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Educational Middle Leading: A Critical Practice in School Development

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ABSTRACT: Educational leadership makes a difference in schools for the learning of students, and as part of this range of leading practices, we have focused specifically on the practices of middle leaders. We have defined middle leaders as those who have an acknowledged position of leadership in a school, but also teach in the classroom. The leading practices of these middle leaders have been the focus of our research and scholarship for over 10 years, and while there seems to be current increase in interest in this topic, it generally remains under-researched and under-theorised. For our part, we have focused on middle leaders leading professional learning and curriculum development, specifically as they happen and unfold in particular school sites amidst local conditions and arrangements (practice architectures). Thus, we reject the idealised notion of some form of middle leadership best practice, but rather see middle leading as dialogic, communicative and responsive – replete with concerns about trust and change. Therefore, a main thrust of our work is that middle leading can be seen as a key driver of educational change in schools and other learning institutions.

Introduction

It is well established within Australia, and across the world, that leadership makes a difference in education. However, much educational leadership scholarship focuses on school principals and positional heads; and while this is necessary and important, it alone is not enough. As models such as distributed leadership (e.g. Spillane, 2006) have recognised, educational leading needs to be practised across school sites, and at different levels. These insights have directed our research, scholarship and development work over the last 10 years – specifically, the examination of *middle leading practice*.

How can we understand educational leadership without understanding its fundamental purpose and the constituent practices that influence its development and action in sustainable ways? This question arises from our own primary interest in student learning, and the conditions that enable and constrain its development, from our time as trained teachers and former middle leaders in schools as precursors to our academic partnership. With student learning and the improvement of it as a firm pretext, our research collaboration together with Karin Rönnerman (Gothenburg, Sweden) has expanded understandings of the role middle leading plays in site-based education development – for teachers, but primarily for students.

A central interest in the site occasions a focus on the particularity, the praxis and the ‘happeningness’ of practices to consider middle leading as creating conditions of possibility for the development of teachers and students in schools (Grootenboer, Edwards-Groves & Rönnerman, 2020). We come to middle leading as a focus, since as we have argued, their leading is practised in and around classrooms – the actual key site in schools where education practices happen (Grootenboer, Edwards-Groves & Rönnerman, 2015). Consequently, middle leaders, being fundamentally different to principal leaders, are well-positioned to understand and respond to particular conditions and arrangements in that site, and, so more readily influence teaching and impact learning.

An enduring feature of our work has been to document nuanced insights into the practices of middle leaders, foregrounding the complexity of educational change doubly pressured and challenged by contemporary managerialist perspectives that dominate teacher performance, student achievement, and curriculum alignment and development. Largely through ethnographic studies we have explored middle leading as social, material and cultural practices; rather than a set of personal characteristics or dispositions, or a series of precepts to be followed with rigid and impermeable boundaries. These social, material and cultural practices unfold as a complex, dynamic interaction between the individual and the collective, context and systemic pretexts, practices and practice architectures.

This article reflects on our body of work and illustrates the important contribution made towards understanding the complex, dynamic and multiple ways in which leading as a practice (Wilkinson & Kemmis, 2015) weaves through professional learning, teaching, student learning, middle leading, and researching. Next, we outline, in brief, the key features emerging from our empirical work.

Practices and practice architectures of middle leading

Our theoretical perspective has capitalised on the theory of practice architectures (Kemmis & Grootenboer, 2008; Kemmis et al., 2014) that gives us purchase on cultural-discursive, material-economic and social-political arrangements that enable and constrain practices in schools as sites of educational practice. In employing a site-ontological practice-based approach we centralise middle leading practice in these terms: as educational, as socially constituted (among people), dialogically formed (through communication), locally situated (in particular places) and as accomplished in real-time in response to real needs and circumstances. Hence, we typically talk about middle *leading*, rather than its nominalised form – leadership; a distinction highlighting the activity of ‘doing’ leadership.

For us, leading the development of improved education practices means paying close attention to what is happening in actual sites where education happens (like in staff meetings room or classrooms). Practices always happen somewhere; and so, what happens, and has happened, in the site is central to understanding and changing practices. As noted above, taking a site-ontological approach and considering educational leading as a practice has been shaped specifically by the ‘theory of practice architectures’ (Kemmis et al., 2014; for an account of the practice architectures of middle leading, see Grootenboer, 2018). Suffice to say here, this approach has foregrounded the actual doing (practising) of educational middle leading as it unfolds in time-space, as it is enabled and constrained by site-based *practice architectures*.

In simple terms, this means we understand leading practices as comprised of characteristic *sayings* (i.e. ways of talking and thinking), *doings* (i.e. activities and actions), and *relatings* (i.e. ways of relating to others and the world), and these are enabled and constrained by *cultural-discursive* arrangements, *material-economic* conditions, and *social-political* orders. What is clear from this perspective is that middle leading needs to be considered and understood locally – where it is practiced within local practice architectures and in response to local needs and demands. In our view, therefore, there is no uniform educational leading *best practice* – since what is best suited for those in one site can only be considered in relation to the circumstances and conditions there, at that time.

From this perspective, and based on our empirical evidence, we came to the following position:

The practice of middle leading involves engaging in (simultaneous) leading and teaching by managing and facilitating educational development through collaborating and communicating to create communicative spaces for sustainable future action. (Grootenboer, Rönnerman & Edwards-Groves, 2017, p. 248)

Two key points to highlight here are, first, middle leaders are *leaders*, but also, simultaneously, *teachers* – this is a promising position to influence teaching and learning, but it is also an awkward, challenging, and sometimes lonely place. Second, middle leading is a complex practice that is enabled and constrained by particular site-based conditions and arrangements, but also, their role is fundamentally about creating and developing practice architectures to enable and constrain the teaching practices of their colleagues, and in turn the learning practices of students. As such, middle leading is a mediated practice, and middle leaders are reliant on others to achieve the key goal of education (to which we say *is* student learning).

Middle leading as critical educational praxis

Our participation in the *Pedagogy Education and Praxis* (PEP) international research network (Edwards-Groves & Kemmis, 2016), involving research collaborators from Australia, Colombia, Finland, Norway, Sweden, New Zealand, the Caribbean, the Netherlands, and the UK, has provided impetus for examining critical praxis in education. ‘Praxis is what people do when they take into account all the circumstances and exigencies that confront them at a particular moment and then, taking the broadest view they can of what is best to do, they act’ (Kemmis & Smith, 2008, p. 4). Each person can, through their practices, shape their circumstances and act

‘rightly’ (Kemmis & Grootenboer, 2008); it is the intentional and morally committed actions taken by individuals in an endeavour to ‘act rightly’ within and in response to their existing circumstances. Therefore, praxis in middle leading highlights the practical wisdom and conscious commitment to acting responsively to the needs and circumstances in schools.

The position of middle leaders as being largely responsible for the learning directions in schools shifts the nature of their work away from performativity and metrification towards addressing complex ethical considerations linked, not just to the conduct of leading, but to the appropriateness of conducting it in particular ways. Our study of praxis in middle leading has identified ways it is an ethically and morally reasoned practice with ramifications for the students, teachers and often for the broader school community. Therefore, ethics and morality in middle leading as educational work has led us to consider middle leading as critical educational praxis. Critical educational praxis emerges when it is manifested in practices that aim not only towards the good, but also strive to overcome or ameliorate unreasonable, unproductive, unsustainable and unjust conditions in the sites in which they exist.

Middle leading - A practice of possibility

So, middle leading practice is crucial for bringing about site-based educational development and change because it is exercised in and around classrooms – the site of learning and teaching. This is not to say that educational leadership at the principal, systemic, or government level is not important, but it is somewhat distant from learners and teachers, whereas middle leaders are also still teachers and engage with learners daily. Thus, middle leading can be seen as a *practice-changing practice* (Grootenboer, Edwards-Groves & Rönnerman, 2020).

In recent times there seems to be a growing appreciation of the work of middle leaders in leading pedagogy and curriculum development in schools. Within the broad and general practice architectures provided by leaders ‘above’ them, middle leaders can consider what curriculum and pedagogy is needed for learners and teachers in their site, and how they can facilitate professional learning to support teachers’ pedagogical development accordingly. In this, educational middle leading practices are essentially about creating conditions of possibility – new conditions for the students and teachers in their particular school site.

Of course, the challenge here is for middle leaders to be provided with the practice conditions and arrangements that enable them to have this vital professional focus. Schools can be very busy places with a heavy burden of bureaucracy and administration, and often senior educational leaders can overwhelm middle leaders with administrative tasks. Not only can this deplete the time middle leaders need to lead professional learning and curriculum development, but it can also change the fundamental nature of their leading practice, and indeed, their own teaching and, at times, the perceptions of their colleagues as a peer who leads. Yet, we have also established that middle leading is generative of leading (Edwards-Groves & Rönnerman, 2013; Rönnerman & Edwards-Groves, 2012). Analysis established distinctive relationships between the conditions and circumstances generated by leading for teacher learning, and the subsequent development of teacher leading practices. What was striking about these findings were the strong interrelationships between the leading practices of the middle leader who facilitated the

professional learning and the next generation of leading practices that travelled across time and space to emerge in the work of those teachers who became middle leaders (some years later).

The five dimensions of relational trust

Middle leading, like all education practices, is relational work. And, as well recognised, is a practice dependent on trust. Trust figures prominently in research investigating the conditions necessary for enabling transformations in practice and practice communities (Cranston, 2011; Kemmis et al., 2014; Toole & Louis, 2002). Although much research exists in the space of relational trust, and the nature of trust needed for building and sustaining professional learning communities, particularly as it relates to the role that principals play (Little, 2003), there is less research examining the nuances and particularities of what this means for middle leading. As a response, our empirical work, addressing the ‘taken-for-grantedness’ about what relational trust entails and how it can be promoted and sustained, has established the multidimensionality of facilitating a culture of professional trust.

Specifically, we illustrate how leading site-based professional learning requires trust evident in practice in five interrelated social dimensions: (1) *interpersonal trust*, experienced in the way middle leaders demonstrate sensitivity, empathy, relatability, respect and engender confidence in their teaching peers; (2) *interactional trust*, experienced in the way middle leaders open and sustain safe spaces for collaboration and democratic dialogues; (3) *intersubjective trust*, experienced in the way middle leaders demonstrate ‘with-it-ness’ and collegiality through prioritising the development of shared language, activities and a shared responsibility for fostering a professional community; (4) *intellectual trust*, experienced in the way middle leaders convey self-confidence, professional knowledge and wisdom regarding development work; and, (5) *pragmatic trust*, experienced in the way middle leaders lead change that is practical, relevant, realistic and achievable (Edwards-Groves, Grootenboer & Rönnerman, 2016).

These five dimensions of relational trust, formed through social interactions, are critical for generating and sustaining the conditions for change. They form a relationality that not only facilitates the kind of trust necessary for initiating, animating, customising and solidifying site-based professional development (Edwards-Groves, Grootenboer & Rönnerman, 2016), but form generative principles for creating and opening up communicative spaces necessary for developing practice communities. These, as we have argued, are critical for supporting the ontological transformation of teachers grappling with the varying complex demands and professional pressures required in and for site-based professional learning.

Middle leading as dialogic, communicative and responsive

Relatedly, our research has shown ways that middle leading is a communicative and responsive practice that facilitates active learning and participation in discussions about complex and often challenging educational issues. So, for the middle leader, negotiating and facilitating professional learning with teachers in schools, necessitates dialogic participation. In turn, this creates conditions for relational trust that move teachers’ thinking from surface level to deeper level thinking – from ideas to embodied enacted practices.

Dialogue creates a common ground upon which new practices can be understood – developed through intersubjective meaning making. So, our work has highlighted the value of a dialogic approach to designing and negotiating site based professional learning (Grootenboer, Edwards-Groves & Rönnerman, 2020). By dialogue, we do not mean the kind of talk that simply delivers information or administrative routines to teachers, but rather, it is an approach to professional learning that opens up a shared and democratic communicative space where everyone can have a say. We consider that it is through the dialogues that ‘the site’ becomes critical in facilitating development, and leaves open conditions generative of possibility and relational trust. As we advocate, dialogic approaches maximise teacher engagement in spaces that place virtue on validating the particularity, the praxis and the ‘happeningness’ of practices. Dialogic professional learning deprivatises practice (Kemmis et al., 2014), and lays the groundwork for middle leaders to build strong interpersonal relationships and relational trust as fundamental emancipatory conditions that produce affirmative professional action, teacher agency and change.

Impact and influence

We opened this monologue with a question about the constituent practices that influence leading development and action that framed the direction of our research collaboration. Along with our commitment to making research scholarship accessible to practitioners in the field, our focus on understanding and influencing educational improvement through middle leading has been paramount. For us, supporting middle leading in the development of teaching and learning has reached into the disciplines (particularly in English and mathematics) (see research reported in Grootenboer, Edwards-Groves & Rönnerman, 2015; Grootenboer, Rönnerman, & Edwards-Groves, 2017) and has influenced local schools. This, in recent years, has redirected our scholarship to be more directly impactful on the field itself. Through professional initiatives in local schools and school districts our impact is gaining momentum among middle leaders and their supervisors (individually and as a collective) in the Australian states of New South Wales, South Australia and Queensland, New Zealand, western Sweden and in the Canadian province of Ontario. For instance, the take-up of our professional book *Middle Leadership in Schools: A practical guide for leading learning* (Grootenboer, Edwards-Groves & Rönnerman, 2020) is securing traction in a number of local, national and international jurisdictions.

Conclusion

Educationalists and researchers across the globe have invested much in isolating the specific ‘drivers’ that enable and constrain school change and development. Current neo-liberal foci on performative conceptions of accountability, reductive understandings of ‘effect sizes’ and decontextualised ‘what works’ approaches have been promoted as solutions to intractable educational problems. Yet, as we have argued, 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 (Edwards-

Groves et al., 2019). For us, this position locates middle leading as a key driver in school-based change. This is a contention that considers middle leaders as professional activists in their own schools with the power and agency, and with solidarity with their colleagues, inflect practice and policy discourses. This feature of our work draws attention to middle leading as the antipathy of inertia in educational development; it is practice which counters ‘out there’ policies that have often failed to keep sight of the centrality of site-responsivity in students’ learning practices.

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