonstrated how middle leaders can influence teacher pedagogy in classrooms, teacher professional learning and motivation and school change. Research has shown that professional social interaction can spread innovative practices within schools and drive teachers to develop their beliefs about teaching and learning, which are requirements of sustaining educational improvement (Shirrell and Spillane, 2020). In practice, middle leaders, through their subject knowledge and classroom expertise, can be well positioned to influence their colleagues' orientations towards learning that guide teachers' pedagogy and assessment choices. The rationale of

this proposed ability is that teachers construct their orientation about learning through their practice (Opfer and Pedder, 2011), thus, altering these orientations requires practical strategies such as modelling and leading by example, which are key middle leaders' roles.

One of the major limitations of PD courses is their short-term impact; often change in teacher performance tend to be superficial and temporary (Hubers, 2020). This issue is attributed to separating the PD from the complex teaching and learning environment in which teachers work (Hubers, 2020). Thus, as middle leaders work closely with teachers and students, they can play an important role in facilitating teaching and learning improvement, and more importantly in sustaining this improvement through embedding it in school daily routine.

Through monitoring their colleagues' performance, middle leaders can judge the impact of the PD delivered and consequently determine learning needs of colleagues in the light of the school context. Embedding teachers' PD in the specific context of the school is imperative in successfully leading and sustaining educational change (Harris and Jones, 2017). This provides an opportunity for an effective PD cycle that revolves around teachers' and students' actual learning needs. This type of learning focused leadership can also help middle leaders to overcome the traditional tension between their responsibilities of support on the one hand and monitoring performance on the other, (Lipscombe et al., 2021).

Another important role of middle leaders in the implementation of teaching and learning changes, which is often overlooked in research, is to avoid the potential risk of misuse; what Dylan Wiliam calls 'lethal mutations' (Hubers, 2020). An example of 'lethal mutations' occurred when differentiation became fashionable and was sometimes seen as an end in itself, with little attention to its proper implementation. Some teachers started to apply invalid differentiation strategies, such as assigning tasks, unrelated to the lesson objectives, to low achievers simply to be seen to have included differentiation in the classroom. This necessitates the intervention of the subject leader to help those teachers apply valid differentiation strategies that can help in achieving the lesson learning objectives, rather than just to show student superficial engagement.

Education systems provide PD training to educators as an important strategy to develop their performance. However, this tends to be “one size fits all” PD that covers what policy makers believe as important to achieve the reform goals. Teachers mostly attend the same PD training regardless of their diverse training needs (i.e. whether they are newcomers or veterans). This issue is more serious in the case of middle leaders, who mostly attend the same PD training as their colleagues, who they should lead and counsel. The lack of specialised training for middle leaders seems to be the result of a common assumption that middle leaders have been chosen because of their subject knowledge and teaching expertise, which together provide them with leadership authority (Bennett et al., 2007). They are therefore not provided with a formal preparation for their role. Taking into consideration the diversity of their roles and responsibilities, middle leaders require PD training that support them in developing their leadership skills and to properly qualify them to the complexity of their role.

Consequently, this opinion piece recommends the provision of differentiated PD training that meets teachers’ diverse learning needs. More importantly, specialised PD training should be available to middle leaders focussed on developing their leadership skills and empowering them to lead and sustain improvement in their schools. Having discussed the significance and requirements of PD to empower middle leaders, senior leadership support, mediated by school effective learning culture, is the focus of the next section.

### **Senior leadership support and school learning culture**

Research emphasises the fact that middle leadership is a social construct where the school context and the characteristics of individual staff members will be likely to shape the way middle leaders practice their roles (Lipscombe et al., 2021). An increasing body of research emphasises the role of organisational factors such as school context, learning culture and colleagues’ support and feedback in influencing teachers’ willingness to develop performance (Hubers, 2020).

Thus, improving the school contextual factors, including the school principal support, seems a necessary requirement in order to optimise middle leaders’ ability to lead and sustain school improvement.

Research into the best-performing educational systems shows that these systems pay considerable attention to leadership for learning that aims to create and sustain schools' conditions, context and create a culture that promotes learning opportunities (MacBeath, 2020). Through practicing the leadership for learning model, which subsumes features of instructional, transformational and shared leadership (Hallinger, 2011), school senior leaders can consistently facilitate learning and change in schools. To achieve these goals, it is important to share, articulate and model school vision, goals, values and beliefs that are consistent with what middle leaders guide their colleagues to achieve. In practice, conflicting messages can undermine middle leaders' efforts in achieving and sustaining improvements in terms of colleagues' performance and students' learning.

In some educational contexts, middle leaders complain that they lack adequate authority to impose change within their departments. In fact, what middle leaders actually need is not the authority to impose change on their colleagues, who are likely to revert to their familiar teaching methods at the earliest possible opportunity. Middle leaders need a supportive school learning culture that promotes collaborative learning and mutual trust among staff where school goals and values are shared, practiced and celebrated (Haiyan, Walker and Xiaowei, 2017). Such a positive school culture empowers middle leaders to negotiate and facilitate a smooth implementation of learning initiatives where teachers are prepared to accept and even embrace change.

Such a supportive school culture facilitates middle leaders' ability to model the benefits of initiatives on student learning, which can motivate teachers to change their practice (Haiyan et al., 2017). Such culture promotes a sustainable improvement as the intended practice becomes a part of the school daily routine. Consequently, in order to lead and sustain school improvement, middle leaders require authority, effective negotiation skills and the capacity for leading by example. Middle leaders' role in supporting, monitoring and evaluating, is increasingly necessary considering school principals' growing duties that keep them away from the classroom, and limit their ability to personally practice vital instructional leadership roles (Hallinger, 2011).

A positive learning culture in a school can help teachers to collectively develop their knowledge and skills with a clear link to student learning and improvement (Haiyan et al.,

2017). Thus, school leaders' support through building and sustaining a positive school learning culture can facilitate learning and change and make middle leaders' task in leading and sustaining school improvement attainable.

### **Middle leaders' working conditions**

In addition to professional development and school senior leaders' support, middle leaders' working conditions highly influence their ability to actively contribute to school improvement. This section will discuss middle leaders' working conditions such as their teaching loads and the benefits attached to their role.

Hargreaves and Fink (2004), when discussing the principles of sustainable leadership argued; "Sustainable leadership provides intrinsic rewards and extrinsic incentives that attract and retain the best and brightest of the leadership pool; and it provides time and opportunity for leaders to network, learn from and support each other, as well as coach and mentor their successors" (p.8). Their argument highlights the significance of benefits and time for leaders to nourish and make a sustainable impact. It is not uncommon for policies and procedures to intentionally overlook the assignment of incentives for teachers to lead teams and implement educational changes (i.e. (Al-Taneiji and Ibrahim, 2017)). This leads teachers working in such contexts to avoid nomination to unrewarded leadership positions, which seriously affects the process of appointing talented teachers to leadership positions (Al-Taneiji and Ibrahim, 2017).

The complexity of middle leaders' roles in balancing managerial responsibilities (e.g., managing budgets, timetables, reporting etc.) and leadership (e.g., mentoring, facilitating PD etc.) indicates the crucial importance of monetary compensation as well as professional growth opportunities. The lack of benefits associated with middle leadership roles has been overlooked in the literature in some contexts, despite its inevitable effects on maintaining good performance. Rewarding the role of middle leaders is essential to compensate for their increased responsibilities and accountability. This can increase their commitment to seek and maintain high teaching and learning standards. This commitment is necessary if middle leaders are to continuously follow teachers' performance, student learning and achievement and plan for new cycles of improved learning.

Another important consideration necessary to empower middle leaders is to provide a reasonable amount of non-teaching time. The lack of non-teaching time is one of the most common issues that hampers the work of middle leaders (Bennett et al., 2007). Thus, less teaching time is essential to help them fulfil their role and make an impact. However, it is equally important that they have some classroom teaching; a zero-teaching load would undermine their professional credibility and their ability to lead by example.

## **Conclusion**

This opinion piece has argued the need to capitalise on the significant role of middle leaders in leading and sustaining school improvement. Considering the increasing necessity to make educational change a sustainable process, the impact that middle leaders can make is indispensable. For educational reform to succeed, middle leaders need to be empowered through qualifying them to master the complexities of their role while improving the school conditions that support and facilitate learning and change. This opinion piece proposed three significant approaches to empower middle leaders; these approaches should also apply to teacher leaders who can equally play a significant role in leading and sustaining school improvement. The proposed approaches relate to the quality of PD supplied to them, the amount of senior leadership support mediated in the school learning culture and the availability of benefits/rewards attached to middle leaders' role.

The empowerment of middle leaders can enhance the ability of schools to implement educational initiatives, sustain the initiated change and ensure its validity over time. The improved role of middle leaders can further help in evaluating the impact of PD programmes on teaching and learning in the school context and inform the design of future PD programmes.

This opinion piece emphasised the need to tailor PD programmes to fit middle leaders' complex roles. Equally important is school senior leadership support to middle leaders mediated in school learning culture that influence all aspects of learning and change in schools. Another significant suggestion is rewarding the efforts and multi-dimensional role of middle leaders as this would provide them an extrinsic motivation to maintain the quality of performance within their departments.



The complex role of middle leaders requires tailored PD programmes appropriate to their role and responsibilities. The absence of such PD will damage progress to real improvement and change. A continuation of traditional PD programmes is unlikely to lead to any real change. Adequate support from senior school leaders' is also essential to create an effective school learning culture where school goals are shared, articulated and emphasised. Without this support, middle leaders are unlikely to be able to make real or sustainable impact. Unpaid additional leadership duties are likely to be perceived by middle leaders as a burden that they should strive to keep to a minimum and by their team members as an honorary position with no real authority to follow and monitor improvement. Empowering middle leaders through adopting the three recommended strategies can create an effective framework to lead and sustain school improvement.

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