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Formal Middle Leadership in NSW Public Schools

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY, DECEMBER 2020

Commissioned by the NSW Department of Education
School Leadership Institute

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Foreword by Andy Hargreaves

The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the NSW Department of Education.

“I love my job as an Assistant Principal. I love that I am making a real difference at my school across all stakeholders but it is an incredibly hard job. I feel the importance of the position very deeply and I feel that many other areas of my life have been sacrificed to do my job well. I feel a constant pull, and often guilt, about not being able to give enough of myself to my own class because I am often spending my time managing and leading my team and other projects. It’s a balancing act every day, but incredibly rewarding”



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Foreword

I am delighted to have been invited to write the foreword for this much-needed report on leadership in the middle of our schools and our systems.

This important study for the NSW Department of Education School Leadership Institute, the largest educational organisation in the southern hemisphere, and its findings point to the attraction of middle leadership to many teachers. Only in some cases is this due to teacher's interest in promotion to principalship. Mainly, teachers in NSW want to get up close to other adults inside and sometimes outside the school, to get closer to the learning and wellbeing of their students, and to exert a stronger impact with more of their students that way.

More than 20 years ago in Canada, we asked high school teachers about who were the teacher leaders in their school, they always came up with the same three or four names. Asked what defined these individuals as teacher leaders, the answers were very consistent. They work really hard, they treat their colleagues with respect, and they are in it for the kids and not for themselves. This is clearly also the case among the majority of respondents in the NSW sample. Many teachers want to step forward, to work with colleagues, and to advance the interests of the students they came into the profession to help. They are not just eager to ascend up the escalator of advancement. They want to make a greater difference.

Historically, though, the educators we have called teacher leaders, middle leaders, or middle level leaders, have, despite their dedication and idealism, found their positions stressful and conflicted. They may be caught between other teachers and the school administration, being made to feel they are neither fish nor fowl; not yet on a par with senior leadership, nor trusted by former colleagues any more who they now seem to have moved above. This was the reported fate of many Australian Advanced Skills Teachers in the past, for example.

In addition, the report documents the enduring problems of all educators almost everywhere these days – time, workload, and difficult colleagues. The typical response to these problems is to commission a workload study (which never reports that teachers need more workload) and make recommendations about reducing paperwork and other administrative responsibilities. These are things that systems can pledge to do and to make policies out of. A much harder job is to create better work rather than reduce bad work, and this requires changes in leadership at the top as well as in the middle. It's a cultural change, as this report makes clear on several occasions, not just a structural change.

Very recently, my colleague Dennis Shirley and I published our report on *Leading From the Middle (LfM)*, among ten school districts in Ontario, Canada (Hargreaves and Shirley, 2020). First, similar to the findings of this report, it's important not to see the middle as a level or a link, as an intermediary position. In Western culture, this kind of middle is often not well regarded – think middle child, Middle Ages, or middle age spread, for example. It's the bit that gets left out or whose only purpose is to join up two more important things.

Foreword

Rather, LfM brings educators and their leadership closer to the heart of students and their learning, and involves them directly in the decisions that affect those students' experience. LfM is a *philosophy* of practice; a *structure* of teamwork; with shared values, high mutual trust and respect, and strong support for each other as colleagues as well as for the task that was being undertaken. It is a *culture* of relationships and beliefs. In our own words

LfM regards those in the middle not just as a mediating layer that connects the bottom to the top, but as expressing and addressing the heart and soul of leadership at its core..... LfM is not just a level or a tier. It is the heart, the soul, the backbone, and the guts of leadership.

With these insights in mind, I would suggest that in addition to the report's excellent and much-needed recommendations for more time, better recruitment and increased clarity in relation to middle leaders, that developing middle leadership should also cause the NSW system to think hard about what this will mean for transforming other kinds of leadership at the school and system level. How can middle leaders be empowered by their principals and the wider system to drive and develop improvement, and not only implement improvements that have been handed down to them? How are all teachers encouraged to see themselves as actual and potential leaders from the moment they start their first job? Is teaching still mainly seen as an individual profession, or as a collective profession in which everyone takes the lead and also knows how to follow at different points? And what do leaders at the top need to give away (especially things that they actually like doing rather than tasks they find burdensome) to create space for those below to have a chance to develop things of value?

By addressing these kinds of questions, we can start to combine the important improvements recommended in this report with philosophical and cultural transformations too. In the highly complex world we are now in, that cannot have been any more obvious than during the pandemic, teachers cannot just wait at the bottom for policies to come down from the top. In times of complexity and even crisis, teachers need to be able to be the first responders to their children's needs, but to do this collectively, not individually, and to do it with guidance, clarity and support from those above them. This is ultimately the aspiration for middle leadership. This much needed report by highly regarded Australian researchers, shows us why middle leadership matters, how hungry many teachers are for it, and what changes we can start making in the system right now so that middle leadership work does not drag them down with overwork, but inspires them to pursue the better work that will move all young people forward.

Andy Hargreaves

Director of CHENINE (Change, Engagement and Innovation in Education)
University of Ottawa
August 2020



Use evidence from the text or your prior knowledge to make a prediction about what may happen.
I think _____ because _____

Report purpose

The purpose of this executive summary is to present an overview of the research findings from 2608 respondents who participated in the NSW Formal Middle Leadership Survey (FML_NSW). A full report is available on the NSW DOE SLI website.

This project was commissioned by the NSW Department of Education (DoE) School Leadership Institute (SLI) and led by a cross-institutional research team consisting of Dr Kylie Lipscombe (University of Wollongong), Dr John De Nobile (Macquarie University), Dr Sharon Tindall-Ford (University of Wollongong), and Dr Christine Grice (The University of Sydney).

Acknowledgments

We wish to thank all the educators who gave their time and energy to participate in this research project. We would also like to acknowledge and thank our research assistants, Paul Gardiner, Iliana Skrebneva and Yoke Berry and our editor John Revington for their contributions to this important work.



Middle leadership in Australian schools

As with other countries across the world, Australia has a national education agenda focused on school improvement, with the goal of improving student learning outcomes. While school principals are central to fulfilling this national agenda, increases in principal workloads (NSW Department of Education, 2017) and increased expectations of senior school leaders (Marks & McCulla, 2016; McCulla & Degenhardt, 2016) have led to the redistribution of leadership roles within schools (Lárusdóttir & O'Connor, 2017; Spillane, 2006). This has resulted in the middle leaders being recognised as pivotal to school improvement and success. Middle leaders are usually teachers who have a substantial classroom teaching role (Grootenboer, 2018), who are positioned between teachers and senior leaders, and whose leadership is different to that of principal leadership (Wilkinson, 2017; Wilkinson & Kemmis, 2015).

In Australian schools, formal middle leadership positions are subject to jurisdictional requirements (state and territorial) and sectoral permutations (government and non-government) and they are influenced by school type (primary or secondary) (Lipscombe et al., 2020b). This has resulted in a multitude of terms, with some confusion regarding who middle leaders are, and what their roles and responsibilities are. There is general consensus, however, that whatever the nomenclature, middle leaders' work is multifaceted (Forde et al., 2019), and typically involves classroom teaching in conjunction with 'out of classroom' activities ranging from school management, administrative tasks and strategic initiatives.

Middle leaders in Australian schools hold positions such as year level and subject coordinators, heads of departments and in some cases assistant principals. They often lead teams of teachers in specific areas or projects (Lipscombe et al., 2020b). Primary and secondary school middle leaders may perform different functions, and they may have different responsibilities and areas of influence within their schools. Additionally, middle leaders across different sectors (government and non-government) may have different aspects of their roles emphasised, based upon the historic and traditional purposes of middle leaders within these contexts. It is clear that middle leadership is dependent upon others, and as such the role cannot be easily analysed or defined in isolation from context or in isolation from the leaders that support and co-define middle leading practices (Day & Grice, 2019).

Within national teacher and leadership policy, it is unclear where school middle leadership is placed. The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership provides "national leadership for the Commonwealth, State and Territory governments in promoting excellence in the profession of teaching and school leadership" (AITSL, 2011). What is evident within AITSL's national policy documents is that middle leaders are integrated across three stages in the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (APST). These stages are: Highly Accomplished (HA) and Lead Teacher (LT) stages and the Australian Professional Standard for Principals (Lipscombe et al., 2020b).

Aligned with the need for clarity in middle leader policy is a corresponding need to understand middle leaders' professional learning requirements. There is an understanding that middle leadership needs to be an area of increased focus for professional learning, and that these needs should not be viewed as just part of a leadership hierarchy that prepares leaders on a trajectory for senior leadership. Middle leading professional learning programs typically focus on collaboration, change and influence, and it is evident that middle leaders who work in complex areas such as leading in conflict situations and supporting underperforming colleagues have been given less attention (Lipscombe, et al., 2020b).

While the nature of middle leadership is contested and disparate, both research and practice highlight how in most schools there is at least one teacher who has a middle leadership position, working between their Principal and teacher colleagues with multiple responsibilities for classroom teaching and leading the professional development and the performance management of staff (De Nobile, 2018a). These teachers play a critical role in improving student learning outcomes through their pedagogical leadership (Grice, 2019). They lead collaborative teams (Lipscombe, Buckley-Walker & McNamara, 2019a) and influence site-based teaching and learning through developing teachers' classroom practices (Grootenboer et al., 2015; Grice, 2019; Lipscombe, Tindall-Ford & Grootenboer, 2019c; Lipscombe, Tindall-Ford & Kirk, 2019b). Harris et al. (2019) suggests that while there is ongoing interest in understanding middle leadership internationally, predominantly studies are small scale. There is a need for more sophisticated and larger-scale research projects to deeply investigate the impacts and effectiveness of this important school leadership space. This large-scale mixed method study will provide important understandings on NSW public school middle leadership.



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Executive summary

Background to the Study

This study is a research project commissioned by School Leadership Institute (SLI), a dedicated leadership unit within the New South Wales Department of Education (NSW DoE). The NSW DoE is one of the largest and most diverse education systems in the world, with 2207 schools supporting approximately 798,000 students in 2018 (CESE, 2019). The SLI is responsible for the ongoing investment in current and future school leaders across their careers. The SLI's vision is to create a future that enables all educational leaders to influence positively the learning of teachers and students in NSW public schools. Its mission is to design and implement world-class, evidence-informed, future-focused leadership development programs and initiatives to make a difference in public education.

In 2019, the School Leadership Institute developed the School Leadership Development continuum. The Continuum illustrates leadership development stages aligned to leadership positions within the NSW DoE. It shows the opportunities that will be supported by the system to develop high-level leadership skills that make the greatest difference to students as per the School Leadership Strategy (NSW Department of Education, 2017). In 2019, as part of the development of the Continuum, the School Leadership Institute committed to examining the needs of formal middle leaders in NSW public schools in order to provide tailored, responsive and evidence-informed support and professional learning opportunities.

In the NSW DoE, a typical formal middle leader is a teaching practitioner who has formal school leadership responsibilities, and whose substantive title is commonly either Assistant Principal or Head Teacher. Assistant Principals are most typically positioned in primary and central (K–10) schools, and generally work in the classroom as well as lead a Stage (e.g., Stage 1= Years 1 and 2). Head Teachers are more commonly located in secondary schools, teach in the classroom, and lead in curriculum and non-curriculum areas. Head Teachers have an allocation of 22 periods per week of face-to-face teaching, six periods less than a regular classroom teacher (Crown Employees (Teachers in Schools and Related Employees) Salaries and Conditions Award 2020 (NSW) s 7.1). The allocation of teaching and time release for Assistant Principals is dependent on school context, with some Assistant Principals receiving two hours of time release, no more than their teaching colleagues.

In 2019, working in partnership with scholars at the University of Wollongong, Macquarie University and The University of Sydney, the NSW Formal Middle Leadership research project (FML_NSW) was established. Its aim is to provide a deeper understanding of middle leadership in order to proactively

support the professional learning of this important school leadership position across NSW public schools. This large-scale study is the first research project undertaken by the NSW DoE to examine middle leadership.

The findings of this study have the potential to enable the NSW DoE to further understand and support NSW public school middle leaders by providing targeted professional learning and increased support. The findings aim to inform the School Leadership Institute's development of long-term strategic goals aligned to school leadership in NSW public schools. These strategic goals are evident in the 2018–2022 strategic plan (NSW Department of Education, 2018). The plan values excellence, service and accountability, and aims to create an environment in which “every student, every teacher, every leader and every school improves every year” (Goal 4). The two key actions outlined in the NSW DoE School Leadership Strategy are: 1) to provide quality leadership preparation and development; and 2) to strengthen collegial support for school leaders (NSW Department of Education, 2017).

Aim of the study

The aim of the NSW Formal Middle Leadership research project (FML_NSW) is to build an understanding of, through a strong empirical foundation, formal middle leadership and middle leadership professional learning needs across NSW DoE schools. The study seeks to provide data and insights to inform future NSW public school middle leadership initiatives.

Six research questions guide this project:

- 1) Which teachers are being appointed to formal middle leadership positions?
- 2) What are the roles and responsibilities formal middle leaders are enacting?
- 3) What perceived impacts are middle leaders having on student learning?
- 4) How are middle leaders collaborating with and influencing others?
- 5) What are the professional needs and preferences of formal middle leaders?
- 6) What are the leadership trajectories and aspirations of formal middle leaders?

Taken together, the research findings provide an understanding, based on empirical evidence, of the current responsibilities, practices, professional learning and career trajectories, and aspirations of formal middle leaders in NSW public schools.



Methodological overview

The research was conducted in Term 4, 2019. Data were obtained from responses to an online survey developed for this study and sent, via invitation, to 7751 middle leaders across 1697 NSW public schools. A total of 2608 (34% of those invited to participate) educators responded to the survey. The survey sample makes it the known largest research project devoted to middle leadership nationally and internationally.

The 59-item survey questionnaire comprises six sections designed to address the six research questions. Items include closed and open-ended questions. Closed questions were used predominantly to identify the roles and responsibilities of middle leaders. Thirty-six of the 59 items were derived from the Middle Leadership in Schools Questionnaire – School Edition (MLRQ-SE) designed by De Nobile (2016). The questionnaire reflects a model of middle leadership research based on a review of more than 250 reports, institutional policy documents and peer-reviewed research articles. It is based on six role categories (De Nobile, 2018a). Each role category represents a discrete aspect of middle leaders' work as reported by research studies and other literature. Further, open-ended questions were designed in consultation with the SLI in consideration of their policies, contexts and needs. These other items were designed to investigate other aspects of middle leadership aside from roles. The open-ended questions were thematically analysed using random sampling, where a sample size for each question was calculated based on a 5% margin of error and a 95% confidence level. This method

aimed to minimise bias of results and support saturation point being reached when thematically analysing only a sample of open ended question data. Quantitative data were analysed using factor analysis to empirically identify groups of items that best represented role categories for middle leaders, and to make comparisons (e.g., between Head Teachers and Assistant Principals) of those measurements that would further inform understanding about middle leadership roles.

Research findings overview

This executive summary provides an overview of the findings according to each research question. A detailed response to each research question is available in the Findings section of the full report.

Research Question 1: Which teachers are being appointed to formal middle leadership positions?

Most of the respondents to the survey were female (74%) and most were aged between 41 and 60 (64%). Forty-five per cent were currently Assistant Principals and forty-two per cent were Head Teachers. Ninety-two per cent of participants had at least 10 years' teaching experience but less leadership experience. Most (65%) middle leaders have 0–9 years' leadership experience and only 14% have 16+ years of leadership experience. Many (39%) middle leaders are new (0–5 years) to their roles. Three percent of respondents were currently accredited as having 'highly accomplished' or 'lead teacher' status.

Research Question 2: What are the roles and responsibilities formal middle leaders are enacting?

Formal middle leadership positions have existed in NSW public schools for some time. However, until recently the exact nature of the roles they have performed have not been well documented, apart from the general duties outlined in documents such as selection criteria. The results of the survey identify seven role categories. These role categories, referred to in this report simply as 'roles', comprise activities oriented to particular aspects of middle leading in the school. The seven roles identified were:

- Developing staff
- Student-centre
- Administration
- Organising people
- Curriculum-centred
- Supervising staff
- Leading learning and change.

Comparisons of the means for each of the seven roles revealed that, overall, people in middle leadership positions were engaged most frequently in:

- Supervising staff
- Student-centred roles
- Curriculum-centred roles

It is worth pointing out that the other four roles were also substantive ones for these middle leaders. A comparison of the results for Assistant Principals and Head Teachers revealed similar patterns of activity, although Head Teachers appeared to be engaging in administration more than Assistant Principals.

An open-ended survey item offered participants the opportunity to suggest roles that were not addressed by the MLRQ-SE items. The results suggested five potential additional roles that formal middle leaders engage in:

- External liaison
- Staff wellbeing
- Parent liaison
- Leading extra-curricular
- Relieving higher duties

Research Question 3: What perceived impacts are middle leaders having on student learning?

In schools, middle leaders are increasingly being seen as having positive impacts on school teaching practices, with the potential to improve student learning outcomes (Dinham, 2007; Gurr, 2019; Leithwood, 2016). In this survey, 75% of middle leaders perceived they had a high to very high impact on student learning. Analysis of a representative sample of qualitative responses found middle leaders perceived they impacted student learning by:



- 1) leading and implementing school academic programs;
- 2) developing colleagues' capacity through professional learning and mentoring;
- 3) leading general school initiatives; and
- 4) leading student wellbeing and welfare programs.

A limited number of middle leaders (2%) reported that it was difficult to assess their impact on student learning.

Middle leaders reported that they understood their impact on student learning firstly through feedback from colleagues, students and parents, and secondly from internal school data and external assessment data. Middle leaders were asked what constrained their ability to impact student learning. The most common constraint reported was administrative requirements and workloads, followed by: time; student welfare and behavioural issues; school leadership; and teacher colleagues. Middle leaders perceived that central to their ability to successfully impact student learning was the need to develop and maintain positive, respectful relationships with colleagues, students, parents and the community. This was coupled with middle leaders modelling excellence and expecting excellence in teaching and learning from others within their schools.

Research Question 4: How are middle leaders collaborating with and influencing others?

In schools there is a long history of using collaboration as a strategy for improvement (Harris, Jones & Huffman, 2017). Hargreaves (2019) explains that research since the 1980's has demonstrated teacher collaboration can secure higher student results however, the effectiveness of change depends on the quality of collaboration.

In this survey, collaborating with colleagues was identified as an important and frequent practice by the sample of middle leaders. Stage meetings, faculty meetings and cross-disciplinary teams were the most frequently cited structures for collaboration. Other forms of collaboration, such as co-teaching with colleagues, were not commonly reported.

Related to collaboration, middle leaders reported on their spheres of influence when they led from the middle in schools. Arguably, middle leaders are highly experienced teachers who often have limited authority and power, and as such find it difficult to influence their colleagues (Lipscombe et al., 2019c). The most commonly reported form of influence was team-based influence, where middle leaders both influence and are influenced by their colleagues in team situations. Whole-of-school influence, followed by student, senior leadership and parent/community influence, were also cited. Factors that hindered the ability of middle leaders to influence included: having viewpoints that were not consistent with their school's direction; a feeling they lacked experience; respect or authority among their colleagues; and increase system demands resulting in fatigue relating to continuous change.

Research Question 5: What are the professional needs and preferences of formal middle leaders?

Due to the unique and complex nature of middle leadership roles, it is imperative that middle leaders are provided with leadership learning opportunities to enable them to develop and enact effectively their leadership capabilities (Bassett & Shaw, 2017). In this survey, middle leaders were invited to share information about their leadership development. Analysis revealed five important insights. Firstly, middle leaders reported that peer feedback was used to support professional development. From the 2128 responses, 49% of middle leaders sought feedback frequently to very frequently, however 51% only reported seeking feedback sometimes, rarely or never, indicating that many middle leaders are not engaged in obtaining regular feedback as part of their professional learning. Secondly, analysis of a sample of open-ended responses revealed that nearly a third of middle leaders reported limited to no professional learning specific to leadership. Factors that constrained opportunities for professional learning in leadership included limited availability, lack of financial resources and lack of senior leadership support. Only 5% indicated they had undertaken postgraduate studies in educational leadership. Thirdly, internal leadership programs implemented by the NSW DoE were identified as the most frequent type of professional learning accessed by those who had engaged in leadership development. Fourthly, middle leaders reported that they required dedicated time and reduced workloads to engage more in quality professional learning. Lastly, the most common preferred professional learning theme for professional development was a specific focus on leadership. Engaging in professional learning related to managing conflict, staff performance and administration were also identified as significant professional learning needs.

Research Question 6: What are the leadership trajectories and aspirations of formal middle leaders?

Most commonly, the middle leaders surveyed in this study wanted to gain greater proficiency in their roles so that they could support the outcomes of students. Participants shared that they often became middle leaders because as teachers they were able to identify needs in their schools for improvements in curriculum or welfare. In relation to career aspirations, two thirds of the sample analysed sought to continue in their current role and further develop what they described as "*curriculum leadership*", including the mentoring of other staff. These middle leaders were seeking to create better educational opportunities for students through providing professional learning opportunities for their teams. The remaining one-third of middle leaders sought promotion to other senior leadership roles. Some were completing the NSW DoE SLI Aspiring Principals Leadership Program and were seeking senior leadership positions. A small proportion was undecided.

Executive summary

In examining the career aspirations of middle leaders in NSW DoE schools, participants were asked to 'explain how [they] became a middle leader in [their] school.' The majority (64% of those surveyed in the sample) responded literally to the question, that they became middle leaders through merit selection opportunities and formal interview processes, as all formal middle leaders have been. Other participants responded to the question by sharing the system and school conditions that enabled their formal appointment. A quarter of middle leaders in the sample were given relieving leadership opportunities prior to their formal appointment. A small proportion (3%) shared that they were identified by senior leaders and supported in their formal applications.

Overview of the implications and recommendations for policy and practice

Middle leaders across NSW public schools are working hard to improve teaching and learning in their schools. Many take on multiple leadership roles that span across areas such as staff supervision, professional learning, student academic and wellbeing development, school administration, and liaising with external organisations. The roles and responsibilities middle leaders are enacting suggest they are architects of teaching and learning improvement in schools, and that they play significant roles in designing, facilitating, managing and transforming school cultures and classroom practice. These middle leaders are driven to make a difference in their schools, with many reporting that they were engaged in a plethora of support functions that enabled them to lead in their schools effectively. These functions included principal support, developing trusting relationships with colleagues, and creating supportive networks.

It was also clear that some current middle leaders have inherited system and school conditions that are not conducive to successful leadership. Middle leaders reported many challenges and constraints that are impeding their capacity to develop, influence and ultimately directly impact student learning in a positive way. The most commonly reported constraints included: a lack of time, increased workloads and administrative burdens. Some reported that these challenges had adverse impacts on their health and wellbeing. These issues are important areas for the Department to consider and respond to. However, providing recommendations about these areas are beyond both the scope of this study as well as the remit of the SLI who commissioned this report.

In reference to the empirical data from this study, we have identified ten recommendations for the SLI to consider in light of the primary purpose of this study: to develop a deeper understanding of middle leadership in order to proactively support the professional learning of this important school leadership position across NSW public schools. We acknowledge that, at the time of this report, the SLI have

committed to developing middle leaders through the design and implementation of a system-wide professional development program and have also recently undertaken the redesign and implementation of system-wide middle leadership induction. The recommendations identified below may provide further opportunities for the SLI to continue to understand and invest in middle leadership in NSW public schools.

Three key opportunity areas were identified from the data analysis that are recommended for consideration by the NSW School Leadership Institute (SLI):

- Advancing a system-wide understanding of formal middle leadership;
- Identifying and supporting aspiring middle leaders;
- Developing system and localised professional learning for current middle leaders that is relevant, differentiated and responsiveness to diversity of needs.

The opportunity areas include ten specific and practical recommendations for the NSW School Leadership Institute to consider. It is important to note that each opportunity: Understanding; Identification; and Development is interrelated (Figure 1). For example, the identification of aspiring middle leaders will be supported by advancing an understanding of the expectations and roles of middle leaders in NSW Public schools. Additionally, advancing an understanding of middle leadership in NSW DoE will support development of current middle leaders. In this executive summary we have briefly described recommendations within each opportunity area. A more elaborate response to each recommendation is detailed in the Implications section of the full report.

Figure 1: Recommendations



Advancing a system-wide understanding of formal middle leadership

Similar to international research (Heng & Marsh 2009; Larusdottir et al., 2017; Li et al., 2018), our survey results indicate that in the NSW DoE, understandings of the term 'middle leadership' vary and consequently there are different views about which roles are part of middle leadership positions. This is in part due to the diversity of contexts, job titles and responsibilities across educational systems in Australia and school sites within the NSW DoE. Given the diversity in NSW school contexts, it is recommended that the SLI consider advancing a system-wide understanding of middle leadership as the term is not well documented in Department policy and practice. As research has demonstrated, for middle leaders to significantly and positively impact student learning (Grootenboer, 2018; Gurr & Drysdale, 2013) it is critical that their work is defined with clarity.

Three key recommendations guide the consideration of advancing an understanding of formal middle leadership. Firstly, developing an operational definition of formal middle leadership in NSW public schools provides the opportunity to enhance understanding and support of middle leadership by colleagues, prioritise a focus on tasks in specific areas that lead to improved student learning outcomes, and strengthen the applicability and acknowledgment of these important leadership positions in Department policy and documents. Secondly, we recommend that the SLI design a framework and accompanying guidelines for principals to develop localised role descriptions for formal middle leaders in their schools. Our survey findings suggest that middle leaders have many responsibilities and tasks, however, they are struggling to reconcile and manage the varied and manifold responsibilities placed on them from system level and the school level priorities. A framework providing guiding principles that support school principals to develop localised role descriptions as opposed to set descriptors from the system, will acknowledge the diversity of NSW public school contexts whilst providing clarity about middle leader roles and responsibilities that can then be tailored to school contexts. This approach would provide conditions that support middle leaders to work effectively by aligning the expectations of the Department and the needs of individual schools. Lastly, we propose an increased inclusion and support for middle leaders in policy development, influence and enactment. This study identified that middle leaders play an important role in connecting system and school policies and directives to teaching and learning in classrooms, however, constraints surrounding areas such as unclear expectations, limited resources, and a lack of support were evident in many responses. We suggest that the SLI could provide greater support for middle leaders with the skills, knowledge and practices to contribute, co-design, influence, and enact system policies and directives.

“At this point of time in my career, I feel increasingly overwhelmed with the amount of information I am trying to process. The many roles and responsibilities and the high expectations for my role as AP cause me to doubt my abilities as a professional. We constantly talk about “doing less better” but this seems impossible. In recent years I struggled to be a fulltime classroom teacher and an AP leading a team of 8-9 staff (Assistant Principal)

Identifying and supporting aspiring middle leaders

Identifying potential middle leaders and enabling them to develop their leadership through professional learning experiences and leadership opportunities could enhance system-wide support for middle leaders in the NSW DoE (Hargreaves, 2019; Lipscombe et al., 2020b). Such an approach recognises that leadership is not a fixed construct but instead can and should be developed and supported over time and is a collective responsibility of the system and school leaders. It is recommended that the SLI consider middle leadership identification as a component of teacher leadership development work, where teachers who are effective in carrying out informal leadership tasks are supported with professional learning that prepares them for possible future positions as middle leaders. Additionally, professional learning for principals could be introduced to ensure that local school environments are enabling aspiring middle leaders to access support and gain experience in teacher leadership, mentoring, and team and school leadership opportunities. This recommendation supports those educators with aspirations to become formal middle leaders to develop their leadership capacity and understanding through the identification and development of goals and resources to support them.

“I have loved my role but am exhausted...I continue in my role for the students and being able to maximise my assistance through leading a faculty of staff but acknowledge that people seeking to take up these middle executive leadership roles are decreasing at an alarming rate. (Head Teacher)

Developing system and localised professional learning for current middle leaders that is relevant, differentiated and responsiveness to diversity of needs.

Investing in system-wide leadership support and development ensures middle leaders and their schools are more effective. Systemic professional learning develops shared language embedded in system policies and initiatives so that research and guiding principles can be shared to support work in schools. System-wide support and development recognises that schools and leaders can make a greater difference if they work together and contribute to the system to share, challenge, and transfer expertise and capacity within and

between schools (Fullan, 2019). However, system leadership development has been criticised as inadequate if it is too focussed at a system level without careful consideration to individual leadership development and school needs (Lovett, Dempster, & Fluckiger, 2015). This study identified a number of divergent middle leader needs and experiences including diverse school context (e.g., rural, remote, metropolitan, primary, secondary, central, SSP), various teacher accreditation levels (from Graduate to Lead), teacher experience (1-40 years), leadership experience (1-16+ years) and preferred professional learning approaches (e.g. mentoring, networking, formal programs).

Six key recommendations are provided that are derived from survey data and research into leadership development and effective professional learning. Firstly, we recommend that the SLI design purposeful professional learning to cater for different groups and needs of middle leaders. Strategies may include: attention to examining the prior, individual and school learning needs of middle leaders as part of middle leadership professional learning; negotiated professional learning pathways where middle leaders can, in consultation with their principals, choose varying options and learning opportunities to suit school and individual needs; professional learning that is firmly embedded in context and emphasises authentic middle leadership experience; and alignment of professional learning activities to the expectations and processes of Highly Accomplished and Lead Teacher accreditation to support development of middle leaders who are motivated for higher levels of accreditation.

Great teachers become middle leaders, but we are not necessarily given the development to become great leaders. We learn to manage on the job but leadership is something else. I have been meaning to complete the leadership modules but never have the time to complete them! (Assistant Principal)

Secondly, we recommend the SLI support the development of middle leaders by advancing their knowledge, understanding and resources to utilise evidence informed and student centred teacher collaboration (including co-teaching and peer feedback) as a vehicle to support teacher and leadership development and improvement. The survey identified the significant commitment and dedication of middle leaders to work with their colleagues to improve teaching and learning. Specifically, data from the survey indicates that most middle leaders identify a high to very high impact on student learning and are more influential when they work in teams. However, wide-spread use of student assessment data to understand teacher and leader impact as well as the use of co-teaching and peer feedback as a collaborative professional learning strategies were less evident. We suggest an investment is supporting middle leaders to work together with teacher colleagues in collaborative processes to analyse student

learning data in order to best understand how to meet student needs, and to engage in continuous and well-resourced co-teaching, peer observation and feedback to evaluate the impact on teaching and leadership.

I need to attend more PL around professional dialogue and collaboration (Head Teacher)

Thirdly, we suggest that resources are developed to support personalised and localised induction and mentoring for new formal middle leaders in schools. Localised induction and mentoring led at the school site, in addition to centralised support, provides opportunities for leadership practices to be developed within the context where leadership is enacted. In this way, newly appointed middle leaders are orientated in system expectations and resources for their roles. They also have the opportunity to engage with other newly appointed middle leaders, receive site-based support from their senior school leaders, and importantly, have the opportunity to change their identity, from teacher to middle leader.

Fourthly, our data suggests two direct benefits of networking for middle leaders. These relate to school change and professional learning. We therefore suggest that the SLI consider ways they can resource and support all middle leaders by providing them with opportunities to come together in networks with other middle leaders to engage in ongoing professional learning and collegial support.

We also recommend that the SLI design professional learning opportunities that prioritise the collective leadership process. This form of professional learning would bring schools' senior leaders, middle leaders and teacher leaders together for mutual learning with the aim to build a schools' leadership capacity and for middle leaders and teacher leaders to feel supported, credible and empowered to positively impact their school. This supports a distributed leadership approach where leadership distribution is not simply a matter of dispersing tasks from principals to formal middle leaders across the school but rather, it is a partnership and orchestration of the resources within the school community with the common purpose of positively impacting student outcomes.

I have had the opportunity to be involved in a wide variety of complex situations whilst being a HT. This has expanded my skill set and also provided me with growth opportunities professionally and personally. I have been fortunate enough to have a principal who is willing to guide and support me (Head Teacher)

Lastly, data from this study supports the relational component of middle leaders' work with data showing that supervising staff, having responsibilities for staff and student wellbeing, mentoring and collaborating with colleagues, and leading school teaching and learning initiatives were common middle leader activities. Additionally, the data suggest that middle

leaders' perceive they impact student learning through their positive relationships with students, colleagues and parents and their influence is often team-based, with the development of collegial and cooperative relationships foundational to their work. We suggest that the SLI consider professional learning that supports middle leaders to develop their understanding, knowledge and capacity of core emotional social intelligence competencies central to effective leadership through self-reflection, critical consciousness and engaging with peer networks and school leaders in critical reflection and peer feedback. This could be coupled with workshops focused on middle leader areas of concerns such as engaging in difficult conversations and change management. Additionally, expanding the use of 360-degree emotional intelligence assessment tools currently used as part of the Aspiring Principal Leadership Program (APLP) alumni, to include NSW DoE Middle leaders.

I need a mentor. I need a course on leadership skills that cover conflict management and working with and leading difficult staff (Assistant Principal).

The School Leadership Institute is to be commended on making the first steps in understanding middle leadership, the important work middle leaders do, and the current constraints to their leadership. These first steps include investing in the research and co-designing a research instrument to capture the voice of middle leaders in order to recognise and build on the strengths of middle leadership in NSW public schools. Considering, interrogating and implementing the recommendations will take time and investment, but their implementation have the opportunity to make a significant contribution to student learning by enabling middle leaders to lead improvements in their school sites. Without increased support and resources, there is a risk that middle leaders will be unable to make a positive contribution to the provision of world class and equitable education in all NSW public schools.



Authors

A middle leadership cross-institutional research team with members from the University of Wollongong, Macquarie University, and The University of Sydney was formed to research the middle leadership landscape nationally and internationally. Primarily, the team aims to work in partnership with various educational sectors, such as NSW Public Education, to understand the roles, practices, relationships, needs and impacts of middle leaders in schools.

Dr Kylie Lipscombe (Joint Lead Investigator) is a Senior Lecturer and researcher in the School of Education at the University of Wollongong (UOW) and she is the Associate Academic Program Director of Educational Leadership. Kylie has 20 years' experience in educational organisations such as schools and universities. She has held roles such as teacher, middle leader, Deputy Principal, curriculum writer and lecturer. Kylie is passionate about the nexus between educational research and practice. As such, her program of research aims to positively influence professional practice in schools in fields such as middle leadership and teacher collaboration. As an experienced middle leader, Kylie is dedicated to researching and advocating for a better understanding of middle leading practices. She is a keen contributor and leader in professional education associations and is currently serving on the NSW President for the Australian Council for Educational Leaders (ACEL) and is a past NSW President of the Australian Literacy Educators' Association (ALEA). Kylie is currently the lead academic for the NSW Department of Education (NSW DoE) School Leadership Institute (SLI) Aspiring Principals Leadership Program and in 2019, was awarded a National Fellowship from ACEL for her contributions and impact in educational leadership.

Dr John De Nobile (Joint Lead Investigator) is a Senior Lecturer in Education and Director of Primary Teacher Education Programs in the Department of Educational Studies at Macquarie University. He teaches in the Master of Educational Leadership and Master of Education programs and has supervised many research degree candidates. He also does substantial work in the undergraduate and graduate teacher education programs, where much of his teaching concerns classroom and behaviour management. His main research interests are educational leadership and organisational behaviour. Dr De Nobile has published two books and more than forty peer-reviewed journal articles and conference papers on topics ranging from educational leadership, teacher job satisfaction and stress, leader and staff communication

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Dr Sharon Tindall-Ford is an Associate Professor at the University of Wollongong. Sharon's research has focused on making a positive change for school students, pre-service teachers, teachers and school leaders. Sharon has had over 30 years of experience in schools and universities. Her research has focused on two distinct areas – Cognitive Load Theory (CLT) and teacher learning. In the field of CLT she has investigated instructional designs that support student learning. This work has informed the 2019 NSW Department of Education publication: "Cognitive load theory: Research that teachers really need to understand". Her most recent research has focused on three key interrelated areas: middle leadership, teacher policy (including teacher education) and pre-service and teacher learning. Sharon has led and contributed to research supported by funding from universities and education organisations, and has co-published 27 academic publications.

Dr Christine Grice is a Lecturer in Educational Leadership and coordinator of the Master of Education: Management and Leadership program at The University of Sydney. Her key research interests are pedagogical leadership, middle leadership, systems leadership, and practice theory. Christine has been the recipient of two prestigious research awards in Educational Leadership. In 2017, she was awarded a New Voice Scholarship in Educational Leadership Research from ACEL (the Australian Council for Educational Leaders). In 2018 she was awarded the International Journal of Leadership in Education: Theory and Practice Emerging Scholar Manuscript Competition for her article entitled 'Leading Pedagogical Reform' in a top-ranking international journal. She has taught in the government and the non-government sectors in Australia and in the UK. Christine has over a decade of leadership experience in schools and she held previous appointments as Principal, Deputy Principal and Assistant Principal: Curriculum. Christine is coordinator of the Educational Leadership special interest group for the Australian Association for Research in Education. She currently serves on the editorial board of two international journals: the Journal of Educational Administration and History and the Journal of Professional Capital and Community.



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