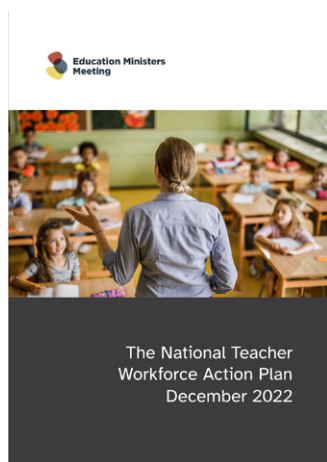


Briefings

Thought leadership for the independent schooling sector

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UNLOCKING THE POTENTIAL OF POWERFUL MIDDLE LEADERS IN INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS



The Australian Government Department of Education report (December 2022) *The National Teacher Workforce Action Plan* was developed to address the national issue of teacher workforce shortages.

Foreword

*The National Teacher Workforce Action Plan*¹ (DESE, 2022) released in December 2022 identifies five major priority areas to address the critical teacher workforce issue including: “Priority 3: Keeping the teachers we have: To improve retention by increasing support for teachers, enhancing career pathways, reducing unnecessary workload and freeing up teacher to focus on core teaching tasks and collaboration”.

The development of middle leaders is a potential strategy to support and retain teachers by creating clear pathways for classroom teachers to conceptualise a desirable career trajectory in a school, and leadership development in education remains a significant focus for policy makers at both the state and federal levels.

This research feature compiled by ISQ Manager (Teacher Quality) Anjulee Singh investigates middle leadership in schools, middle leader development, and the impact middle leaders have on student learning.

The focus on this important cohort has never been more critical in addressing the ongoing challenge of teacher workforce retention. As Munby (2019) noted, “I am not aware of any high-performing school system, or one that is rapidly improving, that leaves leadership development to chance. It is too big a risk for the future (p. 20).”



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Chief Executive Officer
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UNLOCKING THE POTENTIAL OF POWERFUL MIDDLE LEADERS IN INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS



ANJULEE SINGH
Manger (Teacher Quality)

Middle leaders are often referred to as the ‘glue’ of the school leadership structure. They hold an acknowledged position of leadership within the school while still practising as teachers in the classroom, and are consequently key agents in understanding and developing the core business of schools - teaching and learning (Grootenboer, Edwards-Groves, Ronnerman, 2020). The National Teacher Workforce Action Plan (DESE, 2022) released in December 2022 identifies five major priority areas to address the critical teacher workforce issue including:

“Priority 3: Keeping the teachers we have: To improve retention by increasing support for teachers, enhancing career pathways, reducing unnecessary workload and freeing up teacher to focus on core teaching tasks and collaboration”.

The development of middle leaders is a potential strategy to support and retain teachers by creating clear pathways for classroom teachers to conceptualise a desirable career trajectory in a school. Independent Schools Queensland (ISQ) has developed a suite of professional learning programs to support leadership development across all career stages including the Emerging Leaders Program, Aspiring Principals Program and Empowering Classroom Teachers Program, Educators as Researchers Program, and Teacher Growth and Development Program as well as a range of school-specific middle leader development workshops in areas identified by member schools. Leadership development in education remains a significant focus for policy makers at both the state and federal levels. In October 2022, the Australian Institute of School Leadership (AITSL) announced it would commence work to develop specific Middle Leader Standards that align to the Australian Professional Standards for Principals (AITSL, 2022).

Who are our Middle Leaders?

According to the Australian Teacher Workforce Data (ATWD), middle leaders are both classroom teachers and leaders. At least ninety-one per cent (91%) of middle leaders have face-to-face teaching roles (AITSL, 2021). In addition to classroom teaching, middle leaders may hold responsibility for a specific curriculum area or year level (e.g., year coordinator, subject coordinator, head of department, head of year). Alternatively, they might lead strategy and development across the school within a particular focus area

(e.g., director of curriculum, head of digital learning and practice, director of pastoral care). Senior leaders are recognising the short and long-term impact of middle leaders in their schools and acknowledging the need to nurture and develop their skills (ATWD, 2022). The research indicates that when properly supported in their roles, middle leaders can positively impact various outputs including teaching quality, teacher attitudes, and student outcomes (AITSL, 2021). Additionally, middle leaders serve as a link between senior leadership and classroom teachers, ensuring that the school’s vision and priorities are effectively communicated and implemented. A principal of one of ISQ’s member schools in south-east Queensland notes:

“One of the key tensions we have found is that middle leaders as teachers have to relate to other teachers as colleagues, yet their joint leadership roles also require them to undertake line management responsibilities and navigate the impact of authority. This can often lead to a tenuous relationship when collaborating as teachers in a department.”

FIGURE 1. THE MIDDLE LEADERSHIP IN SCHOOLS MODEL (DE NOBILE, 2018)



Middle leaders must therefore also develop a range of interpersonal skills to navigate this dynamic while maintaining relationships with colleagues and executive leaders to drive improvement. Middle leaders also play a key role in the professional development and mentoring of teachers and staff. Their contributions are particularly important when nurturing and growing beginning teachers, which is critical to the retention of teachers in the profession (de Nobile, 2018).

It has been widely acknowledged in the education sector that middle leadership needs to be an area of increased focus for professional learning, and that these needs should be viewed as more than just a means to prepare teachers for executive leadership (AITSL, 2022). Middle leading professional learning programs typically focus on three key areas:

- collaboration,
- change management and
- influence.

It is evident that middle leaders who face complex circumstances such as leading through conflict situations and supporting underperforming colleagues, have been given less attention (Lipscombe, et al., 2020). While the nature of middle leadership varies from context to context, 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 performance management of staff (De Nobile, 2018). Many of these teachers play a critical role in improving student learning outcomes through their pedagogical leadership (Grice, 2019). Therefore, the selection of middle leaders from within the teacher cohort becomes pertinent to school strategy both for school boards and senior leadership teams.

The Middle Leadership in Schools Model

Various practices and responsibilities of middle leaders have been linked in the Middle Leadership in Schools (MLiS) model (de Nobile, 2018). This model represents the support middle leaders require, common practices they use to enact their roles, and the outputs they can positively influence through their roles.

The MLiS model was developed through an extensive review of existing literature and distinguishes between ‘what’ middle leaders do and ‘how’ they do it (see Figure 1) (de Nobile, 2018). The model identifies five factors or inputs that are required for middle leaders to be effective in their roles:

1. principal support
2. school culture
3. professional development
4. knowledge of curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment
5. enthusiasm and drive.

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While the literature on middle leadership commonly highlights the importance of principal support, all these factors can help facilitate success for middle leaders, and, conversely, middle leaders may struggle to be effective without these inputs.

The model divides the roles middle leaders traditionally hold into two categories. ‘Managing’ roles encompass student-focused roles, administrative roles, and organisational roles. These roles are often focused on developing processes and ensuring organisation within the school. On the other hand, leading roles comprise supervisory roles, staff development roles, and strategic roles. These roles aim to motivate others within the school and seek to improve or change practice through influence (Grootenboer et al., 2021).

The MLiS model highlights the various strategies middle leaders use to enact their roles, including managing relationships, leading teams, communicating effectively, managing time, and managing self. The ISQ Emerging Leaders Program delves into these specific areas throughout the one-year program to ensure middle leaders feel supported and have strategies to enact within their specific contexts. The focus areas within the ISQ Emerging Leaders Program include:

- communication
- self-awareness
- self-regulation
- accountability
- selflessness.

The Impact of Middle Leaders on Student Learning

In research conducted by Lipscombe, Nobile, Tindall-Ford and Grice (2020), 2608 school middle leaders were asked to list activities they had developed and led in their schools which they perceived had impacted student learning. Middle leaders in this study perceived developing and leading school academic programs as the most important activity that impacted student learning, followed by developing colleagues through professional learning, mentoring and collaboration. These activities are focused on school improvement, supporting recent research suggesting the work of middle leaders is oriented towards educational development at the school level (Grootenboer et al., 2015; Lipscombe et al., 2019). Middle leaders’ active engagement in student welfare at the school level is of similar importance, while middle leaders are noted as having an important role in student welfare issues, problem behaviour and academic choices at the individual level (Wise & Bennett, 2003; Dinham, 2007).

Middle Leaders as Leaders of Teacher Learning

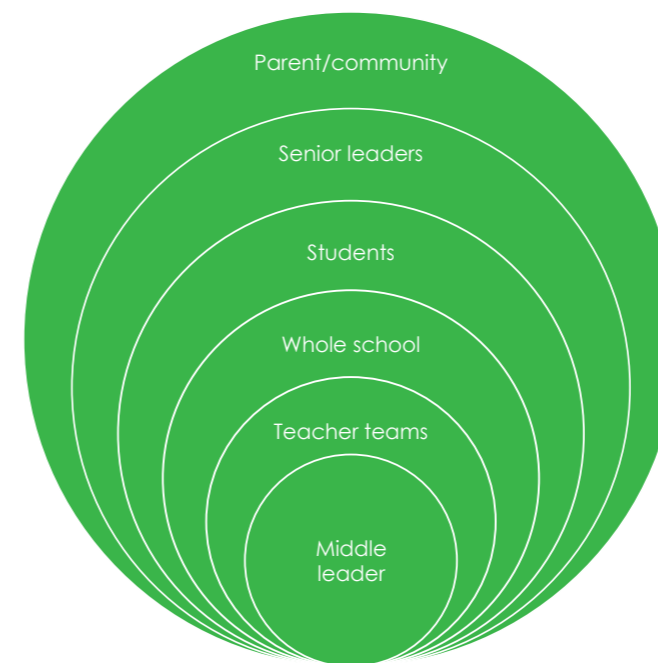
Middle leaders are often involved in decision-making conversations alongside school leaders and other staff. Grootenboer et al (2021) note that their ongoing classroom teaching experience coupled with

their simultaneous engagement in leading teaching and learning is an asset in decision-making processes as middle leaders provide a unique understanding of the realities and complexities of implementing various decisions across the organisation. Middle leaders’ influence and authority enables them to shape school policy and programs, while also supporting school staff through supervision and management practices (Bennett et al., 2007; de Nobile, 2021; Grootenboer, 2018; Hirsh & Bergmo-Prvulovic, 2019).

Middle leaders are expected to lead, promote, and sustain effective practices to support student learning outcomes and provide high-quality teaching within their own classrooms, while often “simultaneously being a mentor, coach, supporter and evaluator for their colleagues” (Davies, 2020). In maintaining high quality teaching and learning in their own classrooms, and demonstrating these practices to others, middle leaders are well-positioned to support and mentor other teachers to strengthen their own teaching practices. Specific leading teaching and learning practices for middle leaders include:

- modelling quality teaching and learning
- delivering professional learning
- supporting teachers to engage in new pedagogical practices
- leading curriculum delivery and/or advising on curriculum delivery approaches
- leading development of assessments and/or assessment strategies, and moderating assessments
- observing lessons and providing expert mentoring, feedback, and goal setting
- demonstrating strong pedagogical and curricula knowledge and modelling continuous learning themselves.

FIGURE 2 – MIDDLE LEADER SPHERE OF INFLUENCE



Spheres of Influence

In 2019, a survey of 2608 middle leaders was conducted by the School Leadership Institute, a leadership unit within the New South Wales Department of Education. They reported various spheres of influence in their schools. Figure 2 overviews the most common spheres of influence reported by a sample group from the NSW study in order of frequency (from inner to outer) (Lipscombe et al., 2020).

The most reported sphere of influence was teacher teams. These were typically year level, faculty, and cross-faculty teams. Whole school influence was also commonly reported by middle leaders, particularly as many middle leaders have whole school responsibilities and are called on to perform relieving deputy and principal roles. Working closely with colleagues to influence student learning, although less cited than teacher teams and whole school influence, was also regularly reported, especially in relation to student wellbeing and welfare. However, it is noted that the work of middle leader influence in teams and whole school focus areas is often associated with

student learning, and as such it could be argued that they are influencing student learning from all the levels shown in Figure 2. Less frequently cited were spheres of influence associated with senior leaders and parents/community. Importantly, many middle leaders reported multiple places of influence as they led multiple areas in the school. This is consistent with research on middle leadership and distributed leadership where expertise and authority are distributed across practices in the school (Bush & Glover, 2014). As such, multiple roles and responsibilities provide opportunities for multidimensional influence through various collaborative approaches in which middle leaders can influence purposeful action to develop solutions to local issues in local contexts (Lipscombe et al., 2019).

Middle Leaders and Professional Learning

For schools to remain abreast of national and international educational trends, it is essential to continue to understand and grow cultures of professional learning.

The skills of effective leadership are rarely left to chance alone. Hence, investing in a leader’s capacity to lead improvement should be seen as paramount in developing capacity and capability across the school. As Munby (2019) noted,

“In providing opportunities for middle leaders to engage in professional learning and development, principals can communicate the value they place in these roles and their ambition for their middle leaders to succeed.”

Middle leadership can be purposefully fostered, cultivated, and developed. Principal support is one of the most significant contributors to the success of middle leaders (Gurr & Drysdale, 2013). It has been suggested that middle leaders are typically recruited to their roles as a result of quality teaching and learning (Irvine & Brundrett, 2016) instead of leadership experience, and many middle leaders consequently have limited professional learning experiences in leadership development (Bassett, 2016).

Principals build school culture and model the way other school staff should regard middle leaders and their expertise (Hirsh & Bergmo-Prvulovic, 2019). In providing opportunities for middle leaders to engage in professional learning and development, principals can communicate the value they place in these roles and their ambition for their middle leaders to succeed. Ongoing professional learning provides important opportunities for reflection and the development of skills and knowledge at any teacher career stage.

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At a bespoke Middle Leadership Professional Development workshop delivered by ISQ in January 2023 a participant commencing his leadership journey this year noted:

“It is remarkable to have the opportunity to think about leadership, to discuss our purpose and shared vision and protocols for leading our teams. To know this time is dedicated to us as a relatively new leadership team is setting the positive tone for the year. This investment in us from our Principal is part of feeling like we are being set up for success.”

Jensen et al’s (2017) study on high performing school systems found that leadership development should be collaborative, goal-orientated and reflexive by nature. ISQ’s Educators as Researchers Program, considers the unique position of middle leaders within the school leadership structure as well as the development of characteristics to engage teams of principals, middle leaders and teachers in an active inquiry into a specific school focus area using either Action Research or Inquiry methodology. With the shared focus of making sustainable improvements in teaching and learning, coupled with the understanding that good teaching and good decisions are based on high-quality evidence rather than taken-for-granted assumptions (Robinson and

Lai, 2006), the team, frequently leading other teams of teachers, trial a range of strategies, collect data to measure impact, reflect on their learning, make changes then repeat the process. This program closely aligns with research undertaken by Grootenboer et.al (2020) and Elliott and Hollingsworth (2020) who argue it is professionally conducive to consider middle leadership as a social practice.

Furthermore Jensen et al. (2017) found that effective leadership development provides time for leaders to implement what they were learning and time for leaders to connect with key colleagues and stakeholders with whom they shared leadership responsibilities. According to Jensen et al. (2016) connection of the learning to a leader’s context ensured “problems of relevance and applicability” and an opportunity for reflection, experiential learning or the ability to practice the new ideas and behaviours (p. 17).

Middle leaders engage in professional learning through a variety of means. More structured professional development activities include workshops and conferences, while on-the-job learning opportunities often involve collaborative learning from peers. According to the ATWD, the amount of professional learning educators undertake increases with seniority. Middle leaders report spending more time engaged in professional learning activities over the course of a year (46.3 hours) than teachers with leadership responsibilities (42.6 hours) and classroom teachers (38.7 hours). However, this is considerably less than the amount of time principals (73.4 hours) and deputy principals (55.6

hours) report spending engaged in professional learning (AITSL, 2021).

According to Bryan & Walker (2022) the most effective professional learning for middle leaders is structured and highly relevant to their role. Although middle leaders report that their professional development experience is valuable, their perceptions are lower than that of principals. (AITSL, 2021). Specifically, they are less likely than principals to agree that: their professional learning was aligned to their own professional development needs (81% vs 89%); that it was aligned to the needs of their education setting (88% vs 92%); that they have had opportunities to implement what they had learned (78% vs 88%); and that they have had opportunities to reflect on or evaluate the impact their professional learning has had on learners (61% vs 82%) (AITSL, 2021).

In a study commissioned by the NSW Department of Education (Lipscombe et al., 2020) the type of professional learning middle leaders would like to engage in was also examined. Mentoring by a senior leader, networking with other middle leaders and formal leadership programs were the preferred professional learning types identified. Mentoring, both inside and outside the school setting, was the most popular type of professional learning middle leaders identified. Some responses were based on prior experiences. Others discussed their preference for leadership mentoring, for example some middle leaders said that their current role included coaching and mentoring other members of staff, however, they were not afforded the same opportunities.

“I spoke recently with the executive team as I feel that I am responsible for learning, mentoring, and working with my six teachers on my team but I am without the same support for myself. I have asked that next year the Deputy Principal is the clear mentor for the Assistant Principals and that we have time fortnightly to sit and meet with her to discuss things that we are needing help with (Assistant Principal) (p.53).”

Networking with other middle leaders was also a common form of professional learning referred to by the middle leaders. Some identified the need for networking as a result of the isolating role of middle leader, while others explained the importance of networking to share resources. Some said networking was beneficial but was no longer implemented frequently. Others discussed the importance of networking being organised at a system level instead of relying on individual middle leaders to organise. All ISQ leadership development programs include intentional opportunities for participants to network and share practice, through both formal and informal channels including face-to-face sharing symposiums and connection through online platforms. Participants comment on the usefulness and impact of having colleagues from a broad range of member schools to connect with.

Conclusion

The research has shown that middle leaders have possibly the greatest potential of all school leaders to positively impact classroom practices and improve student learning (Gurr, 2019, Leithwood). It has been argued that:

“No other position has more potential to increase school effectiveness than the department-head position because it is a direct extension of the school’s administration and department heads enjoy the unequalled opportunity of direct, daily contact with teachers and students” (Weller, 2001, p. 74).

The focus on this critical cohort of leaders has never been more important due to their key role in addressing the ongoing challenge of teacher workforce retention. School leaders have an important role in identifying, nurturing and developing this important leadership group. To support schools to do this, ISQ currently offers a range of leadership development workshops and programs.

“All ISQ leadership development programs include intentional opportunities for participants to network and share practice through both formal and informal channels...participants comment on the usefulness and impact of having colleagues from a broad range of member schools to connect with.”

ISQ also conducts targeted Leadership Reviews as support school leadership teams to identify key strengths and areas for development to support the growth of this critical teaching workforce and senior leaders. Please contact Sheridan Fisher (Assistant Director, Teaching & Learning) for more information: sfisher@isq.qld.edu.au.

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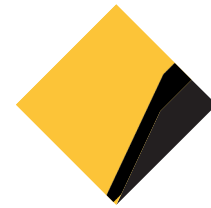
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