Title: Understanding middle leadership: practices and policies.

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There is a long and rich history of research, scholarship and publication on educational leadership, albeit that most of this has centred on the important work of principals and school senior managers/administrators. More recently there has been growing interest in *middle leadership*. We have been researching and publishing about educational middle leadership for about 10 years now, and this led us to propose this special issue of *School Leadership and Management*. To initiate the development of this special issue, we, the guest editors, put out a call for expressions of interest (EOI), and 25 were received from across 12 different countries, and this is indicative of the broad interest in this topic. From these EOIs, about half were invited to prepare full papers that were then subjected to all the usual reviewing and revision procedures. The result is this special issue, which brings together a collection of articles from international researchers that consider what drives change in education – specifically the important work and practices of middle leaders. Importantly, it continues the developing dialogue about, and theorization of, middle leadership in ways that understand it as complementary to, but not the same as, principal leadership or senior school management.

As noted above, there has been a growing interest in the work and practices of educational middle leaders, and the first article in this issue by Harris, Jones, Ismail and Nguyen provides a summary of some of the work in this field up until 2017. This article lays down the foundation for the work represented in the remainder the of special issue offering some reflections on the development of the empirical base on middle leadership in schools since 2003. It concludes strongly with calls for the knowledge base on middle leading to be strengthened with more sophisticated empirical studies and greater theoretical analysis. Subsequent to the period reported in Harris et al. (this issue) and since 2018, the nature, role and influence of middle leadership for professional learning in schools has gained momentum across the globe. In times of significant pressure on education performance and development across the globe, this focus signals the critical importance of, and growing interest in, researching middle leading as a central attribute in school based education development. This movement is reflected in publications including: the monograph by Grootenboer (2018) on *middle leading practices*; a professional book for supporting the *development of middle leaders* in Sweden by Rönnerman, Grootenboer and Edwards-Groves (2018); the recognition that *leading from the middle* supports the kind of collaborative professionalism necessary for systemic change and development by Hargreaves, Shirley, Wangia, Bacon and D'Angelo (2018); and, reconceptualising middle leading as *pedagogical leadership* by Grice (2018).

What can be gleaned these publications and from the collection of articles in this issue, is that educationalists and researchers from across the globe have invested much in isolating the specific 'drivers' that support (and inhibit) school change and development. Moreover, current neo-liberal foci on performative conceptions of accountability, reductive understandings of 'effect sizes' and decontextualized 'what works' approaches have been promoted as solutions to intractable educational problems. However, such foci often 'hover above' what really

happens in everyday school contexts, and have generally proved to be little more than destabilising distractions that divert attention from necessarily *situated* understandings of practice as the real drivers of education development. As conceptualised by Edwards-Groves and Grootenboer (2019), site-based education development in schools requires three core, high-leverage, impactful but interrelated practices: (1) middle leading; (2) collegial collaboration; and, (3) evidence-informed. The articles in this special issue draw particular attention to the importance of the leading practices enacted by middle leaders, a particular group of educators who work to generate education development from 'the middle' in their specific educational sites.

Empirically, the articles direct timely attention to the leading practices of those described as *middle leaders*, and how their practices produce particular conditions for change, specifically in relation to leading the professional learning of their colleagues. Coupled with this is the intense concern with improving conditions for student learning, after all this is the central and all-encompassing goal of education. Gurr's article in this issue, for example, highlights the international significance of middle leadership and critical role of the middle leader for improving teaching and learning in six studies on middle leaders from Australia, Chile and Singapore. His article demonstrates enabling and constraining conditions that impact the work of the middle leader and signals that although middle leaders were seen to be key personnel in the change and development initiatives, all too often they had limited impact, did not receive sufficient support from senior leaders, and worked in school structures that hindered their work. The taken-for-grantedness of middle leading for educational change is considered by the article by Forde and colleagues. Their critical policy analysis of Scottish and Irish policy on middle leadership revealed that while there is a development of policy ideas from delegated tasks to management functions to leadership for learning, there is little on the practice of leading learning. What these articles show is that middle leading is a contested, yet under researched, under supported practice, and as such, they provide a foundation of sorts for future research and practice development.

Some articles in this issue interrogate distinctive 'drivers' of education development in educational settings like schools, and draw on a range of theories to examine the nuanced, localized enactment of the practices of middle leaders. Taken together, the claims about middle leadership are related to its (1) situatedness; (2) relational nature; (3) significance to educational change; and, (4) multifaceted nature.

First, while the discussion of middle leadership here is general in nature, in practice, middle leading is situated and local – it happens in schools, in and around classrooms, which are the sites of education. Thus conditions for site based education development and the middle leadership that steers it is culturally nuanced, thus a one-sized-fits-all is never enough. As the articles in the issue show, we simply cannot treat education in Scotland, Ireland, Chile, Australia, England, Sweden, the US or Singapore systems and so on as the same. The situatedness and locally responsiveness of middle leading is of critical importance since the fundamental goal undergirding any educational activity – be it leading, researching, teaching, learning, evaluating or developing – is to educate students. Furthermore, to accomplish this involves responsivity to

students' different needs and circumstances, to the locally produced evidence and to the particularity of local situations and conditions that are brought to bear on the work of all involved. For the middle leader, how this happens in practice *here* is the essential matter. Therefore, part of their role is leveraging exemplary practices already present in sites to strengthen, in positive ways, conditions for teacher and student learning, for building capacity and knowledge. In this vein, Edwards-Groves, Grootenboer, Hardy and Rönnerman, in this issue draw attention to how developing and sustaining change in schools is contingent on middle leaders' insider knowledge, shared responsibility and capacity to sustain and 'drive' teachers' learning. They argue that for sustainable educational reform, more situated understandings of middle leading practices is essential.

Second, middle leaders are relationally positioned in unique ways in schools, and are often working as a "bridge and broker" between senior management and the teaching staff. This positionality affords, but often demands, a *both-and* interdependently and ecologically connected ways of working. But not only this, middle leading work is a social practice. Thus, leading instructional growth among teachers and students in schools necessitates building change-ready conditions open for a learning culture to be nourished and settled. So, for the middle leader, this means interpersonal relationships with colleagues - teachers, principals and other senior management staff - formed through their social interactions are critical for generating and sustaining the conditions for change. This relationality facilitates the kind of trust necessary for initiating, animating, customising and solidifying site based education development (Edwards-Groves, Grootenboer & Rönnerman, 2016).

Third, as has been noted, middle leaders are the key school-based leaders to drive educational change. Research, as presented in this special issue, shows that middle leading practices are high leverage practices pivotal for facilitating and managing school-based development initiatives. Their place in this change endeavor is cricital for establishing collegial and collaborative practices, and for understanding and drawing on site based evidence to inform the reform and sustain development at the school level.

Finally, middle leadership is multifaceted; thus cannot be considered to be a neatly defined or bounded practice. It is not a discrete or prescribed way of working bundled up into packages of professional development to be served up to teachers as more normative "best practices" because it is necessitates being responsive to the distinctive needs of systems, school-based leadership and policies, practitioners and ultimately students. To accomplish productive shift in genuinely responsive ways that account for variances among cultures, communities and individuals requires drawing strategically on a repertoire of middle leading practices that may include facilitating, mentoring, coaching, modelling, advising, workshopping, researching, managing, consulting, negotiating, collaborating and teaching. Developing or enacting these practices are often a pivot point from which to view the work of middle leaders. In this issue, Willis and colleaugues explore the often unacknowledged mentoring work of middle leaders. Drawing on concepts of recontextualisation, and horizontal and vertical discourses of knowledge to understand how middle leaders described as mentor teachers negotiated and

enacted the 'messy work' in schools in diverse schooling contexts. They show how local leadership influences, responds to and shapes the work of beginning teachers.

Middle leading as a professional career move is an empirical question. Who is, who would want to be and who remains a middle leader is considered in the article by Hirsh and Bergmo-Prvulovic. This article identifies different reasons for seeking middle-leading positions and categorises particular driving forces for maintaining middle leadership positions as either internal reward/non-observable outcomes or external reward/observable outcomes. Farchi and Tubin take on this issue in their article seeking to understand the nuanced work of subject leaders who, as middle leaders, are responsible for contributing to school effectiveness. They delineate more or less successful schools by identifying differences in practices associated with the specific rules, resources, and structural positioning that occur in different sites.

What emerges, as also shown in the Gurr and Forde et al. studies presented in this issue, is that professional development, resources and learning support for middle leaders is limited. Moreover, amidst the recognition of the integral place of middle leadership in contemporary education, the need emerges for the provision of systemic support for the professional development of these educators themselves. As a counter to the problems associated with education development and change, professional development for middle leaders will lubricate the cogs that form a necessary condition for driving sustainable longer term school development and effectiveness. This notion sparks rise to a realm of education development that requires a dedicated focus for future investigations.

Ultimately, together the articles argue that what is missing is a sufficiently focused investigation of the "real" drivers of day-to-day educational change in schools. Findings presented in the articles in this special issue have implications for teachers, school principals, systemic educational leaders and administrators if education - and its associated complex of practices - are to secure educational development that is responsive to the needs of school students and communities. Therefore, articles mark out middle leadership as an important educational phenomenon worthy of significant future investment for accomplishing site based education development. The focus upon the work of middle leadership therefore offers education, through the enterprise of schooling, a future for real (and realistic) change in relation to the future of policy, practice and research.

References

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