

MIDDLE LEADERSHIP IN SCHOOLS

Middle Leadership in Schools: Ideas and Actions for Navigating the Muddy Waters of Middle Leading is a unique book in that it brings together practitioners, researchers, consultants, and administrators, to share their stories and ideas about middle leadership in schools. Thus, each chapter is both theoretically robust and pragmatically relevant. This is important because in each case the wisdom that is shared is reliable and relatable, and written in a style that is accessible to all. Middle leaders provide crucial leadership in schools – in and around classrooms where the purposes of education are enacted and fulfilled, so this is an important volume in that it provides needed professional learning for these key leaders. Furthermore, the chapters cover some of the fundamental practices of middle leadership, including the development and maintenance of trust, how to lead change and innovation through action research, and strategic thinking and planning. I commend the chapters in this book to school middle leaders, as important insights that can help you reflect upon, and develop, your own middle leading practices in your own educational site.

—Peter Grootenboer, Professor of Education,
Griffith University

Middle Leadership in Schools is a powerful guide that brilliantly illuminates the challenges and opportunities faced by middle leaders. With its diverse perspectives from across Australia, this book is an invaluable companion for anyone navigating the muddy waters of middle leading. I wish I had this treasure during my own middle leadership journey!

—Lauren Sayer, Director Curriculum Victorian
Curriculum Assessment Authority

This is a book for aspiring school middle leaders. It sets out the complexities of the role so that you will know what to expect.

It is valuable for current middle leaders. It illustrates the volatility of the job you're doing and help you understand why your job can be so tricky to carry out.

Senior leaders will benefit from reading it. It will assist you to unravel the challenges of getting the best from your organisation's middle layer.

The range of expertise on show makes this an easy to read yet thought-provoking book. It bridges the gap between the regularly criticised ‘ivory tower’ academic approach and purely anecdotal, bias laden non-generalisable accounts.

The structure is clear and ensures the reader thinks about the content. Guiding questions and reflective questions and tasks steer you though varying perspectives. Real-world experiences are supported and underpinned by academic citations. This is important when discussing crucial middle leader issues such as identity, trust and authenticity.

It is a book that has sought the opinion and critical appreciation of those doing this vital work in schools and robustly validated it. It works well.

It is an important addition to school middle leadership literature.

—*Bill Lowe*, Responsible for the design and delivery of Education Leadership in the Education MA at Newman University, Birmingham, UK. Author of *Middle Leadership for 21st Century Schools*. Crown House

Middle-level leadership is the engine room for positive change in a school. I have been privileged to work with Liz in the hard graft of positive school improvement from the middle and to learn from Barbara and Patrick’s work over many years. I strongly recommend their thoughtful, expert and empathetic approach to bringing the best minds in middle leadership together in this essential book on building a thriving school and future for senior leadership.

—*Karen Money*, Regional Director Victorian Department of Education

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Ideas and Strategies for Navigating the Muddy
Waters of Leading from the Middle

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Emerald Publishing Limited
Emerald Publishing, Floor 5, Northspring, 21-23 Wellington Street,
Leeds LS1 4DL.

First edition 2024

Editorial matter and selection © 2024 Elizabeth Benson, Patrick Duignan
and Barbara Watterston.

Individual chapters © 2024 The authors.

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-83753-085-4 (Print)

ISBN: 978-1-83753-082-3 (Online)

ISBN: 978-1-83753-084-7 (Epub)



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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ABOUT THE EDITORS

Elizabeth Benson firmly believes that ‘every student deserves a great teacher, and every teacher deserves the opportunity to be great’. Throughout her career, she has been devoted to enhancing the capabilities of teachers and leaders in secondary schools. Her current focus lies in empowering middle leaders within schools, enabling them to thrive in their roles. To this end, she founded Pivotal Leadership, offering coaching and mentoring programs specifically tailored to middle leaders. In 2018, she established the Australian Council of Educational Leaders Queensland (ACELQ) Pivotal People Middle Leaders professional network, which serves as a valuable resource for educators in the middle leadership tier of educational institutions. She has amassed a wealth of experience in various roles, including Leadership Capability Development, Deputy Principal, and Pedagogy and Curriculum leader. She also wrote the Australian literature review for the AITSL Middle Leadership Environmental Scan. Currently pursuing a PhD at Griffith University, she is dedicated to investigating how middle leaders in secondary schools develop their leading practices. Her research aims to shed light on this crucial aspect of educational leadership.

Professor Emeritus Patrick Duignan has been involved in education for over 50 years as a Teacher, Deputy Principal, and Principal and in several positions from Lecturer to Professor and Dean in tertiary education institutions in several countries. He was Head of The Centre for Administrative Studies, University of New England; Professor Emeritus at Australian Catholic University, Australia; Past President of the Australian Council for Educational Leaders; Dean of the Faculty of Education, University Brunei Darussalam; and Director of Leading to Inspire. He received his initial

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ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

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Sarah Gunn currently holds the position of Director of Studies and Pedagogy at St Peters Lutheran College Springfield, a co-educational, Lutheran P-12 school in Queensland, Australia. She recently completed her Master of Educational Leadership, focusing her literature review on the practices of highly effective professional learning communities (PLCs). She is passionate about leveraging contemporary educational research to lead practical, impactful, and context-specific school improvement initiatives. She is particularly interested in cultures of thinking, learner agency, and inquiry-based professional collaboration. She is also passionate about contributing to the profession across educational sectors through her work with Pivotal People, a professional learning network run by middle leaders, for middle leaders.

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Jenny Lewis is an experienced National and International Education Advisor and provides leadership coaching and facilitation roles for international, national, and state education systems to develop innovative, performance-focused sustainable practices. Recognised for her expertise in leadership capability development, she has co-designed school and system leadership development continuums, frameworks, and learning maps for the Australian Council for Educational Leaders, the Commonwealth of Nations, and most recently the Worldwide Innovation Summit for Education. She is an Education Advisor to the Indonesia Ministry of Education, Culture, Research and Technology Director-Generals Schools and Teacher Quality. She was the Lead Author along with Liz in completing the AITSL Middle Leadership Environmental Scan that detailed evidence regarding middle leader impact in Australian schools, international application of middle leadership standards, and recommendations regarding future work to support middle leadership development. She is currently completing her PhD and is analysing international principal preparation certification and registration programs with an aim to building an evidence-led program for Australian aspirant principals.

Kylie Lipscombe is an Associate Professor at the University of Wollongong. She is an Australian researcher, educator, and presenter with nearly 25 years' experience in schools, school systems and universities. Kylie has contributed to international, national, and state educational initiatives and policy in middle leadership, leadership development, and teacher collaboration. She has

authored numerous books, book chapters, journal articles and government reports. She is the academic leader for the NSW Department of Education (NSW DoE) Senior Leader- Aspiring Principals Program, and NSW DoE Middle Leadership Development Program. Currently she is on the advisory board to the Australian Institute for Teaching & School Leadership (AITSL) development of The Professional Standards for Middle Leaders and serves as the President of ACEL NSW and Deputy President of ACEL nationally.

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Jodie Schafer has been teaching secondary students in Queensland for 30 years and has also taught in British Columbia Canada. She is currently Head of Humanities Faculty at Wavell. She has also worked in various curriculum roles with Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority. She studied her Bachelor of Arts and Graduate Diploma of Education at Griffith University, Queensland, Australia.

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Lucy Warnock is the Dedicated Well-being Coordinator at Immanuel College, in Adelaide, South Australia. As an Educator who has held multiple middle leadership positions since early in her career, her experience in both government and independent schools is extensive. Prior to her well-being role at Immanuel, she was Y8 Year-Level Coordinator for 12 years and has also been Acting Head of Middle School, numerous times since 2012. With a passion for helping students navigate the complexities of adolescence, she has been the leader in transforming the well-being curriculum. She has developed a bespoke framework and curriculum that includes a range of innovative programs that focus on respectful relationships, consent, and building resilience. Her warm and empathic approach has earned her the respect and credibility of students, colleagues, and the wider college community. She studied her Bachelor of Education (upper primary/lower secondary) at Flinders University.

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FOREWORD

Dr Lyn Sharratt

This book, *Middle Leadership in Schools*, is a gift. The authors have brought together voices from all sectors in education contributing to the book's practicality and authenticity.

If leadership is defined in the Educational Administration literature as 'influence and impact', then middle leaders are in a strong position to influence and guide their colleagues in the never-ending pursuit of excellence and equity. The former being the growth and achievement of every learner and the latter meaning the inclusivity of ALL learners achieving success – and I really do mean *all*. Middle leaders are educators intricately enmeshed in the leading of professional learning (PL) and teaching practices in their schools – downward, outward, and upward. They are the essential glue, the critical link.

My research reveals that leaders establish the conditions for success in systems and schools – and that first condition in enabling and establishing the necessary linkages embraces 'relational trust', as multiple authors in this text so aptly point out. I concur that the ideal middle leader's identity includes the ability to reach staff members' consensus on a shared vision, on motivating and mobilising teachers to own that vision and on garnering a commitment to the vision. This facet of middle leader identity contributes to their power to make a difference.

This book is a must-read for all teachers and leaders – as everyone is a middle leader – 'leading from the middle' somewhere in their systems. Being very practical, it does not shy away from the challenges but offers heaps of practical guidance for aspiring middle leaders on approaching and overcoming the challenges.

I judge a book by what I have learned that can be implemented tomorrow – and this book hits that mark! It offers so many practical self-help suggestions. For example, ‘soft tactics’ to build trust – an imperative for middle leaders – are explained in detail, for instance: one-to-one conferencing with new staff members; bud-dying-up staff to work in pairs on staff members’ ‘next best learning moves’; co-constructing operating norms to cement respectful treatment of each other during every meeting; giving time to teachers to share their ‘practices that work’; honouring work-life balance with no emails on weekends, holidays, and after 6 p.m. (and before 8 a.m.!). Authentic middle leaders work ‘alongside’ and learn the work while doing the work with their peers. Again, they are the glue.

Reflective questions sprinkled thoughtfully throughout this book help readers self-assess their next steps in developing and embracing their leadership identity. I am delighted with the focus on PL programs for middle leaders. Too often, the middle leader sector is not a valued focus for PL – in my opinion a grave omission.

I appreciate the authenticity of the narratives captured from middle leaders doing this leadership work. Middle leaders write that they are visible in classrooms, they work alongside teachers and students, they are expert teachers, and they are the conduit between the system vision and the schools moving forward to capture that vision. These middle leaders describe the opportunities they have had to not only engage with their teaching force but also to empower them to ensure that every learner is growing and achieving – beyond what their teachers and schools might ever have thought was possible. That, for me, is the essence and beauty of this must-read!

Commitment, communication, co-construction of meaning, clarity, and collaboration – the skills that middle leaders develop over time – are highlighted from each author’s unique perspective in this book – how refreshing! ‘Establishing Trust’ is the middle leaders’ foundation that underpins the work of system and school improvement. Thought-provoking and challenging as it is to build trust, middle leaders know that trust is built differently in differing contexts. Building trust is the first step in the puzzle to be

solved by middle leaders, and fortunately for readers, this process is unpacked in this book.

Throughout this gem, we are constantly reminded that we must focus on the ‘how’ of purposeful collaboration and on the processes, structures, protocols, and tools that middle leaders use to:

- ✓ co-construct and test solutions;
- ✓ facilitate quality conversations;
- ✓ promote clarity;
- ✓ deepen connections; and
- ✓ celebrate all large and small wins.

Together, these approaches as implemented by middle leaders and teams, in authentic ways, sustain and accelerate the speed of change and progress for all students’ growth and achievement (Clarke & Sharratt, 2023).

In conclusion, this book effectively researches and emphasizes the necessity for *all* leaders to support middle leaders actively, strategically, and intentionally, and give them the time, guidance, and PL they need to navigate the complex educational landscape that they find themselves in. It is worth the investment in building the capacity of middle leaders as they are the glue, we need to improve our systems and schools.

Brief Bio for Lyn

Dr Lyn Sharratt is a highly sought-after expert in the field of education. As a distinguished practitioner, researcher, author, and presenter, she has dedicated her career to turning cutting-edge research into practical guidance for school leaders and teachers. Based on her extensive experience and expertise, she has developed the CLARITY Learning Suite (CLS), a unique online roadmap for educational leaders and teachers. Through CLS, members learn to utilise ongoing assessment to inform instruction to ‘Put FACES on the Data’ and drive Equity and Excellence at all levels of the education system.

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INTRODUCTION

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THE SCHOOL MIDDLE LEADERSHIP CONTEXT

Schools, education systems, and academics are currently investigating who are middle leaders, what do they do, how to best develop middle leader capability, and what is the impact of middle leadership on student learning. However, very little middle leader voice can be found in any of these conversations. This edited book aims to fill that gap and amplify the voice of middle leaders by sharing their leading practice.

Research into what middle leaders do is starting to highlight the complex nature of leading from the middle. Leadership research in schools has tended to focus primarily on principals and the principalship, and the attention given to middle leadership by researchers and education systems has, for the most part, been on strengthening the pool of potential principals and therefore the succession of middle leaders to the principalship. This book gives primary attention to the leadership of middle leaders by including them as authors or co-authors of various chapters. In doing so, this book positions middle leadership as a worthy leadership career in its self and amplifies the voice of middle leaders in deepening our collective understanding of educational leadership.

There is no clear definition of a middle leader in literature, research, or policy. Middle leaders can be described by:

- positionality;
- formality of role; and/or
- tasks and accountabilities.

It would be pertinent of a middle leader or principal to reflect on these three features of middle leadership in their school context as middle leaders are different from teacher leaders and principals (Grootenboer et al., 2020; Lipscombe et al., 2021). Middle leaders have been defined as ‘those who assume formal responsibilities and duties of leadership and management at a level situated between principal and teachers’ (Li et al., 2021, p. 2). This definition creates a picture of the position a middle leader holds in an organisational hierarchy. Middle leaders who authored chapters in this book might find Grootenboer et al.’s (2020) definition of middle leadership closer to their reality: middle leaders hold formal leadership responsibilities and significant teaching responsibilities. ‘It is middle leaders who have some positional responsibility to bring about change in their schools, yet maintain close connections to the classroom as sites where student learning occurs’ (Grootenboer et al., 2020, p. 2). There are also middle leaders whose context is formal but not situated in a school. These middle leaders often work with other school leaders to support the development of education policy and practice within a system. The variety of middle leading positions, roles, and accountabilities adds to the complex nature of middle leadership.

From the relevant literature and the experience of the contributors to this book, it would appear that responsibility for leading school improvement is being distributed (or delegated) down the school hierarchy. However, we know very little about the impact of middle leadership on student learning, and it is also challenging to accurately capture the impact of middle leader practice (Lipscombe et al., 2021).

Many of the middle leaders who have contributed to this book are or have been responsible for driving school improvement in various

roles, especially in a curriculum role, as a leader of pastoral care, leading whole-school improvement, or developing policy for a system. They provide insights into how they have led school improvement by connecting their practice to research. And while this book does not attempt to directly explore the impact of middle leadership on student learning, it does provide guidance and examples of how middle leaders can tackle some of the challenges of leading improvement in school.

Most middle leaders are, however, *leaders AND teachers*, and the themes in this book recognise the dualities that *exist* in school middle leadership. The chapters are organised around three themes:

- leading others AND empowering yourself;
- collaborating AND communicating; and
- leading learning AND leading change for improvement.

The inclusion of AND in each theme positions the middle leader as one who juggles the multiple responsibilities and roles of leading from the middle. When writing or contributing to a chapter in this book, middle leaders were requested to impart their wisdom about:

- their experiences as a middle leader;
- ideas and strategies for leading from the middle; and
- what changes are necessary to enable them to empower themselves, grow, and bloom as leaders.

When reflecting on their development needs within the chapters of this book, middle leaders suggest that the following are significant challenges for them:

- having difficult conversations, including navigating accountability and developing trusting relationships;
- leading strategically in a demanding environment, including leading school improvement, implementing a raft of school and

policy changes, and influencing others while responding to the daily challenges of school life; and

- developing the capability of teachers while finding opportunities to develop their own teaching practice and discovering their authentic leadership self.

As editors, we are encouraging middle leaders to use their professional artistry when dealing with challenging and messy situations. They need to be creative and resourceful when responding to new and unique problems that they haven't faced before, and they should be encouraged to 'invent' new ways of thinking and doing in responding to complex challenges. Successful middle leaders learn and grow each day, and they encourage others to do the same, that is, they empower others to become better leaders. By engaging with the stories of practice within this book, middle leaders can gain ideas on how they could craft unique responses to their unique challenges.

WHY A BOOK WRITTEN FOR AND BY MIDDLE LEADERS?

As editors, we had three goals for this book:

1. provide an opportunity for middle leaders to tell their story of 'middle leading' and add their voice to the existing literature about leading from the middle in schools – something that is currently weak or absent;
2. empower middle leaders to confidently tackle the challenges of middle leading informed by and through stories of other middle leaders; and
3. provide mentoring opportunities for middle leaders to develop their writing skills and confidence, hopefully empowering them to own their leadership voice.

The middle leaders who have contributed to this book have been chosen carefully to ensure thoughtful representation of the depth and breadth of middle leadership in schools. You will notice

chapter authors from government, Catholic, and independent education sectors and from across Australia. Many of the middle leaders in schools are also classroom teachers. There are middle leaders included from primary and secondary schools; leaders who have significant years of leadership experience and others are earlier in their leadership career. We thank them for taking up this challenge, juggling their leading, teaching and writing, and sharing their leadership story with others.

Many of the middle leaders had never written for publication before, so we paired them with an experienced author or academic (or both). The role of the mentor was to guide the middle leader through the writing process. How that appeared in practice was different for each writing partnership, but our hope is that both the mentor and the middle leader have benefitted from this process. We thank Kylie Lipscombe, Sharon Tindall-Ford, Louisa Rennie, Pamela Macklin, and Donna Pendergast for their mentoring roles.

Each of the middle leaders who contributed to this edited collection took on the challenge of writing about aspects of their leadership. As a collection, their writings provide an overview of the sophisticated nature of middle leadership. The overview clearly indicates that middle leaders are:

- thinking and planning strategically;
- interpreting sophisticated curriculum and making decisions with their teams about what is best for the students in their context;
- cultivating safe cultures for teachers to talk about their practice and develop themselves as educators;
- researching teaching and learning using high-level action research skills;
- using data and evidence to diagnose problems of practice and collaborating with others to find solutions;
- shaping a clear sense of their leadership identity, being strategic and intentional about their own leadership development, and leveraging their strengths to create trusting learning environments;

- developing networks with educators outside their school to deepen knowledge of their craft;
- balancing the demands of senior leaders and teachers;
- influencing up, down, and across the school and system hierarchy;
- gathering the resources so that teachers can provide learning experiences that engage students;
- using their organisation and management skills to manage their workload and the workload of their team; and
- understanding and recognising their impact and ensuring they are leading with integrity and authenticity.

THE STRUCTURE OF THIS BOOK

The topics represented in this book have been chosen based on the research into what middle leaders do, the challenges they face, and the passions that inspire them to lead. Each chapter explores an aspect of three dualities of middle leadership:

- leading others AND empowering self;
- collaborating AND communicating; and
- leading learning AND leading change for improvement.

Each chapter starts with guiding questions to stimulate reflection on the reader's own leading practices. Within each chapter, the authors provide reflection questions or tasks, practical examples, or vignettes of practice to further enhance the reader's learning experience. The editors are confident that middle leaders will find the wisdom and advice given on leadership by the authors valuable for improving their leadership practices within their spheres of influence. We hope you enjoy reading this book and find its content practical, informative, and inspiring.

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