Leading practice development: voices from the middle

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Leadership has long been acknowledged as a significant dimension in effective school functioning and, indeed, school leaders can play a substantial role in professional development of staff. Here we have centred on the *practices of leading* as opposed to the qualities or characteristics of leaders, and this is emphasised by our use of the term 'leading' rather than 'leadership'. In this article we explicitly focus on the leading practices of practitioners we describe as *middle leaders*. Middle leaders are those with an acknowledged position of leadership but also a significant teaching role. Here we present data from a cross national study of middle leaders in Australian primary schools and Swedish preschools which investigates the leading practices of middle leaders in educational contexts. The article draws on interviews with 22 teachers who have been given the responsibility for leading the practice development of their colleagues; these interviews give voice to this distinctive group of schools leaders. In particular, the article draws on the theory of practice architectures to examine the social nature of the language, activities and relationships of leading 'in the middle', and the particular conditions or practice architectures which enable or constrain the development of middle leading practices in education. From this analysis we conclude with a definition of middle leading that includes positional, philosophical and practice dimensions. This could then be used to inform the domains of higher education, policy development and school education globally where middle leading practices are well established.

Keywords: middle leading, leading practices, practice theory, practice architectures, participant voice

Introduction

Leadership in pre-schools, schools and other educational institutions is a complex issue with a rich and long-standing history of research (Nicolaidou & Petridou, 2011). The extensive body of literature describing educational leadership lays a well-established foundation for conceptualising the complexities which constitute educational leadership – its efficacy, its dimensions, its influences. This literature is dominated with multiple interpretations as to what a leader does, who they lead and the variable purposes for leading. Further, this scholarship and research has had a strong focus on the work of principals or the positional heads (Inman, 2009). More recently, work on leadership practices in education has been extended to include notions of ‘distributed leadership’ (Spillane, 2006), ‘dispersed leadership’ (Lingard, Hayes, Mills & Christie, 2003), ‘democratic leadership’ (Woods, 2004) and ‘teacher leadership’ (Muijis & Harris, 2006) where leadership is seen as spread throughout the learning institution.

In recent years, the study of leading *as* practice as it is understood through practice theory lens has been gaining momentum (e.g., Carroll, Levy & Richmond, 2008); but predominantly this research centres on the practices of those in the ‘top’ executive positions of organisations such as school principals. In this article we are not looking at the leading practices of principals, but rather the particular aspect of educational leading that is undertaken by middle leaders. By ‘middle leaders’, we mean those who have an acknowledged position of leadership in their educational institution but also have a significant teaching role. Colloquially, they can be seen as those who sit between the Principal or the Head, and the teaching staff – in the middle! We have adopted the term *middle leaders* to try and capture this positioning, but also to highlight that these leaders practice their leading from ‘among’ their teaching colleagues. It is not the same construct as ‘teacher leader’, which is more generic and ubiquitous, or ‘middle

manager', which highlights more the managerial rather than the leading dimension. Furthermore, it is not necessarily easy to identify and label these people because their titles and roles vary across educational levels, sites and countries, and there are also issues related to scale and the size of institutions. In Australia, middle leaders would include syndicate leaders, assistant principals and curriculum leaders, and in Sweden development leaders, team leaders and process leaders. These are not exhaustive lists, but they are indicative of the roles that could be considered as middle leaders.

While there have been some studies that focussed on the group we have termed 'middle leaders' (e.g., Cranston, Tromans & Reugebrink, 2004; Cranston & Ehrich, 2009; Day, Harris, Hadfield, Tolley, & Beresford, 2000; Møller & Eggen, 2005), in general they seem to have received limited attention by researchers and educational leadership theorists, and yet they are critical agents in school development and student learning (Cranston, et al, 2004; Margolis, 2012; Walters, 2012). It is middle leaders who have some positional (and/or acknowledged) responsibility to bring about change in their schoolsⁱ, yet maintain close connections to the classroom as sites where student learning occurs. In one sense, middle leaders bridge the educational work of 'classrooms' and the management practices of the administrators/leaders. According to Lingard, et al. (2003) the 'principal effects on student outcomes were small and indirect' (p. 51) and it is 'teachers [who] have the greatest impact upon student learning of all 'educational variables'. The effect of [a] principal's practices on student learning are, in contrast, heavily mediated and limited' (p. 148). Furthermore, middle leaders have a major impact on teacher learning through on-going responsibilities for the practice development of colleagues (Edwards-Groves & Rönnerman, 2013). Unlike the principal, a middle leader can directly impact classroom practices and as such can be described as key 'instructional' and 'curriculum' leaders who focus on the core business

of educational institutions; i.e. learning and teaching. As such, we believe they are in a powerful position to be professional development leaders and to promote and sustain quality teaching and learning practices in schools, and their leading practices are worthy of attention and thought. Of course, it is not quite as simple as the independent practices of a principal or middle leaders or teachers, but rather it involves leading from a range of people (Crowther, 2010; 2011; Gronn, 2009; 2011).

The article specifically aims to provide rich characterisations of middle leading drawn from an in-depth comparative analysis of interview data from a range of participants and educational contexts (schools, preschools, jurisdictions, countries). The article draws on a rich body of literature as well as empirical studies conducted in Sweden and Australia. Based on interviews the data is analysed through the theoretical lens of practice architectures. The theory of practice architectures (described in more detail below) helps the analyst understand practices by allowing them to see *how* they happen, *how* they are understood by those in the practice and *how* they are enabled and constrained by particular cultural-discursive, material-economic and social-political dimensions that make them possible and that hold them in place (Kemmis, et al, 2014) as they happen in physical space-time. It provides an analytic tool to examine these three dimensions of practices (the cultural-discursive, material-economic and social-political) which distinctively exist as simultaneously functioning features of practices. The findings, where the voices from the middle leaders in particular are emphasised is contributing to a tentative definition of this important field of research.

In this article we focus on a dimension of leadership that augments these previously established models by centring on *middle leaders*, and by considering *leading as a practice*. We begin this article by first highlighting the case for middle leaders and the context of their work, before providing a brief review of literature

related to school leadership and practice theory. The empirical work that underpins this article is then outlined before the main relevant findings are presented and discussed. Finally, in the concluding section we posit an initial working definition of ‘middle leading’.

Literature Review

In this section we briefly review literature relevant to this article. In particular, we provide an overview of the leadership literature related to teacher leadership, distributed leadership and similar characterisations including hybrid leadership (Gronn, 2009; 2011) and parallel leadership (Andrews & Crowther, 2002; Crowther, 2010; 2011). Additionally, we have examined studies related to concepts like instructional leadership. We then provide a short outline of the relevant practice theory with a focus on practice architectures (Kemmis & Grootenboer, 2008; Kemmis, Wilkinson, Edwards-Groves, Hardy, Grootenboer & Bristol, 2014).

Characterising Leadership: Perspectives and Practices

Internationally, there is a significant and extensive body of literature within the field of leadership in education. This work is dominated largely by theorising the work of principals: their knowledge, values, characteristics and the tools for being an effective principal (Blossing, 2011). Recently, in response to more neo-liberal managerial perspectives centring on the relationship between leadership and organisation culture and management (Berg, Sundh & Wede, 2012), the literature has been laden with descriptors such as ‘instructional’ (Murphy, 1990; although the term ‘educational leadership’ is preferred in the Australian context), ‘transformative’ (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999), ‘distributed’ (Spillane, 2006), ‘dispersed’ (Lingard, et.al. 2003) ‘hybrid’ (Gronn, 2011) and parallel (Crowther, 2011). These concepts highlight the relationship between

the leader and co-workers. Other terms such as 'democratic leadership' (Woods, 2004; 2011), 'teacher leadership' (Muijis & Harris, 2006) and 'generative leadership' (Edwards-Groves & Rönnerman, 2013) have entered the arena in an attempt to capture a broader understanding of the leading work in schools, its development and how it is enacted in more non-managerial or non-instrumentalist ways.

The concept that leadership cannot be the sole responsibility of one 'head', or even a small leadership team is now widely accepted (e.g. Lingard, et al, 2003, Nicolaidou & Petridou, 2011), and many term this 'distributed leadership'. While it appears this has not been widely employed as a theoretical framework (see Liljenberg, 2012, for example) the concept of 'distributed leadership' has been ingrained in the theorising of leadership (Gronn, 2010; Woods, 2004). However, this notion has a hierarchical logic in that someone is 'doing' the distributing. Lingard, et. al. (2003) recognise this in their attempt to explain the democratisation of leadership practices in the use of the term 'dispersed leadership'. In their view 'dispersed leadership is central to what is referred to as school organizational capacity building, focused on ensuring the best social and educational outcomes for all students' (p. 54). Consequently, to achieve the project of education it is imperative that leadership be spread, shared and enacted across the whole school community. In this vein, dispersed leadership means that all teachers (and indeed students and other members of the school community) take a shared responsibility for providing a quality education for all students, not just those in their own classes. This has synergies with Crowther's (2010; 2011) notion of 'parallel leadership', which he defines as "a process whereby teacher leaders and their principals engage in collective action to build and sustain enhanced school capacity" (2010, p. 36), and where the leading of all is of equal value. Similarly, Gronn (2009; 2011) developed the term 'hybrid leadership' to highlight that leadership should not be

viewed in a binary way – focussed or distributed, but rather that effective school leadership is a necessary mix of both.

From this, the literature has also been endowed with an increasing body of research focusing on 'teachers as leaders' or 'teacher leaders'. In 2000, Frost et al. argued that for schools to create a rich learning environment which facilitated strong academic success, high quality 'teacher leadership' was essential. They suggested that teacher leaders reflected proactivity, expressed a genuine desire for exerting influence beyond their own classrooms and demonstrated a capacity for bringing about a positive difference for students. This notion is advanced in the recently published anthology entitled 'Teachers as leaders' (Berg et al., 2012), which illustrates the importance of teachers who as leaders are highly connected to, and uniformly part of, developing effective teaching practices. Specifically, the literature connects teacher leaders to efficacy in student learning, instructional innovation and curriculum knowledge. In general, these descriptions centre on identifying lists of characteristics or necessary attributes of teacher leaders. Research by Edwards-Groves and Rönnerman (2012), attempts to illustrate how such leading practices evolve. They demonstrate how educational practices (like long term professional development) have the potential to accomplish the development of teacher leading capacities. Their results orient towards notions of middle leading, but do not explicate these in detail. Here, we are not focussing on teacher leaders in general, but specifically and explicitly on those who have a formally acknowledged leading position in the school and a substantial teaching role in the classroom.

Characterising Leading Practices

Like principals and other formal leaders in schools, teacher leaders are acknowledged as playing a strategic and empowering role pivotal in the efficacy of

schooling, linking reform to learning and teaching and improved student outcomes (Margolis, 2012). Yet historically, and despite strong themes of teacher leadership emerging among the broader descriptions of educational leadership, research seems to have somewhat ignored the work of those in the position we have described as 'middle leaders' (Cranston, et al., 2004). Ironically, this group are recognised as critical agents for school development and attributed to making student learning visible in classrooms (Hattie, 2009). For us, middle leaders hold a unique position where they have a direct influence on the learning of students in their own classrooms and, through their close work with colleagues, they have a significant indirect influence on the learning of other students. They have close connections to both the sites where student learning occurs (e.g. classrooms) and to the sites where professional learning happens (e.g. localised study days, staff professional development meetings). By and large, this influence is not as available to the principal or other positional heads.

Whilst, it has been established that positional leaders such as principals effect school life and it is acknowledged that the effectiveness of education in schools is enhanced and enabled by teachers (Hattie, 2009), the research does not extend to the issue of being a teacher leader for colleagues who lead across a school facilitating teacher professional development. In one way, what we are proposing could be described as 'instructional leadership' but this is a field which has its history in the particular role of the principal (Murphy, 1990). In our view, the concept of middle leadership or leading is rarely the focus of in-depth investigation (Cranston, et al., 2004; Møller & Eggen, 2005) but is a vital link which connects the work of teachers across all domains and personnel in schools. From this, the leading practices of middle leaders should be viewed as critical in the complex world of school life - its development, sustainability and efficacy (Margolis, 2012). They have a pivotal position and capacity

to bring about change in their own schools and preschools and are in a powerful position to promote and sustain quality teaching and learning practices. Consequently, understanding the nature of the practices of middle leaders requires further, in-depth scientifically rigorous investigation.

In this article, we attempt to address this research void by contributing new knowledge about *leading as it is practised* by teachers who are dispersed across schools and work as both teachers and leaders. We aim to show how middle leading evolves in particular sites from the perspectives of the participants, and we seek to understand their practices, the conditions influencing their work and further enhance their leading capacities for the benefit of both local and global education contexts. The nature of the research, drawn on data from Australia and Sweden, and presented in this paper is essential for developing more explicit understandings about the differences between leading practices from a managerial or instrumentalist position and those experienced in the everyday leading practices of those who lead 'across' as they lead the learning and development of their colleagues in their own sites. Critically, we draw on the theory of practice architectures (Kemmis & Grootenboer, 2008; Kemmis, et al, 2014) as a framework for building new understandings of leading practices in educational contexts; in particular it is important for describing the social nature of the language, the activities and the relationships of 'leading in the middle'. This will be further developed in the next section.

Practice Theory and Practice Architectures

Although educational leading has been examined through socio-cultural theories previously (e.g., Daniels, & Edwards, 2012), here we call into focus a 'practice turn' (Schatzki, Knorr Cetina, & von Savigny, 2001) in the theorising of the leadership and leading which exists in schools. Practice theory has, in recent years, offered a new way

of conceptualising practice. In particular, Green (2009), Kemmis and Grootenboer (2008), Kemmis et al (2014) and Schatzki (2002, 2010) have sought to show how practices – like practices of learning, teaching and leading – are held in place by distinctive preconditions which are informed and shaped by cultural-discursive, material-economic and social-political arrangements. These arrangements enable and constrain particular kinds of language (or *sayings*), activities (or *doings*) and relationships (or *relatings*) which together constitute a practice of one kind or another. These arrangements are described as ‘practice architectures’ by Kemmis and Grootenboer (2008) and provide a theoretical way of understanding educational practice within preschools and schools, and across the broader educational landscape.

From an ontological perspective, these dimensions of practice (the sayings, doings and relatings) form the intersubjective spaces for the enactment of educational practices – how they unfold in actuality, and how they are influenced by particular conditions (the discourse of education, the materiality of place and work, and the sociality of power, agency and solidarity). Practices shape and are shaped, in interrelated ways, by these conditions and the historical traces of past educational practices that exist in a particular site (such as teaching and learning in a classroom or leading the professional development of other teachers in staff meetings). Specifically, these arrangements constitute enabling and constraining preconditions for the conduct of practices as they happen in reality. In summary, these are:

- the characteristic *cultural-discursive* arrangements of the practice. These exist in the medium of language in the dimension of semantic space and orient to the distinctiveness of language and discourses used in and about practices of particular kinds. Cultural-discursive arrangements enable and constrain the ‘sayings’ characteristic of the practice; for example, determining what it is

relevant to say, or – especially – what language or specialist discourse is appropriate for describing, interpreting, justifying and participating in the practice;

- the characteristic *material-economic* arrangements of the practice. They exist in the medium of activity and work in the dimension of physical space-time and orient to the characteristic kinds of activities or work that is done in the course of a practice. Material-economic arrangements enable and constrain the ‘doings’ characteristic or typical of the practice; for example, in the physical set-ups of staff meetings or professional development days and in the particular activity systems in an organization; and,
- the characteristic *social-political* arrangements of the practice. These exist in the medium of power and solidarity in the dimension of social space and orient to the characteristic patterns of relationships between people and between people and non-human objects that occur in practices. Social-political arrangements enable and constrain the ‘relatings’ characteristic of the practice; for example the relationship between students and teachers, between the principal and the staff, between teachers in collegial groups, or between facilitators and teachers.

(Kemmis, et al, 2014).

In practice these arrangements exist, not as separate dimensions or entities, but rather as enmeshed and interconnected – each shaping and being shaped by the other. On this view, understanding a practice such as leading requires understanding the conditions and site-based circumstances that make it possible, and that support it so it can develop, endure or be sustained in the realities of the everyday sociality of practices as they exist. Drawing upon this theoretical position, we argue that understanding leading practices entails understanding the conditions - the enablements and constraints - which make

leading possible. Importantly, understanding this from the perspective of those in the practice (such as the middle leaders described in this article) is crucial for understanding the complexity of leading as it happens and is understood in sites. Taking this one step further, understanding how particular leading practices shapes teacher practice development in schools is necessary for understanding education more broadly.

The Empirical Studies

The empirical work in this study has been conducted employing a multiple case study approach (Stake, 2006) where data is drawn from three large-scale qualitative studies conducted in Sweden and two regions in Australia (in rural New South Wales NSW and in suburban Queensland QLD) over four years. Data reported in this article were collected from a series of semi-structured interviews with these teacher participants in middle leading roles in Swedish preschools settings (in Sweden pre-school children are between 1-5 years of age) and in Australian primary schools settings (for children between 5 and 12 years of age). The participants were known to the researchers in both countries through their participation in long term action research projects facilitated by the researchers in the particular districts in which the participants worked. Teacher participants from the rural NSW school sites were experienced 'middle leaders' drawn from seven schools which ranged in size from 75 students to 530 students. Teacher participants from suburban QLD schools worked in two urban primary schools (260 and 340 students respectively) in positions of 'middle leadership'. And the five participants from the pre-schools in Sweden were all experienced preschool teachers from two local authorities acting as facilitators for their colleagues in their own or other preschools in the local authority.

More generally, these sites in Sweden and Australia were selected because the

educational leadership and management arrangements in Australia and Sweden are substantially structurally different, thus providing a robustness and richness to the data. Australian schools generally have a structured hierarchy of leadership positions (i.e. principal, deputy principal, senior teachers, etc.), whereas Swedish schools and preschools have a much flatter structure (i.e. principal and then the teachers).

The following overarching research questions guided the study:

- (1) What are the leading practices of middle leaders in a range of educational contexts?
- (2) What practices (or practice arrangements) are common and what practices differ for middle leaders across different sites (schools, preschools, jurisdictions, countries)? How do these enable and constrain the practices of leading the learning of colleagues?

Although a range of data were collected in the broader constituent studies, in this article we focus only on interview data which aimed to describe the phenomenon from the participants' points of view. Our intention was to give voice to these participants, so relevant transcript excerpts were selected as illustrations of key themes. Making the voices of middle leaders a central focus provided a way to theorise the practices and practice architectures of this distinctive group of educators. Bogdan and Biklen (1998) describe giving voice as "empowering people to be heard who might otherwise remain silent" (p. 204) or whose perspectives have not been accounted for in the theorizing of particular concepts; in this instance, the middle leading practices encountered and *practised* in schools settings. For us, accounting for participant voice makes available important experiences and perspectives for others in similar positions, bringing to light both the experiences of participants and our interpretations of that experience

(Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000). It offers a unique description of a highly visible yet under researched dimension of leading in schools and preschools through ‘interpretivist qualitative research’ (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Critical here is that the qualitative nature of this research is based on several assumptions: (a) that all meaning is created through discourse, and (b) that all discourse and thought is "mediated by power relations, which are socially and historically situated" (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000, p. 291). In total there were 22 interviews conducted with ‘middle leaders’; some general demographic detail is shown in Table 1 below:

<insert Table 1 here>

The interviews were semi-structured were audio-recorded and lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. They were conducted at each participant’s school or preschool site at a pre-arranged convenient time. In general, the interviews initially focused on a particular initiative or project that the middle leader had been leading, and this allowed them to discuss their ‘leading’ practices and experiences with a particular focus and to illustrate with relevant examples.

Interviews were recorded and transcribed. These transcriptions formed the data set for this article. After an initial, independent examination of the corpus of data conducted by each researcher, a joint analysis of interview data to elicit main themes was conducted during cross-institutional visits between the researchers (the authors). A detailed examination of emerging categories to discern relevant themes using direct interpretation of the data was conducted; this involved looking at each case and drawing meaning from it using categorical aggregation (Stake, 1995). A collection of instances

from across the corpus of data was sought with the view that issue-relevant meaning would emerge as they recurred in the data and across all the sites (Creswell, 1998). After Shank (2002), the data were coded through a process of reading and re-reading interview transcripts, and isolating key themes which emerged from the data; the quotes provide evidence in support of the themes presented in the next section.

Because there is relatively little reported in the literature regarding the practices of middle leaders - especially from the participant perspective - we were examining the data for both commonalities and contrasts across the national and institutional boundaries. Analytically, and in keeping with Yin's (2009) argument that case studies can be informed by existing theoretical propositions to guide data analysis, we draw upon the notion of practice architectures (Kemmis et al., 2014). Furthermore, the analysis was guided by a shared understanding and commitment to theory of practice architectures (Kemmis & Grootenboer, 2008; Kemmis, et al, 2014) as members of an established international research network. We report on these shared understandings below, but also acknowledge that the inherent complexities of leading from the middle meant that some of the richness of the narratives was somewhat lost in the process of distilling the analyses that are reported below. A further limitation of the study as it is reported here is that observations of the actual practices of 'middle leading' as it happens in actual sites are not presented; hence the reliance on the accounts of the participants limits the possibility of a more comprehensive description of the phenomena.

Findings and Discussion

Analysis of participant accounts have been organised using the key leading practices that emerged from the data analysis. In structuring the findings this way we are cognisant that these practices are not independent or mutually exclusive; rather, we see them as inextricably related and ecologically arranged. Nevertheless, in order to facilitate the presentation of the findings, we have outlined and discussed the findings related to each of the leading practices we identified in turn. In each case, we use the theoretical framing of practice architectures; namely the sayings, doings and relating,

to interrogate and describe the practices. Also, it is important to note that sayings, doings and relatings are not discrete: in a practice they exist as interconnected dimensions or bundled together. As noted above, in this analysis we will firstly present the findings around the practices of:

- i) managing and facilitating,
- ii) collaborating and creating communicative spaces,
- iii) negotiating the teaching-leading nexus, and
- iv) relational positioning.

We will use excerpts from interview transcripts to provide explanatory material and to exemplify the points raised. These sections will then show how these exist as *bundles* in practice. All names are pseudonyms.

Managing and Facilitating

One of the key middle leading practices that emerged from the data was managing and facilitating. This included the administrative dimension of their work including the bureaucratic demands they had to face in terms of compliance, and their facilitation of development opportunities for their staff, as leading activities had been ‘distributed to them’ (Spillane, 2006). Throughout the data across all the sites there was a managerialist discourse that imbued the way the middle leaders understood their leading practices. In particular, many discussed aspects of their work using sayings in managerial terms, and this seemed to regularly relate directly to perceived expectations from school heads and systemic requirements. Bianca (NSW primary school) commented:

Because I was interested in maths and quite good at teaching it and there was a requirement to do the Numeracy programme because we were a disadvantaged school, I was asked to facilitate the programme in the school. I had to consult with the executive on how I would implement it. I'm pretty sure that I had, like an unofficial title, I suppose in the school, under my assistant principal that I would manage that programme within the school ... When I first facilitated I was provided with feedback from the leadership around what I'd done and how I'd done it, and that sort of thing ... I got five casual release days so that I could help the executive to develop a school plan for improving maths.

This quotation is replete with managerialistic discourse and using language (sayings) that implies practice arrangements that constrain (and enable) possibilities for leading. For example, she used terms like 'requirements', 'consult with the executive', 'manage the programme', and 'a title', each have connotations of bureaucratic structuring and shaping. Thus, the middle leaders perceived particular cultural-discursive arrangements that were practice architectures that enabled and constrained the ways they could describe the way they explained, described and justified their practice. Moreover, they also noted allied material-economic arrangements that similarly defined possibility for action (doings) in the leading practices. In particular, the issue of time was prominent.

Time, or the lack thereof, is not a new aspect or topic of discussion in relation to teachers or leaders' educational practices in schools, and it also featured here as a critical dimension of the practice architectures of the middle leaders. So, when discussing factors that enhanced their leading practices, the participants commonly noted things like 'support from my principal, support from my colleagues [who are leaders as well], and time to plan and time to conduct my leadership' (Carol, QLD primary school).

Of course, middle leaders have classroom responsibilities as well as formal leadership tasks, and so the issue of time is regularly related specifically to the balance between these dual roles. Indeed, notions of 'teacher leadership' which characterised the

work of Muijis and Harris (2006) were noted by the participants as they described the tension between the competing demands of the roles; particularly they noted time demands of running both a quality teaching programme for their own class and effectively leading their peers in professional learning. For them, both consumed additional time and energy. In their accounts, many of the teacher participants reported that regardless of how generous or limited this allocation was, time both enabled and constrained what was possible in their own leading practices.

Teacher participants also identified that an integral dimension of their practice was to create physical space-time to allow their teacher peers to undertake their own developmental activities. To illustrate, at Bentwood College (QLD suburban School) the middle leaders who had leadership 'shared' with them, sought to also 'share' their leadership with their staff by reconstituting the way physical space-time was utilised in the school. For example, they did this by generating leading activities (doings) which created different configurations of time, space and resources for the teachers to practice their own leading. To this end, April (Bentwood) said; 'Our role was to get the money and help write the report. To get the money so they [the teachers] could be released to do it'.

Alongside their more formally recognised leading tasks, middle leaders were willing to do more menial things like releasing teachers by taking their classes and organising materials and catering, in order to facilitate leadership capacity development 'across' the school. These doings were possible within, and characteristic of, relatings that were developed within the socio-political arrangements of their leading practices; it was evident they facilitated opportunities for others to develop as agentic professionals. This was realised in a range of ways, many of which were somewhat intangible and tacit, but one example was evident in Bianca's comment; 'It's my responsibility to set

up teacher conversations and set up those opportunities for teachers to work together, like even if it's a matter of me releasing them, so that that can actually happen'.

While not perhaps overt, in developing the physical arrangements Bianca (NSW primary school) was also making relational spaces for teachers to dialogue about their practices, undertake developmental activities that focussed on their teaching practices, and connect with one another as they forged a shared understanding of their educational practices. Crucially, Bianca, like other middle leaders, acted as and enabled others to act as “activist professionals” (Sachs, 2003) in their own sites.

Collaborating and Creating Communicative Spaces

Drawing on the notions of practice architectures, the findings reveal the interconnectedness between the accomplishment of sayings, doings and relating as middle leaders created, for their colleagues, communicative spaces in which to develop and share practice. How these practice arrangements connect up with one another is highlighted here by April (QLD primary school), who states; ‘It is not my job to just run programmes, but to create space for others [to learn]’.

For middle leaders, like April, creating different spaces for professional communication and learning among colleagues called for changing the doings or material economic conditions under which they worked. How this was enacted in practice was illustrated by Bianca, who ‘set up teacher conversations, and provide(d) opportunities for teachers to work together and visit each other’s classrooms’. Another example described by Birgit (Swedish Preschool) illustrates the importance of ‘Pedagogical Mondays’ as a ‘set-up’ or material-economic arrangement for communicating with peers about practice. Changing the nature of the physical spaces led to the development of different types of doings or activities which came to exist in the particular schools and directly influenced the nature of the relationships encountered

in that space. Middle leaders in Sweden, for example, arranged for the teachers across different teaching teams to meet for two hours on Monday afternoons to develop focused action research projects, discuss different aspects of their work, to share professional literature and practices, to discuss assessment information and to reflect on students learning and development (Rönnerman, 2008). These new activities enabled not only changed behaviours among the staff but the development of a shared language to talk about practice as ‘more of our colleagues talk, we all had a chance of expressing ourselves. Hardly anyone is silent any longer in a staff-meeting’ (Birgit).

Similarly, Amelia who worked in a school in NSW reconfigured staff meetings to be a space for teachers to exchange experiences from their own contexts and to jointly reflect upon with peers with the view to develop classroom practice. Like other middle leaders in the study, Amelia, used restructured staff meeting arrangements to lead the practice development of her colleagues. For her, as an experienced literacy teacher, this role was ‘pseudo-official’ in one sense as she was not on the school leadership team, but it was her responsibility to support the learning of her peers as this responsibility was distributed to her (Spillane, 2006). Her comments below point to how the role of middle leaders was to negotiate the middle ground – almost it seems as a conduit between the work of colleagues and the work of leaders. In this interview extract, Amelia (NSW primary school) explains:

Working with the teachers, knowing that I’d been there, I’d been where they are and I was going along okay. I really think it is because I’ve actually been through the process a few times myself as a teacher so I can sympathise with them and they know that I am there for them, there seems to be a connection because they know I have been there myself, it’s like they really believe me and believe in me because of it. And it was the recognition... to have that support whether it be from the principal and the teachers I work with...It helped them keep going...It allowed me to take on the aspects of my own experience ... into my facilitation, you know to

lead the other teachers to become critical in their thinking and reflecting and dialogue...Using the new staff meeting format helped this to happen.

From this, and for the middle leaders in our study, changing school structures and arrangements in physical space time was a part of their work which was dependent on, and influenced by, two distinct social- political conditions: first, collegiality (as Amelia above suggests); and second, the support of the principal. For instance, April (QLD primary school) indicated her principal told her; ‘Oh, I trust you to make the right decisions’. This notion of relational trust and support was further expressed by Birgit (Swedish Preschool), who said:

A strength was that we were three teachers from two preschools and with support from the principals where we already had Pedagogical Mondays, a meeting for 2 hours a week with staff from different working teams.The principal said to us “take over the Pedagogical Mondays and use that time to facilitate groups in action research”.

It is perhaps not surprising that the middle leaders, almost without exception, mentioned the support of the school principal or positional head as a critical dimension of the relational arrangements that enabled and constrained their practices. This support was more than just nominal encouragement, but included material and structural backing; that is, the principals or heads in their own practices as leaders created hospitable conditions under which the middle leaders could act to effect change in their particular schools. Melanie (NSW primary school) highlights this in the following extract:

She [the principal] was so supportive and encouraging me all the way even giving me some extra time to prepare so I could share my learning with the staff. I found it really hard because it was a little bit confronting at first, I remember the first few sessions I just came back and I said to Marilyn [the principal], “Oh no I don’t think I can do this Marilyn.” She said, “Oh don’t be ridiculous of course you can, I know you can do it.”

The support of the principals and heads was relational and was affective and moral in nature. Underlying these accounts from middle leaders were notions of how the creation of changed spaces for communicating with colleagues enabled a foundation for professional transformation as teachers, colleagues and leaders. These spaces like those encountered in 'Pedagogical Mondays', staff meetings and class visits, were practice arrangements which both influenced and were influenced by:

- the sayings as meanings were shared and made comprehensible among the teachers in each site as they participated in these new arrangements. In one sense as the cultural-discursive dimension of the practice changed, new semantic spaces which entailed engaging in establishing and sustaining shared meanings were created;
- the activities and productiveness as new forms of work emerged. The activity or work of the group is its dialogic practices which are given importance through the language or sayings and the relating;
- the relatings as participants place value in establishing solidarity among the people involved in and affected by the new spaces. It was in the social space created in the group meetings that the members' practices beyond the group are given power (to lead, to facilitate, to teach, to collaborate).

A key observation emerging from the accounts of the middle leaders was the consistency with which they talked about their practices (sayings) and what they did (doings). For them having the professional autonomy and trust to change communicative spaces (the doings) enabled the development of a culture of collaboration (the relatings) which permeated the cultural discursive fabric of the work (the sayings). Significantly, these cannot be understood as separate dimensions of

practice but as mutually informing and transformative the practices of middle leading.

Negotiating the intricacies of middle leading: the teaching-professional self-development-leading nexus

Alongside the discourses of management and collaboration that permeated the data was a third theme related to how the role of middle leaders involved negotiating three distinctive dimensions: their teaching, their own professional self-development and their leading. On the one hand, it may seem that each of these dimensions of practice exist in parallel with each other. However, in the reality of their experiences, middle leaders describe this as underpinning the practices of middle leading, as shown in these series of extracts from across the data.

Being a middle leader puts a new dimension on being a teacher, be able to work with more overarching issues as well developing my own work in the classroom
(Maria, Swedish Preschool)

Being a middle leader and a teacher supports my own professional development
(Carolina, Swedish Preschool)

Maria and Carolina, not surprisingly, draw on a discourse of learning as an important dimension of their leading practices. For them, it is not insignificant that this applies to the understanding of themselves as teachers and as leaders. Furthermore, this related not only to cognitive conceptions of their work, but also to the affective way they discussed their middle leading practices, as Melanie and Birgit illustrates:

There was it was a big leap for me to go from teacher participant to facilitator but...
I think you've actually got to value what you're doing ... and know in the end it will help the students (Melanie NSW primary school)

I have got a broader view of my profession ... Being a middle leader is to take a step from the work with the children to work with adults, and in another way in the career as an educator. (Birgit Swedish Preschool)

These comments from middle leaders emphasize the interconnectedness between the dimensions of education practice how (in their roles as middle leaders) leading is inextricably linked to teaching and to professional learning, as also identified in earlier research from Frost et. al (2000). Each informed and was informed and transformed by the other. For our participants, there seemed to be a sense of reciprocity as middle leading created and facilitated new (and interconnected) discourses, activities and relationships for all concerned. Rachel (NSW primary school) encapsulated this further as she describes her role as a middle leader:

Developing, sustaining and transforming [my own] teaching practice into leadership comes back to voice that comes from working with your peers in groups, having that deep understanding about your own teaching, having deep and focused conversations that are not in a vacuum but based on real things and a deep belief in it..., all those experiences you get through participating in programmes over time with your colleagues. You not only gain the words to put forward your thinking about education, they follow you. Voice doesn't mean necessarily words; it's much deeper than the words; it's strength, courage, belief, conviction, no compromising with those things when you take up your position [as a leader].

Rachel acknowledges here that one dimension of middle leading practice cannot exist on its own, but that each is necessary and constitutive of the others, as she asserts, 'they cannot exist in a vacuum'. Ann (Swedish Preschool) as she reflects upon her involvement as a middle leader in her preschool setting exemplifies the importance of commitment in professional development:

I burn for development and I feel I have learned more [through my own learning in the action research course] so I thought I can be of help to get other to understand the importance of working with development, be part of it and guide them further

to arouse their interest for development practice by guiding them and convincing them that it isn't so hard, you can start small and let it grow.

Similarly Bianca (NSW school) expressed her commitment to additional professional learning was asked to do some study days to get into leadership; 'They asked me to do some extra executive leadership type stuff that was a couple of days doing a course in the district office and then I'd go off and do the project, and then I did another week of development in Sydney later'. Overall many of these activities were not always complex or sophisticated, but they were critical for the effective actioning of their leading because they facilitated and supported the practices of others at the same time they facilitated academic success in their own classrooms (Frost et. al. 2000).

Relational Positioning

In the previous sections we outlined the leading practices that emerged as prominent in the participant accounts across corpus of data. These were illustrated around the sayings, doings and relatings that constituted the practices they discussed. In this section we focus on what appeared to be the critical dimension of middle leading – *their relational positioning*. In particular, we will show the uniqueness of how the middle leaders related to their position as both a classroom teacher *and* a positional leader.

One of the defining characteristics of a middle leader is their position both 'in the classroom' and as part of the 'school leadership and management' structure. This is illustrated in Figure 1 below.

<insert Figure 1 here>

In this sense, they are not just situated between the management/leadership of the

school and the teaching staff, which is often how one thinks about their position, but they are an integral part of both. This means that they have to relate ‘upwards’ to a principal or head, and also ‘across’ to their teaching colleagues, and this relational positioning can create both opportunities and difficulties for the middle leader (Inman, 2009). In this way, their positioning forms part of the practice architectures of their leading practices, particularly in the forms and kinds of relationships they are required and able to develop in the project of educating children.

Support was clearly and substantially part of their practice architectures in that it both enabled and constrained how they were able to practise their middle leading. In this sense, it seemed that principals were limited in their capacity to actually make a difference to the educational practices of the classroom, but they could be influential in shutting things down or constraining the practice architectures. Therefore, the relationship with the principal/head and the clarity of the influence of their leading practice seemed critical:

We had the possibility to engage quite a lot. Not so much support from the principal in the beginning, but we had each other. We helped one another and discussed a lot, helped one another with the work in the pre-schools, read a lot. I enjoyed meeting my group and felt the support from the other leaders. (Birgit, Swedish Pre-school)

Birgit continued later in the interview to point out that the position of a leader in the middle is not easy to handle in relation to colleagues, and she emphasised the support and willingness of the principal for the middle leadership role in the school:

They (the teachers) felt exposed and ‘attacked’ in the beginning. When the principal is not clear that the mission comes from him/her about that teachers in preschools must be aware about quality, that’s when the questioning comes.

These quotations highlight the relational support of colleagues and the sense of

legitimacy that this provided. As was noted above the nature and quality of relationships with their teaching colleagues provided a significant aspect of the social arrangements that enabled (and restricted) their leading practices:

Experiences are much more real when teachers are working with teachers who are in the same situation; it is more effective than somebody who is withdrawn from the class, like the principal, who might be in the classroom but is not in the classroom all of the time. For me knowing your group or knowing the people that you're working with gives you more of an opportunity to sort of, I suppose differentiate the learning or differentiate the research. (Bianca, NSW primary school)

At Bentwood, the school was structured with a 'hierarchy of positions', but the power and responsibilities were shared amongst the staff through democratic processes. The middle leaders had functions and roles that were based on their positions within the school, but this did not mean that they were 'over' their teaching colleagues, or 'under' the Principal. Rather, they related as peers and colleagues and developed functions to best meet the 'projects' of the school in their site.

Discussion

Our data highlighted some of the critical practices undertaken by middle leaders in preschool and schools settings. In this we have identified - through their accounts of the practices they enact in their own situations - the practice architectures that enable and constrain their work as middle leaders. The leading practices we identified included managerial and facilitative dimensions, and these were framed by factors of time and managerial discourses. Furthermore, the middle leaders saw the creation of new communicative spaces as an important function, and largely involved re-developing practice architectures for their teaching colleagues. For them, there was a shift in the paradigms of language, work and power they 'practised' or enacted leading in their sites

as was evident in how the middle leaders accounted for leading. Furthermore, the practices of the middle leaders in our study appeared to be supported and constrained by the complex network of relationships they operate within in the nexus of their dual roles of teacher and leader.

A feature of the article is that it extends the literature describing ‘leadership’ and ‘leadership practices’ in unique ways, since the existing body of work often neglects to offer insights from those who have had leadership ‘dispersed’ or ‘distributed’ to them (notwithstanding the work of some like Cranston, et al., 2004, and Møller and Eggen, 2005). Understanding how these teachers ‘relate across’ in the ways we have described here, has strong implications for those in Education who support the work of middle leaders, such as principals. By firstly acknowledging, in the public face of the school, the vital role these middle leaders have for driving and securing sustainable change among their peers, principals have a responsibility to advocate the work of middle leaders. Another response would be to identify the *actual* practices that middle leaders enact in the day-to-day work and recognise the conditions which afford agency to respond flexibly to the local needs of colleagues in their own sites. A further response would be to reconceptualise the use of time in schools as a resource that changes the practice architectures in each site; and from our reading of their words, more time leads to more opportunity. As pointed out by our informants, providing changed communicative spaces which enable reconfigured physical space-time as they lead from the middle would not simply validate their work as they endeavour to maintain quality teaching practices in their own classrooms whilst simultaneously support the learning and development of their colleagues. But it would install valuable conditions for high quality responsive middle leading. Additionally, we argue for principals in schools to be fully cognisant of the characteristics and implications for such leading practices so

that in a spiral of change and development, they become attuned to the recognition and identification of particular teachers who emerge as future teacher leaders and middle leaders. In a proactive way this would nourish professional learning (Kemmis, et al, 2014) by feeding each school's change strategy by resourcing succession planning from within the ranks.

What was clear in the data was that the consideration and development of middle leaders' practices requires simultaneous and allied attention to the associated practices architectures. They viewed that in order to change practices in schools and support others to change they needed to change the spaces where teachers encountered one another in the change endeavour – in turn this enabled different kinds of practices to enter the sites. Clearly, the practices middle leaders described are situated in particular sites and within locally experienced practice architectures that enable and constrain possibilities for leading. With this in mind, overdue research and development work with middle leaders needs to be conceived in ways that, firstly, focuses on local sites, and secondly, attends to both the practices and the practice architectures. Finally, it was evident that middle leading practices were not isolated and independent, but ecologically enmeshed within the sites and the existing practices they encounter. As a consequence, this means that the required research, scholarship and development in this area need to consider middle leading practices in an integrated and holistic manner.

Conclusions

In this article we have drawn on data from three related studies that focused on the practices of middle leaders in pre-schools and schools in Sweden, metropolitan Queensland, and regional New South Wales. While there is a substantial body of literature and scholarship related to the leading practices of positional heads (e.g. principals) in educational institutions (Cranston, et al., 2004), there appears to be

limited understanding and research that centres on the leading practices of middle leaders, and so this article is attempt to address that perceived gap. Here, by taking into account the voices of middle leaders, we have taken a step towards developing an understanding of middle leading practices, and we have identified three defining characteristics of middle leading.

- (1) Positionally – middle leaders are structurally and relationally situated ‘between’ the school senior management and the teaching staff. They are not in a peculiar space of their own, but rather they are practicing members of both groups.
- (2) Philosophically – middle leaders practice their leading from the centre or alongside their peers. In this sense they are not the ‘heroic crusader’ leading from the front, but rather alongside and in collaboration with their colleagues.
- (3) In practice – middle leading is a practice and is understood and developed as a practice. To this end, the focus is on the sayings, doings, and relatings of leading rather than the characteristics and qualities of middle leadership.

This ‘definition’ of sorts is, of course, open to further development and refining, and we are committed to this in our program of empirical, theoretical, philosophical and developmental work, but it provides an empirical warrant for the concept of ‘middle leading’.

If those in education are serious about understandings the practices of leadership in schools, then more research into the work of middle leaders is needed; not simply because it appears to have been somewhat neglected, but because middle leaders play a pivotal role as teachers, curriculum leaders and ‘professional developers’. They critically are in a unique position where they can ‘bridge’ both the work of institutional leadership/management and the development of classroom teachers; and their voices (as highlighted in this article) attest to this.

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ⁱ In this article the term ‘schools’ has been used as an all-encompassing term which includes pre-school and primary school contexts. Generally, if we mention ‘schools’ we are referring to both contexts; however if more specificity is required, then the terms pre-school and primary school will be used.