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# SQUEEZED? THE ROLE, PURPOSE AND DEVELOPMENT OF MIDDLE LEADERS IN SCHOOLS

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## Abstract

Middle school leaders are increasingly playing a crucial role in developing and maintaining the nature and quality of pupils learning experiences. However, there is often ambiguity about their role, sometimes experienced as being caught in the “crossfire” between the expectations of different levels in the schools’ hierarchy. Ensuring good teaching and learning was universally recognised as being at the heart of the middle leader’s work, but this also created some of their most intractable problems particularly the rival expectations of monitoring and collegiality. This paper critically analyses the role, purpose and development of middle leaders and specifically the assistant principal, which is a key leadership position within the NSW Department of Education and Communities (DEC). The professional learning needs of middle leadership roles are considered through a critique of two middle leadership development programs currently in place in Sydney, NSW. The Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) standards are assessed for their relevance and applicability to middle level leadership development. Finally, a professional learning model to build the leadership capacity and skills of assistant principals is proposed. Overall, this article suggests that the development of middle leadership preparation programs in schools is now more important than ever.

## Introduction

Caldwell & Spinks (2013) observed that there is a crisis in education in many nations around the world and argued that countries like Australia, England, New Zealand and United States that have been proud in the past of the effectiveness of their systems of education are now struggling to keep pace with others that are performing at the highest levels in international tests of student achievements. Australia was recently embarrassed when results for 2011 in Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and the Progress in International Reading and Literacy Study (PIRLS) were released in 2012. No one was prepared for results that revealed Australia was ranked 27<sup>th</sup> out of 48 countries for Year 4 in PIRLS and 18<sup>th</sup> out of 52 countries for Year 4 Mathematics in TIMSS (Thomson et al., 2012).

Caldwell & Spinks (2013, p. 2) noted that “this is an astonishing state of affairs given that knowledge about improvement and transformation is richer and more dependable than ever”. There have been many studies exploring the question of how to improve school systems so that schools become more effective and this appears to be at the wit of most governments. The role of school leaders as a factor in maximising student learning outcomes features heavily in these studies. While this is often indirect, school leadership impact on various indicators of school capacity and performance is significant. School leadership is currently recognised internationally as a vital factor in improving school effectiveness, teacher quality and student achievement (Dinham et al., 2013). Therefore, the importance of meaningful school leadership preparation and development programmes is unquestionable.

Maximising leadership influence in schools is a collective responsibility (Duigan, 2012; Duigan &

Cannon, 2011; Walker, 2011). A number of studies have suggested that the time is right for rethinking the way the principalship is conceptualised and practised. There is a growing belief that single-person leadership, such as that of the principal, is insufficient when it comes to leading learning and teaching in a complex organisation like school. The effectiveness of principalship is of widespread and growing concern hence the emphasis on collective responsibility for leadership in schools. Research in the role, purpose and development of middle leadership in schools is one of the results of this move from principalship as an individualistic view of leadership to greater collective responsibility for leadership in schools. This paper is therefore concerned with this group of leaders- deputy principals, assistant principals etc.

Hargreaves & Fink (2006) observed that the leadership of principals and the assumption that school leadership is synonymous with the principal has preoccupied educational leadership literature for some time. Apart from this, the large number of principal retirement in Australia (see Marks, 2013; Lacey & Gronn, 2006; Barty et al., 2005) is also presenting education with a significant school leadership challenge. Along with this is the reluctance of younger middle leaders to aspire for higher leadership positions (i.e. principalship) (McKenzie, 2008; Lacy & Gronn, 2006). One of the challenges the school sector is facing as a result of these is the potential shortage of principals which inevitably turns attention to the effectiveness of succession planning. The importance of developing middle school leaders who can take over from these retiring principals is therefore urgent.

In recent years, the role of the principal and its effectiveness in leading schools to meet the contemporary and future challenges in education has been critiqued. One of the reasons for the ineffectiveness of the principal as the primary source of school leadership is that the expectations for the role are too great for any one person. Given the many expectations and the heavy work load, it would seem sensible and necessary for principals to engage with others especially the middle leaders in meeting the expectations for the job. The lone-ranger view of the principal's role is no longer desirable, practical or effective.

The increased complexity and multidimensionality of principal's role as well as the increasing responsibilities and accountabilities are creating opportunities for the distribution of leadership within and across schools (Caldwell, 2006). The responsibilities and accountabilities include educational leadership, educational programmes, learning outcomes, student welfare, staff welfare, development and management, physical and financial resource management and school and community partnerships (NSW DET, 2000). This is currently shifting many practitioners and policy makers' views to the role middle leaders can play in this distributed leadership responsibility. To facilitate this development, school system policies must evolve so as to promote and support a strong commitment to sharing leadership responsibilities and encourage greater leadership density and capacity within the middle leadership levels. Some researchers such as Davis (2006) have suggested that this is already happening in many school systems and that there is a shift in leadership emphasis from the traditional views where school principals provided leadership and middle leaders administered curriculum area to a model of distributed leadership.

The key contention in this paper is that with effective middle school leadership, school improvement can become a deliberate process of design and accomplishment but no matter how assertive middle leadership is, it cannot engender improvement on a sustained basis in and of itself. This is possible only through dynamic interplay of effective middle leadership, effective principal leadership and effective teacher leadership. Effective middle leadership can only be achieved through successfully managed process of revitalisation, support and professional learning activities.

While evidence in support of middle school leadership is compelling, we have not yet reached the point of maturity where middle leadership is a self-sustaining entity nor have most education systems devised fully satisfactory ways of recognising, nurturing and promoting middle level leadership in schools. Therefore, there is an urgent challenge for school systems to develop middle leaders.

Recently, a desire to reinforce school leadership quality motivated the development of National Professional Standards for Principals by the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL). AITSL (2011) have clear professional standards for principals which have been endorsed by all the states and territories. The standards are a complex overlapping system of required skills. The Standards are based on three leadership requirements:

- vision and values
- knowledge and understanding
- personal qualities and social and interpersonal skills

These requirements are enacted through five key professional practices:

- leading teaching and learning
- developing self and others
- leading improvement, innovation and change
- leading the management of the school
- engaging and working with the community

While the standards provide a model against which principals can match their knowledge, qualities, experiences and skills to determine their strengths and areas of development, such professional standards are not well defined for middle school leaders.

## **The role and purpose of middle leaders in schools**

Schools have for many years had positions of leadership in what has been termed middle-level leadership roles but unfortunately, too often, the expectations and support for these roles has largely been lacking (Gurr & Drysdale, 2013). The position has also received considerably less attention by researchers in recent years as compared with their principal colleagues (Cranston, 2009, p.217).

There is little doubt that the role of the middle leader has become increasingly more complex, varied and demanding but as Cranston (2009) argued, as a result of a dearth of research in this area, there are few documented understandings of how their roles and responsibilities have been evolving. However, it is clear that middle level school leadership can have a powerful role in influencing teaching and learning particularly when supported by senior leadership.

With regard to research on school leadership, principal leadership remains prevalent because of the importance of their role to school improvement (Leithwood et al., 2004; Robinson et al., 2008). However, it is clear that principals are not the only leaders in schools that make a difference in school effectiveness and improvement and as such, many scholars have thought of the many ways through which leadership can be dispersed in schools.

Wahlstrom et al. (2010) have argued that leadership can be dispersed in schools by goal directed mutual influence, group level mode in which principals and teachers share responsibility for leadership and through distributed patterns of leadership practices. Gurr & Drysdale (2013) argue that most of the research on dispersing leadership has been centred on the conceptual development and empirical evidence. Distributed leadership remains an appealing concept in terms of the distribution of power and sharing of expertise and reflects the reality of school operations but it has been unclear to what extent it matters in terms of student learning (Robinson et al., 2008).

Two decades ago, Harvey (1994) observed that in the state education system of Australia, the deputy principalship in the primary schools had become a problematic role. Harvey (1994) went further to argue that the Deputy principal had been ignored or forgotten by policy makers, researchers and academics as being a significant school level leader and that educational restructuring in Australia had produced little constructive thinking about the deputy principalship. The situation does not seem to have changed as Gurr & Drysdale (2013) argues that the interest in distributed leadership has continued to ignore the middle-level leaders that already exist in schools.

Kemp & Nathan (1989) argued that defining middle-level leaders is not simple. In corporate and earlier literature, the common term used is “middle managers”. They are those people who have formal responsibilities and duties of leadership and management and sit between senior leadership and teachers (Gurr & Drysdale, 2013). As Blandford (1997) argued, with a devolved school structure, they often have hybrid of responsibilities, with roles that are complex and ambiguous. The term middle leader is increasingly used in education but as Gurr & Drysdale (2013) suggest, those defined as middle level leaders depend on the context and structure of the school or school system.

White (2000) in a review of the literature noted an interest in middle level school leadership research as a result of their importance in improving schools. However, Gurr & Drysdale (2013) notes that middle level leadership has not yet captured the interest it deserves.

In Australia, there have been a number of research focusing on middle school leadership including Dinham (2005 and 2007); Cotter (2011), and White (2000). Gurr & Drysdale (2013) research suggested that the work of middle leaders is heavily dependent on how their roles are constructed and that some are expected to be leaders that influence teaching and learning but that teachers in these roles still have few opportunities to exercise leadership. Cranston (2009) also argued that they may be underutilised resources for school particularly from the leadership perspective.

## **School leadership development**

Research supporting the capacity of school leaders to impact positively on student learning is broad and comprehensive. Hattie (2009) identified six major sources of variance in explaining differences in student achievement which included school leadership. While Hattie (2009) concluded that leadership had a smaller role to play than teacher quality, it was still identified as a key source of variance. On the other hand, Dinham (2008) argued that the influence of leadership has possibly been underestimated, as it is usually indirect and difficult to measure. Leithwood et al. (2006) also conclude that leadership is a key factor and that it is second only to classroom teaching in determining student success.

There is evidence that effective school leadership can play a highly significant role in improving student learning and that this is sometimes underestimated. Therefore, it is crucial that school systems put some strategies in place in terms of leadership development to ensure that school leaders continue to strengthen their practice by learning and applying their knowledge and skills to improve their performance on the job.

School leadership development is a contested area in research and the literature. Some critique formal school leadership development (Levine, 2005; Murphy, 2002) while others advocate for the inclusion of formal and informal programmes (Cowie & Crawford, 2008; Scott & Scott, 2013). Others argue that formal programmes alone cannot prepare school leaders for the realities of their work (Cowie & Crawford, 2008).

The increasing complexity of schools has resulted in all leadership roles becoming more demanding. In New South Wales (NSW) schools, expectations of leaders have increased for a number of reasons including the devolution of decision making and management in schools recently introduced through the *Local Schools, Local Decisions* initiative. Using the self-managing school framework, the responsibilities of school leaders have become significantly broader. Paradoxically, there is a

centralisation of curriculum and assessment through the implementation in 2014 of an Australian national curriculum. These complexities will obviously create a lot of challenges to school leaders in their roles to lead teaching and learning programmes which meet the needs of their school communities. Due to these changing circumstances and complexities, the provision of professional development opportunities for school leaders will have to be on top of the agenda for all school systems. As Bush (2009) argued, all employers have a moral obligation to do this.

There have been very little discussions on professional development of middle leaders. In NSW primary schools, the middle leadership include the positions of assistant and deputy principals. However, the role of assistant principal is the most common formal middle leadership position with key responsibilities for instructional leadership with a focus on improving classroom practice, whole school strategic leadership, team leadership, community engagement and a large range of management responsibilities. In schools of less than 500 students where there is non-teaching member of the leadership team other than the principal, assistant principals are regularly called upon to act as principal and to lead the whole school. This is always in addition to a full teaching responsibilities making the role of the assistant principal one of the most challenging and demanding positions within the NSW public school system.

Teachers are increasingly being promoted to the role of assistant principal at a younger age. The reasons for this are varied and include the suggestion that Generation Y attitudes see formal leadership positions as attainable at any age and not as a product of many years of experience. Teachers are regularly taking up assistant principal roles after only 5-6 years of teaching experience with very little leadership training or professional development because quality training programmes and support structures appear to be lacking within the system for this leadership level.

Although most leadership professional development programmes target school principals, it is clear that some of programmes could also be relevant to the role of the middle school leaders. Investigation of school leaders' opportunities to develop the capabilities they need to perform at an optimum level rarely goes beyond the level of the principal (Spillane et al., 2011). Given the important role of assistant principals, there is a clear case for expanding the scope of investigations into leadership development to include these leaders. As Chetty (2007) argued, middle leaders work at the crucial interface between teaching and learning. Therefore, they are better positioned to lead the core business of improvement in student learning than even the principal and yet they don't receive the kind of development support necessary to fulfil their roles to reach their maximum potential (Adey, 2000).

Many education stakeholders have proposed leadership frameworks as a guide to school leadership practices and these frameworks have continued to influence leadership development experiences (Okoko et al., 2014). In NSW, the leadership skills required by school leaders were recently presented in the Leadership Capacity Framework (NSW DEC, 2003). It provided a basis for the development of leadership programmes such as the Principals Induction Programme and the Principal Preparation Programme. It was also designed to provide a comprehensive guide for aspiring and continuing school leaders who wished to reflect on their own leadership development and plan their own professional learning.

Within the leadership capacity framework were five domains: Educational, Personal, Strategic, Organisational and Interpersonal and the five domains are underpinned by three central higher order leadership skills; Emotional Intelligence, Way of thinking and diagnostic maps (see figure 1 below).

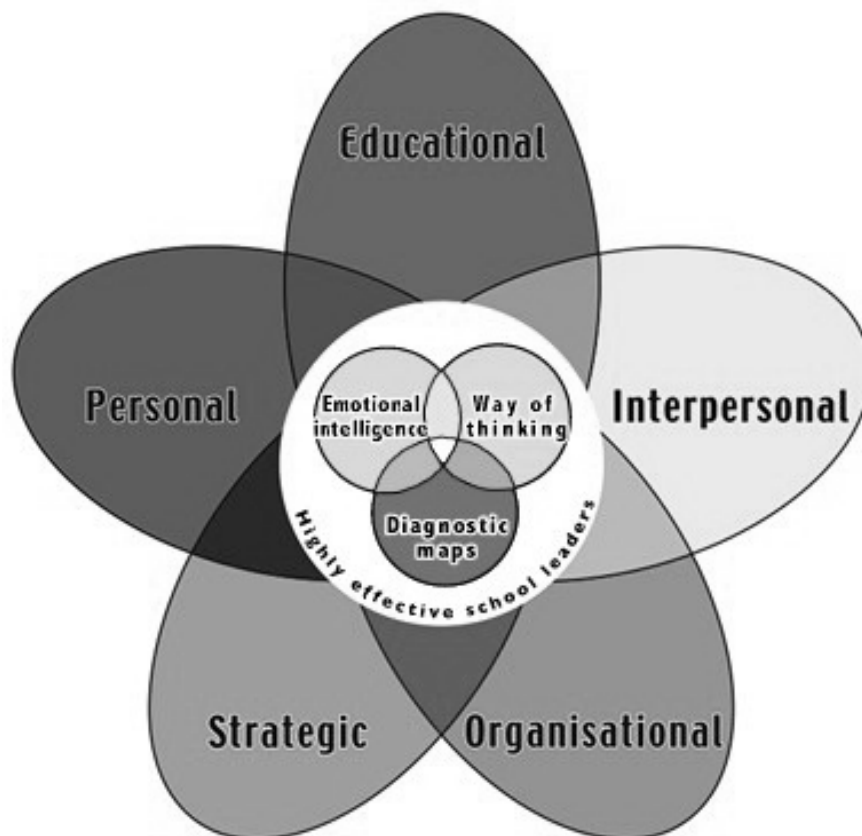


Figure 1: Leadership Capacity Framework Domains

Thinking has evolved from an assumption that good teachers will automatically become good leaders, to recognition that there are specific preparation and development needs for those in school leadership positions but still much of this focuses on the role of the principal. Globally, provisions range from coordinated pre-service qualification programmes to induction and in-service training (Schleicher, 2012). Some programmes are compulsory and provided by tertiary institutions whereas others are optional and are implemented by individual school jurisdictions. However, in NSW public schools, there is no formal training requirement for any level of leadership. Induction and in-service programmes do exist but are *ad hoc* and optional.

There has been a lot of international research on the features of successful school leadership development programmes. As earlier noted, the focus has largely been on principal leadership but the features can easily be applicable to middle leaders as well. Looking at a large array of innovative leadership development programmes, Schleicher (2012) found the most effective ones had the following features:

- approaches that broaden the roles, responsibilities and scope of educational leaders;
- align with professional leadership standards and frameworks;
- integrate theory and practice;
- emphasise instructional leadership, system-wide perspectives and notions of strategic school improvement;
- individualise leadership learning for specific school contexts;

- incorporate quality coaching and mentoring strategies into their programmes;
- foster supportive and sustainable networks between leaders and their schools;
- provide authentic, problem-based learning which incorporate internships.

Effective school leadership development has been placed at the core of many educational reform agenda (Bryant et al., 2013; Walker et al., 2013). Darling-Hammond et al. (2009) suggested the following features as embedded in pre-service principal training programmes with strong outcomes:

- the alignment of a coherent curriculum with externally developed state and/or professional standards;
- an emphasis on instructional leadership and school improvement to guide the programme philosophy and curriculum;
- the use of active and student-centred learning strategies;
- a teaching faculty that includes practitioners and scholars who are experts in their fields;
- diverse support structures such as formal mentoring systems and cohorts;
- a rigorous approach to participant selection;
- supervised internships or school attachments.

Over the years, leadership frameworks have been developed and used by different education systems in articulating what counts as effective leadership practice. It has provided an essential reflection tool, guided performance assessment, defined long term goals for professional learning and assisted in the recruitment of quality leaders (Ingvarson et al., 2006). With a dynamic view of leadership informing the design of professional learning programmes and lack of consistency on what constitutes effective leadership, there has been a lot of the debate regarding the place of leadership frameworks. Leadership effectiveness is difficult to define because it is a complex concept that attempts to capture myriad components: multiple organisational contingencies and various personal and interpersonal behaviours.

Leadership is a complex process and many researchers have serious reservations over the extent to which a framework, a set of qualities or competencies can ever fully capture the nature of what makes some leaders/organisations successful and others unsuccessful. Dempster et al. (2011) argued that there are clear benefits in using developed frameworks to inform leadership learning while also arguing that leadership frameworks give prominence to a system-wide perspective and do not account for the individual needs of leaders and the specific context of different schools. “As they stand, they appear to give primacy to an outside in or systems approach to professional learning, in contrast to an inside out or personal approach” (Dempster et al., 2011,p.15). Arguing for the importance of considering the personal needs of leaders when using frameworks, Dempster et al. (2011) propose what they call a blended approach to leadership develop. This is an approach which combines individual and system’s needs. This provides the flexibility for leaders to determine their own learning needs and those of their schools.

### **The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) standard and its relevance to middle leaders**

Recently, the AITSL working closely with key education stakeholders developed the Australian National Professional Standard for Principals (Education Services Australia, 2011). The purpose of the standard is “to define the role of the principal and unify the profession nationally, to describe the

professional practice of principals in a common language and to make explicit the role of quality school leadership in improving learning outcomes. It will assist in attracting, developing and supporting aspiring and practising principals” (Education Services Australia, 2011, p.1)

As Dinham et. al. (2013) argue, the standard is a conceptual framework which focuses on the skills and knowledge specific to educational leadership, reflects the complexity of contemporary school leadership, reflects the collaborative nature of school leadership, encourages a future focused leadership capacity, guides leadership preparation, development and self-reflection and meets the needs of leaders in different contexts.

The leadership standard seems to have relevance and applicability to middle leadership development. It outlines the interrelated nature of the professional practices (leading teaching and learning, developing self and others, leading improvement, innovation and change, leading the management of the school, engaging and working with the community) and the personal leadership capabilities (vision and values, knowledge and understanding, personal qualities, social and interpersonal skills). It also supports teachers who are stepping into the assistant principal role to more effectively engage with the complexity of school leadership.

The standard brings to prominence the professional practice of developing self and others and the importance of personal qualities, social and interpersonal skills- all areas significant in middle leadership development. However, it neglects some issues in the current understanding of the assistant principals’ roles. One of the current key roles of assistant principals as middle leaders is that of instructional leadership. They are often intensely involved in curriculum and instructional issues that directly affect student achievement. These include prioritisation of teaching and learning; selection and implementation of instructional materials and monitoring implementation; alignment of curriculum, instruction, assessment and standards and data analysis to assess performance. These are areas of leadership expertise which assistant principals within NSW public schools consistently find challenging and they are areas which are not explicitly developed in current leadership standards.

The other areas relevant to the development of middle leaders are the professional practices of leading improvement, innovation and change and engaging and working with the community. Assistant principals need to be supported in understanding the strategic nature of their leadership in leading innovation and school improvement. Effective school improvement, innovation and change will never be achieved if it is left to the principal solely to lead. Skills in analysing school improvement needs, collating and using data, devising school improvement plans and strategically thinking about innovation areas of development need to be specifically highlighted and developed in middle leaders.

The importance of middle leaders understanding and responding to school context when developing their capacity is also crucial. The standard acknowledges this skill in the practice of engaging and working with community.

In general, the AITSL professional standard for principals has relevance to the role of middle leaders. It recognises that school leadership is collaborative and does not reside in one individual and that the role of the leader is to work with and develop others. This is a significant step forward in thinking about leadership in NSW Department of Education and Communities (NSW DEC) schools and a shift which is crucial in the effective development of middle leaders.

### **Leadership development programmes and support structures for middle leaders in NSW DEC schools**

It is clear that leadership development for middle leaders in NSW DEC schools has been limited. Support and professional learning for assistant principals is restricted to in-school mentoring, workshops and conferences and a few development programmes which are implemented regionally. While there is a commitment within the department to developing the capacity of middle leaders, the



design and delivery of the programmes is inconsistent across the state and dependent on the expertise and enthusiasm of the particular people delivering them. There is no mandatory training requirement and access to professional learning is far from equitable. There are two current programmes in Sydney Region, NSW worth looking at.

### The ASPIRE Programme

Aspire is a Sydney region primary executive network for classroom teachers who are interested in seeking promotion in the future. It addresses issues such as preparing for leadership, the qualities of a school leader, the leadership capability framework, applying for positions and developing a CV. The Aspire programme was developed in response to the lack of leadership development programmes targeted at substantive assistant principals and classroom teachers in Sydney Region schools and recognition that there is a need to enhance distributive leadership models within schools. The programme brings groups of teachers together from a broad range of schools over three sessions to share and discuss their leadership work in schools, participate in interactive workshops centred on the NSW DET School Leadership Capability Framework (SLCF) and listen to experts present on their own leadership experiences. The key focus of the programme is the SLCF discussed earlier in this paper.

The programme focuses on unpacking the nature of leadership and through the use of the SCLF it gives participants the opportunity to examine their understanding of what it means to be an effective leader and what their own sense of the role is. The focus is on participants reflecting on their current practice and examining the domains in which they most commonly operate (often organisational) with the aim of developing a more balanced leadership style.

The use of reflective tools and development of measurable leadership learning plans following this process appears to be one of the strengths of the programme together with the focus on the higher order skills of emotional intelligence, diagnostic mapping and ways of thinking which are explored through workshops, presentations and practical exercises. These workshops are expected to broaden participants' thinking and skills to move into the personal and interpersonal aspects of leadership.

While the programme has many benefits for middle leaders, it has been limited to one leadership framework. The programme makes no attempt to look at other models or delve into the research to give leaders a more comprehensive understanding of leadership practices. The programme also lacks attention to specific school contexts, does not consider the impact of school culture and history on leadership practice and is not sustained through coaching or mentoring. There is some value in participants working with other middle leaders during the workshops but unfortunately, these collegial networks are rarely maintained in any way and therefore their value are short lived.

### The Executive Leadership Development Programme (ELDP)

The Executive Leadership Development Programme (ELDP) is aimed specifically to support the work of experienced Head Teachers and Assistant Principals. The programme is structured as a three-day workshop and presentation style course for assistant principals followed by online learning modules to be completed by participants back in their schools.

The programme includes exploration of the following issues:

- developing a deeper understanding of the capabilities of effective leadership as identified in the NSW School Leadership Capability Framework;
- examining the role, responsibilities and accountabilities of the experienced assistant principal and head teacher;

- exploring strategies for building effective teams;
- implementing professional learning with a focus on improving student outcomes; and
- using supervision as a positive process for professional growth.

The programme enables participants to work with an experienced leader to engage learning related to all aspects of the departments “Leading and Managing the School” document (NSW DET, 2000) which is the main leadership accountability document within the NSW DEC. Through presentations from experts and scenario based problem solving in groups, the significance of leadership for teaching and learning improvement and the main aspects of whole school management are explored. The strengths of this programme lies in its collaborative structure, access to an expert leader and scenario based learning which attempts to apply leadership scenarios to real school based contexts. While not personalised to participants own schools, it facilitates authentic learning and gives participants the opportunity to reflect on how the various leadership challenges would play out in their own schools. Working in small groups, the networking and collegiality which forms over the three days is one of the strengths of this programme. The online learning modules participants engage in following the course provide scope for choosing topics which have relevance to individual contexts. They range from the role of technology in learning, data driven instructional improvement and moral leadership as a construct. These modules are self-paced and while participants share the results of their learning at a final sharing day, they lack the collegial support and expert coaching inherent in the training days.

## **Conclusion**

Quality professional learning plans for the development of effective middle leaders within NSW public school systems are lacking. Building on the weaknesses in programmes currently available, this paper proposes a set of focus areas and the incorporation of the new AITSL leadership standard in the development of leadership professional learning for middle leaders.

This paper has emphasised that programmes for middle leaders professional learning should focus on a number of areas. These should include understanding the complexity and evolving nature of leadership, the importance of distributed leadership framework, fostering relationships and developing others and taking into account the significance of school context. It has further highlighted the value of using leadership standards to guide practice and incorporating a range of professional learning strategies with a particular emphasis on mentoring, coaching, shadowing and applying learning to specific work places.

The key areas worth emphasis include:

- Developing an intrinsic understanding of educational leadership;
- Leading strategically with a focus on improvement and innovation;
- Developing the self as a leader;
- Team leadership and developing others.

The role of leadership in creating effective schools is undisputed and in light of this, leadership development is crucial in ensuring schools are of the best quality possible. There is a great deal of research and literature related to leadership development for principals but very little work has been done in the area of middle leadership in schools. Given the significant role middle leaders play in school, this is an area which needs greater attention.

This paper therefore proposes the use of these focus areas and strategies as a guide and the

incorporation of the AITSL National Standard for Principals as a professional learning model to begin the challenging task of ensuring middle leaders are supported to become outstanding leaders who make a significant difference to students in schools. The author also believes that the school principal is a key vehicle in advancing the cause of middle school leadership- and hence promoting the professional image of middle leaders.

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