Middle Leaders: Career pathways and professional learning needs

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ABSTRACT: Teacher leadership needs to be fostered, supported and developed and not left to chance. Contemporary scholarly literature suggests that middle leaders play a significant role in working with their teachers to encourage initiatives for school improvement. The stimulus for this article is an independent evaluation of the Middle Leadership Program (2013-2014) run by the Queensland Education Leadership Institute (QELi) in Australia under licence to the National College of School Leadership and Children's Services in England. First, we examine the recommendations from that evaluation. Second, we present a select review of international literature on studies about professional development for middle leaders. Third, we apply ten criteria for determining the quality of leadership learning programs. Finally, we offer a suggested design for leadership programs that cater for those moving towards principalships (headships) and those staying in the middle leadership tier where they have an important role to play in fostering and enhancing teacher leadership.

Introduction

Our interest for this article arises out of the role that middle leaders (those who hold leadership positions such as Heads of Departments, Heads of Curriculum, Deans of Studies and Deputy Principals) play in fostering the leadership of teaching and learning amongst teachers with whom they are engaged. There is an emerging research literature about the importance of middle leadership in leading learning, which also acknowledges the somewhat limited, although crucial

role that principals (headteachers) in large schools can play in this endeavour. In addition, the accepted view that there is a current crisis in the attraction of people from middle leadership to higher leadership roles (Harris, 2007), and the claim that middle leaders have a special role in connecting leadership with learning, have motivated researchers to reconsider the importance of middle leaders in the overall leadership space. In the light of these interests, while we argue that middle leaders are well placed to move into the promotional leadership pool with appropriate preparation, we are less sure about the commitment that education systems[1] have to provide role-relevant professional learning for professionals who see middle leadership as their career path. Middle leaders with this career aspiration, we maintain, need to pursue professional learning which will improve their capacity to enhance their own and their teachers' pedagogical leadership.

To take this argument forward we structure the article in four parts. First, we examine the findings emerging from an evaluation of the Queensland (Australia) Educational Leadership Institute (QELi) Middle Leadership Development Program (Anderson & Curtin, 2014). This program was run under licence from the then UK National College for School Leadership (now called the National College for School Leadership and Children's Services). A particularly pertinent finding from this evaluation concerns the direct connection of teacher leadership with the work of middle leaders. We discuss this finding and others in the light of results from several studies of professional development for middle leaders selected from international research literature. Second, a set of criteria describing high quality leadership learning programs is identified and summarised from an earlier literature review (Dempster, Lovett & Flückiger, 2011) undertaken for the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL). Third, we reinforce the applicability of the criteria in designing different kinds of leadership preparation programs. Fourth, implications for the design and development of two types of professional development programs for middle leaders are discussed. The first design type is focused on middle leaders' preparation for future higher positional leadership roles. The second design type is focused on the further development of the knowledge and skills necessary to enable middle leaders who prefer to stay in their position to mentor, foster, encourage and enhance teacher leadership from their particular institutional vantage points. It is this undeveloped potential which we seek to emphasise in the article because we believe middle leaders can enable teacher leadership to flourish. We commence Part 1 with a summary of the key findings from the QELi evaluation which provoked our interest.

Part 1: The QELi Middle Leadership Program Evaluation

The QELi Middle Leadership Program Evaluation was conducted by the Australian Council for Educational Research (Anderson & Curtin, 2014) with six groups of participants. One hundred and four responses were received to a post-program survey, with a return rate of 58 percent. The results from that survey, of particular interest to the focus of this article, relate to the relationship between middle leaders and the teachers with whom they worked. For instance, while most participants were interested in improving personal understandings of themselves as leaders, they were also interested in how to develop and lead teams of teachers. Indeed, the evaluation report's

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[1] By education systems we mean, for example, Ministries, Departments of Education, and denominational systems.

findings emphasised the importance of staff buy-in to projects in which middle leaders were engaged. Having the knowledge and skills to facilitate collective action by teachers was the challenge many experienced. For example, 'twenty-five percent of the respondents reported that this [staff buy-in] was a challenge to a "major extent" and a further forty percent reported this to a "moderate extent"' (p. 4). This finding was especially interesting considering that two-thirds of the middle leader respondents reported that they were not interested in career advancement. Therefore, we argue that the need to understand the development preferences of middle leaders deserves greater attention because the QELi evaluation has highlighted the value middle leaders place on fostering and sharing leadership with teachers. It is this practice that allows them to connect leadership with learning. We argue that when leadership actions are clearly focused on the moral purpose of schooling and linked to classroom settings, the satisfaction of both parties is realised as they are able to pursue improvements in their teaching practices.

Part 2: Literature review of studies of professional development for middle leaders

An examination of the literature we have reviewed for this article tells us that there are at least six matters of prominence in relation to issues that middle leaders face in their work. These are: (i) the general malaise that surrounds people being attracted to leadership roles; (ii) the apparent privilege of principals' professional learning; (iii) the visible tensions in middle leadership; (iv) the seductive cry that everyone is a leader; (v) the on-going contest over middle leadership functions; and (vi) the relevant essentials in middle leaders' learning.

The general malaise that surrounds people being attracted to leadership roles
We begin by acknowledging international concerns about the inadequacy of preparation and learning support for educational leaders (Brundrett & Crawford, 2008; Hallinger, 2003). That inadequacy is manifest in the continuing difficulty education systems have in attracting large pools of applicants for leadership positions. It is now widely accepted that there is global leadership difficulty in the recruitment and retention of school leaders. We also know that quality teaching and leadership both matter for student achievement (Day et al., 2009). It is therefore a real concern that leadership work is not seen as an attractive option for many. In the United Kingdom for example, Rhodes and Brundrett (2009) report that 70 percent of current middle leaders are not aspiring to headships and 43 percent of incumbent deputies are similarly not attracted to headships. These findings reinforce those of the QELi Middle Leaders Program which was the catalyst for this article. Furthermore, in Hong Kong, Ng and Chan (2014) suggest that the pool of middle leaders moving to headships has shrunk in the last five years. This points to the need for urgent consideration to be given to what can be done to address leadership undersupply.

The apparent privilege of principals' professional learning
Though there has been some significant commitment in recent times, for example the QELi Middle Leaders Program, middle leadership development has not enjoyed the same level of support made available to principals. A recent desktop search (Flückiger, Lovett & Dempster, 2014) revealed markedly more programs available for principals and aspiring principals, addressing a range of development needs, while far fewer examples for middle leaders were

found. Indeed what has been offered to middle leaders has more often than not had a focus on 'stepping stones to senior leadership positions rather than a concentration on the exercise of middle leadership' itself (Thorpe & Bennett-Powell, 2014, p. 52). Not only is there a moral imperative to support the preparation and development of school principals (Bush, 2009), but there is also a similar imperative to support the preparation and development of those in leadership roles other than the principalship (headship).

The visible tensions in middle leadership
The challenges of being a school leader, particularly those of the principal, have become more complex to the point that leadership density is now accepted as necessary for a school's success. Achieving density means that schools need middle-level leaders. While this may seem unproblematic, leaders in this middle tier typically encounter tensions between whole school agendas and the agendas of their subject departments or networks. Thorpe and Bennett-Powell (2014) explain this tension as visible conflict between the demands of hierarchical line management and the professional concern for collegiality. Middle leaders are often trapped, subject to the compliance and control exercised by the leadership layers above them, rendering them unable to respond to their colleagues as they might wish. Seemingly, middle-level leadership is often about being 'told what to do rather than [being] given a chance to think about it, maybe come back with positives and negatives' (Thorpe & Bennett-Powell, 2014, p. 56).

The seductive cry that everyone is a leader
That middle-level leaders take a share of the leadership work in a school is commonly accepted as an expression of distributed leadership. However, as Gurr and Drysdale (2013) write, distributed leadership may be turning teachers away from leadership work as they can find themselves placed in roles that have expectations beyond their teaching duties. It is often these duties for which they report being unprepared and insufficiently supported. In an effort to explain the merits of a 'leader plus' view of distributed leadership, Harris (2004) suggests that we need to think of distributed leadership as behaviour rather than role definition. In arguing this point, Harris highlights the necessity to make the expectations of teacher leaders transparent to them. Fitzgerald, Gunter and Eaton (2006) suggest the nett effect of the move to distribute leadership within schools has been to restructure it. Now it has become harder to see who the leaders are, as leaders below the level of the principal can include teacher leaders without a formal leadership position and those who have a formal designation. This imprecision has led to a lack of consensus regarding who is a middle leader. Taking Fitzgerald, Gunter and Eaton's (2006) view, such leaders include both those in formal and informal roles.

The on-going contest over middle leadership functions
There is little doubt that there are competing views about the functions of middle leaders. We found many studies reinforcing this finding (Hallinger & Lu, 2014; Marshall, 2012; Ng & Chan, 2014). Interview data from Hong Kong primary schools (Ng & Chan, 2014) have shown that principals and middle-level leaders have differing ideas about the functions required of middle leaders. A further finding from the United Kingdom work of Thorpe and Bennett-Powell (2014) is that despite middle leaders' high levels of confidence in matters to do with the improvement of teaching and learning and raising standards, they are still seeking more professional learning in

this area. In the face of this desire, Marshall (2012) from New Zealand shows that those hierarchically above middle leaders hold them primarily responsible for staff management without ready acknowledgement of the middle leaders' role in fostering collegiality.

The relevant essentials in middle leaders' learning

There is considerable variety in the range of possible learning areas for middle leaders' professional learning drawn from empirical studies. Ng and Chan (2014) suggest there is a strong demand for training in interpersonal skills, crisis management, resource management and an understanding of current curriculum requirements. Middle leaders, they argue, also benefit from learning about strategic directions and making connections with the world beyond the school.

Thorpe and Bennett-Powell (2014) indicate the need for breadth in learning options for middle-level leaders because some may be faced with a portfolio which includes subjects outside their specialisations and therefore will require content based guidance and support in order to retain their credibility and assist their colleagues. Other areas mentioned by Thorpe and Bennett-Powell include more formal induction for heads of department in managing people and leading teams, time management and prioritising demands in the role, how to be accountable for a disparate team and dealing with failing and new staff members.

Finally, the QELi Middle Leaders Program evaluation has pointed to the importance of skills that enable middle leaders to gain 'buy-in' by their teachers for innovative projects or improvement initiatives (Anderson & Curtin, 2014). The kind of skills required enable middle leaders to show respect for collegiality and foster collaboration as they create professional learning communities. We assert that knowledge and strategies related to coaching and mentoring are fundamental to this outcome.

Summary

Our search of studies pertaining to the middle-tier leaders' preparation and support has uncovered six matters which merge to influence the purpose of middle leadership and the professional learning which incumbents should experience. These are: the trouble in contemporary times in attracting teachers into leadership roles; the preference given to principals' professional learning over that of middle leaders; clear tensions in different understandings of middle leadership; distinguishing who is a leader when the notion that 'everyone is a leader' is prevalent; conflict over middle leadership functions within the school; and differing opinions regarding the essential components of middle leadership learning.

We seek to understand what it means to be a leader of learning at the middle level (Gurr & Drysdale, 2013) and what it takes to get there. If it is accepted that the 'responsibility for learning and learners has shifted from the apex of educational organisations to the middle tier' (Fitzgerald, Gunter & Eaton, 2006, p. 29), then middle leaders are, in effect, critical leaders of learning and they should be prepared as such. As stated at the outset, we refer to middle leaders as those who hold leadership positions such as Heads of Departments, Heads of Curriculum, Deans of Studies and Deputy Principals.

Part 3: Features of professional development programs for middle leaders

In the absence of convincing research evidence about which professional development strategies are most effective, Dempster, Lovett and Flückiger (2011) reviewed the international research literature on leadership learning and distilled 10 criteria for determining the quality of leadership learning programs. In another publication, Flückiger, Lovett and Dempster (2014) describe these criteria offering the following explanations:

Criterion 1: Philosophically and theoretically attuned
The literature (Dempster, 2001; Hopkins, 2008) suggests that programs for aspiring or emerging leaders need to be philosophically and theoretically attuned to both system and individual needs in leadership learning.

Criterion 2: Goal-oriented
There are frequent claims in the literature that professional learning programs need to be goal-oriented with primacy given to the dual aims of school improvement and improvement in student learning and achievement (Bishop, 2011; Day et al., 2010; Hallinger, 2011; Robinson, Hohepa & Lloyd, 2009).

Criterion 3: Informed by the weight of research evidence
There is consensus in the literature (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Waters, Marzano & McNulty, 2003) that professional learning programs should be informed by the weight of research evidence on substantive school and pedagogical matters. The thinking is that when school leaders find research informed knowledge credible they are more likely to transfer it to their own practice (Huber, 2011).

Criterion 4: Time-rich
Huber (2011) suggests that professional learning programs for aspiring leaders need to be paced, providing ample time for learning sequences to be spaced and interspersed with collegial support, in-school applications and reflective encounters.

Criterion 5: Practice-centred
There is a strong focus on the importance of leaders taking knowledge gained in professional learning programs back into their schools in ways that maximise the effects of leadership capability on practice (Bush, 2009; OECD, 2008).

Criterion 6: Purpose-designed
The literature is clear that professional learning programs need to be purpose-designed for the participants and their specific career stages (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; McKinsey & Company, 2010; OECD, 2008).

Criterion 7: Peer-supported
Leaders need to reach out and support colleagues in leadership roles, as feedback from within or beyond the school is seen as helping to transfer theory and knowledge into improved practice (MacBeath, 2006; Robertson, 2008; Swaffield, 2004). This kind of support is not seen as

providing answers but rather as using a repertoire of tools to help those being mentored to reach new understandings.

Criterion 8: Context-sensitive
Incorporating real-life school-based problem-solving activities from the context of individual participants' schools is a good way for professional learning programs to make relevant use of school leaders' knowledge of their circumstances (Hallinger, 2011; Huber, 2011). It is also seen as a way of ensuring that knowledge and theory connect with practice and action (Huber, 2011).

Criterion 9: Partnership-powered
Professional learning programs are enriched by the support and engagement of external agencies (Brundrett & Crawford, 2008). When professional learning providers form partnerships with associations, universities and the broader professional world in the development and delivery of programs, participants are seen to gain from the partnership's collective knowledge and experience.

Criterion 10: Effects-oriented
The providers of professional learning need to commit to the evaluation of the effects of their programs on leaders and the associated school practices to which the learning applies. Bush (2009) maintains that both immediate and long-term measures are needed to determine the lasting effects of programs.

We argue that these 10 criteria which define important matters for consideration in the design of professional learning programs for leaders are just as germane in middle leaders' professional development as they are for other roles in education. We move now to apply the criteria to the design of professional learning programs for middle leaders so that different purposes are met.

Part 4: The design of middle leaders' professional development programs

To sequence the discussion, we separate leadership program design into two types. The first is focused on middle leaders' preparation for future higher positional leadership roles. The second is focused on the further development of the knowledge and skills necessary to enable middle leaders to mentor, foster, encourage and enhance teacher leadership from their particular institutional vantage points. It is this undeveloped potential which we seek to emphasise in the article because we know the majority will not seek promotion and we believe it is often middle leaders who are best placed to enable teacher leadership to flourish.

Learning for middle leaders moving to principalship (headship)
In this section of the article, we recommend content and process features for the professional learning of middle leaders who are aspirants for promotional positions. In doing so, we refer to the 10 criteria outlined above but first we draw on the work of Clarke and Wildy (2011) and Lovett, Dempster and Flückiger (2015) who have described leadership content knowledge using five focal points.

1. *Pedagogy*: First, professional learning programs for those aspiring to principalship (headship) need to have a strong focus on teaching and learning, especially of the

pedagogical knowledge needed to inform practices that improve student achievement. This includes information on learning and development across the lifespan; effective strategies for teacher professional development; how to plan, coordinate, implement, monitor and evaluate teaching and learning; and how to conduct evidence-informed professional conversations about teaching and learning.

2. *People***:** Next, programs should have a strong relational focus and develop skills in fostering interpersonal working relationships, establishing learning communities, and engaging others in leadership.

3. *Place***:** Another feature of professional learning for aspirants is the need to promote an understanding of policy environments nationally, internationally and locally, their influence on educational issues and their real and possible impact on school practice in the light of students' family and community backgrounds.

4. *System***:** In addition, programs need to enable leaders to develop an informed understanding of the education system in which they work in relation to legislation, regulation, policies, procedures, curriculum, assessment and other accountability requirements.

5. *Self***:** Finally, professional learning programs for middle leaders aspiring to be principals need to assist them to develop self-understanding so that as leaders, they are clear about their own moral position, ethics and values; recognise their strengths and weaknesses; and are able to identify what and how to further their personal development.

Whilst all five content focal points are necessary for those considering advancement to principalship (headship), we know that the knowledge needs of individuals will always vary and require different emphases at different career points. The five focal points are now matched to the design criteria described earlier to ensure that effective professional learning processes are employed in dealing with this essential positional leadership knowledge.

We suggest a program that is *time-rich* requiring aspirant positional leaders to commit to a dedicated period of no less than a year in order to allow for the necessary reflection on action as they take particular learning needs into the workplace in preparation for a *new career stage*. Identifying those leadership learning needs makes explicit the *theoretical assumptions* about individuals taking personal responsibility for their professional learning at the same time as they accept their obligations to undertake learning mandated by and offered by the system. Spending time on this underpinning philosophical stance is essential in program design as it provides the basis for the development of *personal learning goals*. This can be done with the aid of the five focal points expressed as questions for self-assessment. For example:

> *What do I need to learn in order to ensure that I create and lead effective opportunities for professional development with my future staff members?* (Pedagogy)

> *What do I need to learn to enable me to create good leadership team working relationships and helpful and supportive communities of practice?* (People)

> *What do I need to learn about my local community, its families and students and the policy environment in which I will work?* (Place)

> *What do I need to learn to ensure that I have the necessary grasp of legislation and regulation for which I am accountable at my school?* (System)
>
> *What do I need to learn about my personal and professional values and their implication in ethical leadership decisions?* (Self)

Alternatively, self-assessment can be undertaken with a number of instruments already available, such as the PROFLEC Inventory (Huber & Hiltmann, 2011), or the Comprehensive Assessment of Leadership for Learning (CALL) instrument (Halverson & Dikkers, 2010) or the Australian Professional Standards for Principals (AITSL, 2011). Other assessment tools such as the Leadership Effectiveness and Aptitude Profile 360 (LEAP) (Coach, 2013) used by QELi in its Middle Leadership Program can provide access to judgements by others. Whatever the tool used, we argue that *self* has to be the subject of special attention at the commencement of any leadership learning program and thereafter through the reflective processes employed as aspirants take their learning into deliberate *partnerships* with others in the school context.

When system administrators design programs for future positional leaders, they should ensure that the knowledge presented on each focal point is informed by compelling research evidence which is translated into *practical leadership projects or tasks* that match the learning needs and goals participants have identified. In addition, projects must enable aspirants to enrich their context knowledge – about their teachers, the students and the circumstances they bring with them to the school. All combine to influence project leadership, and as a consequence, these *context-specific* matters must also be the subject of reflection and discussion. Linking *mentors* to support aspirants across the year as they test themselves through their projects will add value to that personal reflection. The most likely mentor for middle leaders seeking the next career stage is the school's principal but a peer may also play this 'critical friendship' role.

Particularly important in leadership learning is a continuous concern for the *impact and effect* of the project or tasks being led by the aspirant. Gathering evidence on effects and analysing and discussing their significance for improvement purposes must be seen as integral to program design. Such discussions should be arranged between aspirants and the teachers engaged with them on their projects as well as with mentors or critical friends.

Learning for middle leaders staying in their position

A set of design features to address middle leaders' work as the coaches and mentors of other teacher leaders is a priority for this kind of leadership learning. Since middle leaders are closer than principals to the action of classrooms, they are well placed to help others understand and deepen their practice; but first, they need to know how to work with their colleagues in respectful and empowering ways. This involves learning about how to be a mentor or coach and modelling that to others. To put this into effect such a leadership learning program would have the following features.

Pedagogy

Middle leaders need to be *philosophically and theoretically attuned* to the research findings that underpin pedagogy. Knowledge gained from reading research takes them beyond self to understand how others have dealt with the issues and challenges of practice which inform the options they have for working with colleagues. The *weight of research evidence* provides the

impetus to ask questions about learners in their own context which then begins a process of inquiry and goal setting.

Once questions about practice have been formed, middle leaders need to know how to progress inquiries about practice in ways which are *peer-supported* through learning *centred in practice* so that those being mentored extend their repertoire of skills and reach new understandings. For middle leaders this will involve learning how to make the most of classroom observations and demonstrations to work alongside teachers rather than merely giving them answers.

Middle leaders will find themselves working with colleagues as individuals and in teams. Learning about strategies for working alongside colleagues will include knowing how to balance interventions with practice time and reflective opportunities for evaluating progress and planning next steps. Knowledge of adult learning principles will ensure learning is *purpose-designed* and relevant for individual teachers regardless of their career stage and experience.

To assist middle leaders staying in their position to think about <u>their knowledge of pedagogy</u>, questions such as the following arise:

> Do I understand learning sequences and progression in order to help teachers plan activities?

> Am I able to help teachers design and use smart tools to evaluate learning?

> Am I aware of banks of teaching strategies from which teachers may draw, irrespective of the learning area?

> Am I aware of what the research tells us about strategies which hold potential for the greatest learning effects?

<u>People</u>

Relationship building is a key area of importance for middle leaders. In establishing a learning community, middle leaders need to understand the attributes of effective professional learning groups and the conditions which ensure learning is safe and conducive for participants. Middle leaders need to be able to articulate why learning in groups is beneficial drawing upon *research evidence to inform* the application of collaborative practices. Middle leaders will benefit from knowing how to review the operation of professional learning groups with their members so that all take responsibility for the way the group works. This is about creating a culture of inquiry where questions are encouraged and everyone is viewed as a leader and a learner at different times. New understandings of what it means to be a leader and engage in leadership work will be important as the middle leader creates the space for others to lead. The middle leader needs to scaffold leadership learning by offering *peer support* and *practice* opportunities so others may experience leadership activity, albeit in defined projects. Distributed leadership should be seen as offering a taste of leadership work while building capabilities in team members.

To assist middle leaders staying in their position to think about their <u>knowledge of people</u>, questions such as the following arise:

> What opportunities am I providing for my team members to see themselves as leaders?

> How are we describing and practising leadership?

> Can I name leadership contributions from all of my team members?

Place

Having knowledge of *research evidence* pertaining to other settings is a first step towards being able to understand the leadership challenges within one's own context. Middle leaders need to know how to use research findings to inform future decision making about students and their learning. Contextual literacy (i.e. an understanding of the backgrounds and capabilities of students and teachers) is necessary in order to justify improvements to practice at a particular time as well as determining the pace and direction to follow. Contextual literacy is gained from *purpose-designed* data collection for particular students. This will involve knowledge of formal and informal data collection methods to reveal what students know and can do. Formal data collection may include viewing summative and formative assessments as well as students' work samples. Middle leaders will need to know how to talk about such evidence with teachers – for example, how to use disciplined dialogue (MacBeath & Dempster, 2009) to uncover what the data are saying, what it means and any further actions which may be required. Informal data collection may include walkthroughs and classroom observations of teacher and student practice. Likewise, if such data gathering is to be *peer-supported* and *effects-oriented* middle leaders will need to frame their learning conversations in ways that help their teachers to make sense of what is happening for their learners and for them to plan where to go next. A prior consideration for such data gathering is how to gain the trust of colleagues so that data are linked to professional learning as a priority rather than compliance or accountability agendas. This would involve learning how to identify and co-construct protocols for entering classrooms so that participants know the purpose for visits and have an opportunity to enter into supportive conversations about the evidence gathered and its interpretation afterwards.

To assist middle leaders staying in their position to think about their knowledge of place, questions such as the following arise:

> How will I know that I have understood the context of learners and learning in my school?

> How effective are my learning conversations in empowering teachers to ask questions about their own practice?

> Am I seeing other teachers using disciplined dialogue in discussions with colleagues?

System

Middle leaders need knowledge and understanding of curriculum and relevant policy documents. Such knowledge will help them to ensure system requirements are being met in classrooms. Knowledge of compliance requirements is essential for planning how to record and disseminate information about students' learning and achievement. Middle leaders need to know how to communicate student learning to multiple audiences, including parents. They must also guide teachers to develop and use formats which are *purpose-designed* and *partnership-powered.* Often middle leaders will need to act as a bridge between system requirements, student needs and classroom teaching realities. Their knowledge of, and access to pertinent resources may help teachers to improve the short and long-term *effects* of their work.

To assist middle leaders staying in their position to think about their knowledge of the system, questions such as the following arise:

> Do I know what and when the system requires reports?
>
> What strategies do I employ for supporting teachers to produce necessary data?
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> To what extent am I collating achievement data so parents understand?

<u>Self</u>

Middle leaders need to be able, as indeed do all leaders, to articulate a strong commitment to the moral purpose of making a positive difference to students and their learning. They need to model this focus on learning in all of their leadership work on a continuing basis. Middle leaders need to acquire personal strategies to enable them to build rapport with colleagues, to deal with resistance, uncertainty and varying levels of expertise in colleagues. Awareness of one's own mentoring strengths and areas for further refinement will require ongoing reflection on the language of effective questioning and listening skills.

To assist middle leaders staying in their position to think about their <u>knowledge of self,</u> questions such as the following arise:

> How well do I and my colleagues articulate and implement the shared moral purpose to improve student learning?
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> Are my practices in working with others based on consistent professional values?
>
> To what extent do my strategies and language when mentoring align with best practice?

To sum up this section of the article, we have suggested that there is a pressing need to revisit the design and implementation of leadership development programs so that they cater differentially for those who continue to work at the middle-tier and those who wish to advance to higher levels. We have spelled out a number of features in program design for aspirants wanting to go further and those wishing to stay in their position, and in doing so, we have argued that because of the numbers in the latter group, it is not enough to expand their personal capacity alone. Attention must be paid to how middle leaders can learn to mentor and coach their colleagues so that they see themselves as teacher leaders in their own right working together to improve student learning and achievement.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we return to the finding from the QELi Middle Leaders Program Evaluation (Anderson & Curtin, 2014) that two-thirds of middle leaders see themselves as leaders of teaching and learning rather than as promotional applicants for principalships. As a consequence, we have argued that professional development programs which incorporate pedagogical leadership skills and provide opportunities to develop these *in situ* with scaffolded support are most needed for the greatest number of middle leaders.

We have gone further and proposed that leadership learning programs should provide opportunities for middle leaders to improve their capacity to enhance their own and their teachers' pedagogical leadership. These skills include engaging teachers in collaborative practice and focused talk about ways to innovate and improve; observing and modelling practice; providing

timely feedback; encouraging deep reflection and critique of practice; coaching and mentoring to ensure professional learning is translated into meaningful practice; and understanding system compliance requirements for assessment and reporting. We believe that education systems have an obligation to provide role-relevant professional learning for leaders who see middle leadership as their career path. For those middle leaders who aspire to principalship (headship), there is no doubt that skill in pedagogical leadership will further enhance their overall leadership capacity.

Despite the springboard for our argument arising from a study of only one program in Australia, we are confident that there is a widespread need for leadership learning programs internationally, to include a focus on the enhancement of middle leaders' roles as leaders of learning. We further assert that middle leadership for most should be seen as a rewarding career choice because its primary aim is clearly focused on fostering talented teacher leadership teams working cooperatively on an agenda committed to the moral purpose of schooling, namely, improvement in learning and achievement for all. While programs designed specifically for middle leaders who prefer their current roles may seem to act as a disincentive for further promotion, there is sufficient international evidence to suggest a majority will always choose to lead 'from within' rather than 'from the top'. If this claim is accepted, then the implication for employers is clear – different types of leadership learning programs are a necessity. Finally, because our work has used but one program for middle leaders as its stating point, we suggest that further research into middle leadership program development and implementation is needed.

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