Symposium Proposal and Information of Contributions

Symposium Title

Navigating Middle Leadership: Insights from Australia, New Zealand, and Malaysia

Chair: Donnie Adams (The University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia)
Discussant: Guri Skedsmo (Schwyz University of Teacher Education, Switzerland)

Middle leadership in education plays a pivotal role as a steppingstone to senior leadership positions (Turnbull et al., 2015). Despite its importance, the precise definition and characteristics of middle leadership remain contested (Thompson & Stokes, 2023). Drawing on the literature from Turnbull et al. (2015), Lipscombe et al. (2023), DeNobile (2018), and Gurr and Drysdale (2013), this symposium will explore the multifaceted nature of middle leadership.

Middle leaders, positioned between senior leadership teams and classroom teachers, hold significant responsibility for pedagogy within their learning areas. Highfield and Rubie-Davies (2022) highlight the positive impact middle leaders can have on academic student learning outcomes by enhancing teacher effectiveness.

This symposium will feature multiple themes theoretically underpinned by the middle leadership literature. Researchers at different career stages, ranging from early career academics to mid-career and senior academics have collaborated on this symposium. Each theme will focus on specific aspects of middle leadership, including women in leadership.

Additionally, the empirical work reported will present three different country perspectives: Australia, New Zealand, and Malaysia. These diverse perspectives will offer valuable insights for participants into the roles, challenges, and strategies of middle leadership across different cultural and educational contexts. Many of which will have relevance for a BERA audience. Thank you for considering our proposal. We look forward to the opportunity to present our research and engage in meaningful dialogue with BERA attendees at the symposium as we believe this would provide an opportunity for further transnational collaboration and interest in the work of AARE and the leadership SIG.

Presentations of the Symposium

1. Understanding the pathway through middle leadership to senior leadership for women in Australian secondary schools

Pauline Thompson* (Faculty of Education, The University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia)
National perspective: Australia

This study investigates the pathway from middle leadership of female principals as they progress through to senior leadership roles. The data is derived from 14 interviews with female secondary school principals in Australian secondary schools.

As part of the interview process each participant was asked to describe their career pathway and specifically discuss the middle leadership roles undertaken within their career progression. The data were analysed to enable comparisons of the experiences of each person's narrative. The evidence in the data reveals that these female principals undertook a range of middle leadership roles and as they served the education system. These women also identified challenges regarding balancing family and caring responsibilities with significant leadership responsibility and the importance of family and colleagues as key affordances on a pathway to principalship. This research is significant as it provides research evidence for women middle leaders on a pathway to principalship.

2. The adaptive practice of middle leaders in a context of crisis and change

Camilla Highfield* (Faculty of Education and Social Work, The University of Auckland, New Zealand)
National perspective: New Zealand

This paper describes the leadership practices of 80 curriculum middle leaders in New Zealand secondary schools utilising adaptive expertise to creatively problem solve in a range of situations. Drawing on data from questionnaires and interviews a descriptive analysis of the challenges middle leaders encounter in their endeavours to improve teaching and learning for students in their departments with evidence of their adaptive practices will be examined. Within an increasingly complex education environment these middle leaders bring about requirements for ongoing policy change in curriculum and assessment, address professional conflicts and mentor their teaching staff. The analysis of their practices reveals evidence of their relentless focus on culturally responsive strategies to implement improvements focussed on raising outcomes for equity groups, despite the ongoing challenges of change management. This research is significant in the investigation of the adaptive practices utilised by middle leaders in an education environment impacted by pandemic conditions while serving the diverse needs of learners.

3. Shaping Futures: Middle Leadership Roles in Malaysian Schools

Donnie Adams* (Faculty of Education, The University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia), and Jayanti S. Sothinathan (Faculty of Education, University of Malaya, Malaysia)
National perspective: Malaysia

Middle leadership roles in Malaysian schools have evolved significantly in response to school needs, student outcomes, and community expectations. However, defining these roles remains challenging due to their dynamic nature and diverse functions within schools. This study aims to explore the impact of middle leadership roles on the transformative culture of selected schools. Employing a qualitative approach, the study involved 10 middle leaders from three primary schools. The findings highlight various aspects of middle leadership, including advocacy, leading by example, fostering a learning culture, data-driven decision-making, sustainability, and nurturing a growth mindset. These insights offer valuable strategies for enhancing middle leadership in Malaysia, ultimately contributing to teacher retention, school development, and improved student outcomes.

Note: *Lead authors are members of AARE. We are able to attend the symposium in person.

References

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Turnbull, B., D. Riley, and J. MacFarlane. (2015). Districts Taking Charge of the Principal Pipeline. Building a Stronger Principalship: Volume 3. New York: The Wallace Foundation.