

# Chapter 13

## Leading from the Middle: A Praxis-Oriented Practice

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**Abstract** Educational leadership has long been a focus of research and scholarship that focuses on effective education and school improvement. This has usually centred on the important practices of principals; but here we focus on the leading of those who are closer to the classroom—*middle leaders*. Middle leaders are those who have an acknowledged leadership position, but are also involved in teaching in the classroom. In this landscape, a prime role of middle leading is site-based staff and curriculum development. In this chapter, we discuss the features, characteristics and issues associated with leading from the middle, and we show how this is a mediated practice that is critical to educational development in school sites. It is mediated since the work of the middle leader is enabled and constrained by the cultural-discursive, material-economic and social-political arrangements exuding from policy and school personnel that are brought to bear on their practices. To navigate these arrangements, we will argue that the complex relational nature of this role demands practical wisdom, and the enactment of praxis.

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## Introduction

When consideration is given to effective education and school<sup>1</sup> development, issues of leadership are inevitably part of the discussion. Indeed, it is hard to argue that ‘good’ educational leadership is not important for quality education in schools and other educational institutions. However, the vast majority of the literature and research in educational leadership focuses on the role and work of the ‘positional head’ or principal. We do not under-estimate the importance of these leaders,<sup>2</sup> but we think there is a lack of understanding and perhaps even uncertainty about forms of leadership at other levels of a school. Specifically, in this chapter we depart from more typical notions of leadership to focus on a group of educators described as middle leaders.

It is middle leaders who have some positional (and/or acknowledged) responsibility to bring about change in their schools, yet maintain close connections to the classroom as sites where student learning occurs. In one sense, middle leaders bridge the educational work of ‘classrooms’ and the management practices of the administrators/leaders (Grootenboer et al. 2014).

Middle leaders would have various titles and positions depending on the size, scale and context of the school, but could include senior teachers, heads of department, deans, level coordinators and process leaders. In the chapter, although we recognise that there are tensions between wider demands for ‘effectiveness’ and ‘quality education’ and for ‘good’ leadership, we focus more specifically on the practices and practice architectures of leading professional learning among peers. The purpose is not to negate these real tensions but rather to argue that calls for ‘effective education’ and ‘quality’ are not necessarily seen as calls for a managerial line. In this then, we aim to recognise the underlying demands for ‘effective education’ that can enable and constrain ‘good middle leadership’. In trying to conceptualise this middle leading role Grootenboer et al. (2014) from their empirical work identified three characterising dimensions of middle leading

1. *Positional*—middle leaders are structurally and relationally situated ‘between’ the school senior management and the teaching staff. They are not in a peculiar space of their own, but rather than are practicing members of both groups.
2. *Philosophical*—middle leaders practice their leading from the centre or alongside their peers. In this sense they are not the ‘heroic crusader’ leading from the front, but rather alongside and in collaboration with their colleagues.
3. *Practical*—middle leading is a practice and is understood and developed as a practice. To this end, the focus is on the sayings, doings, and relatings of leading rather than the characteristics and qualities of middle leadership (p. 17)

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<sup>1</sup>Although we will usually use the term ‘school’, we are referring to all sorts of educational institutions including early childhood centres.

<sup>2</sup>See Wilkinson chapter in this volume.

In this chapter, however, we want to add to these three dimensions—a *praxeological* dimension; that is, that the work of middle leaders rises from a praxis orientation whereby their actions radiate from a morally committed educational stance, practical wisdom and a genuine responsiveness to the site (individuals, needs and circumstances). In practice—and practical action—these actions have social and ethical implications. This philosophical reasoning can be illuminated through empirical analysis by “situating praxis in practice” (Kemmis and Grootenboer 2008, p. 37) by examining the practices (manifested as sayings, doings and relatings) *as* they are experienced and accounted for by those practitioners in the practice at the time. This fourth dimension has been addressed in the analysis through utilising the theoretical tools provided by the theory of practice architectures that attends to the details and influences of the cultural-discursive, material-economic and social political arrangements on practices in sites. This added dimension will be reflected through the empirical examples presented throughout the chapter.

Stemming from the foundation formed by these four dimensions of middle leading is the critical importance of understanding the role of the classroom teacher. Fundamentally, it is the classroom teacher who has the critical educational role of interpreting and enacting the educational policies and curriculum to facilitate student learning. This means that the classroom—where teachers, the curriculum and learners intersect—is the most important site in the educational endeavour (Edwards-Groves 2003; Grootenboer and Edwards-Groves 2014). So, while principals and positional heads are somewhat distanced from the classroom (Lingard et al. 2003), middle leaders are positioned ‘closer’ to this most critical educational site. They are both embedded and embodied in the day-to-day life of teaching. Therefore, middle leaders are crucial in the development of ‘good’ learning outcomes among students because they exercise their leading both within and beside classrooms.

In this chapter, we first outline our understanding of middle leading *as a practice*. We will not reiterate the theoretical foundations of practice theory as outlined in the earlier chapters of this book, but instead we will use these theoretical tools to understanding of leading as practiced ‘in the middle’. This will give rise to particular issues and affordances as middle leaders critically lead teaching and learning, and we have devoted the middle part of this chapter to discuss the middle leading practice as site-based educational development. Finally, and drawing on the previous discussion, we will further conceptualise middle leading as the enactment of praxis. Throughout the chapter we will illustrate with examples from some of our empirical and developmental work carried out in one region in Australia.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Space will not allow us to outline the specific details of the broader empirical studies that have also been conducted in Canada, Sweden and another region in Northern Australia, but we will provide reference to other published work where further details can be found.

## Middle Leading as Practice: Some Theoretical Underpinnings

In the first section of this book, an understanding of a theoretical and empirical positioning of practice was outlined and discussed in several chapters. After Kemmis et al. (2014), we recognise practice to be a form of socially established, cooperative human activity, involving distinctive

- forms of language, discourse and understanding (evident in *sayings* and *thought*),
- modes of action in particular physical locales using particular materials (evident in *doings* and *activities*), and
- ways in which people interact with, and relate to, one another and the world (evident in *relatings* and *relationships*).

These dimensions are enmeshed or ‘bundled together’ (or simultaneously produced) in a distinctive *project*.

The project of a practice concerns its “teleoaffective structures” (Schatzki 2002). These are the broad purposes or even intentions of any given task at any given time in any given place; for instance learning to read, or having a coaching conversation, or conducting a staff meeting. Each project is distinctively formed by practices and it is in the particularity of the human activity that transpires in practices by which particular sayings, doings and relatings accomplish projects.

Practices, and as in the case of educational practices, can be recognized and understood at various levels and on different scales; but here we are focusing on the educational practice of leading and specifically middle leading. It is important to note that we are not interesting in simply characterising middle leaders, but rather we want to focus equally on their *practices*. Added to this, we argue that these practices are site based, locally enacted, understood and co-produced in interrelationships with others. This view lays down an ontological ground that locates its significance in the particularity of the happenings in places and the particular conditions or practice architectures that enable and constrain or mediate what occurs in these places. In other words, we are not suggesting that there is a universal or standard practice of middle leading, but rather middle leading practices are developed and undertaken within the practice architectures of any given site. Indeed, this will be significantly shaped by the contexts and circumstances in which practices exist; this might be the size, scale, type and location of the school (i.e. in a large secondary school there would be several middle leaders including the Deans and Faculty Heads, whereas in an early childhood centre there might be one middle leader who could be the senior teacher. Whether the practices are conducted in Sweden, Australia or Canada, different curriculums and educational policies exert influence on the work of teachers for instance).

With the previous caveats about practice in mind, the *sayings* of middle leading might relate to curriculum and developing classroom teaching and learning; for example, terms related to specific disciplines or pedagogical practices enter the

language of individuals in ways that enable mutual comprehensibility so that a shared language enters or shapes the practices. The *doings* will then often relate to organising and facilitating professional and curriculum development; for example, a reorganised timetable that allows teachers to work together with the middle leader at particular times or that particular physical set-ups enable a ‘roundtable’ conversation. In turn, *relatings* will be ‘among’ and ‘across’ with teaching colleagues and ‘up’ to the principal or positional Head. Of course, these sayings, doings and relatings do not occur outside enabling and constraining arrangements—the practice architectures (Kemmis and Grootenboer 2008).

These sayings, doings and relatings occur as interconnected dimensions, or even actions, in the practice. The *sayings* are enabled and constrained by, for example, the mandated curriculum requirements, an individual teacher’s experiences and contexts, professional standards for teachers, and the learning needs of the students. Similarly, the *doings* of middle leading are enabled and constrained by school budgets and resources, and the physical attributes of the school site. In addition, aspects like the past professional experiences and strengths of the teachers, and the school culture, will enable and constrain the *relatings* of the middle leaders. Furthermore, although we have briefly outlined these here as somewhat separate dimensions of middle leading practice, in action as it happens in sites they occur as inextricably inter-connected and inter-related, and so while we can identify *sayings*, *doings* and *relatings*, they only really make sense when considered in the wholeness of middle leading *practice* (Grootenboer et al. 2014); that is, that sayings, doings and relatings act on and with each other in practice.

Of course, practices do not exist in isolation—they are ecologically arranged with other practices (Kemmis et al. 2014). In a most rudimentary sense, middle leading practices are inextricably related to the leading practices of the systemic administrators, government agencies, school principals and positional heads, and other middle leaders. They also exist within dynamic interdependent ecological arrangements with other educational practices including teaching, student learning, professional development and assessment, evaluation and research. Kemmis et al. (2014) described these as the “education complex of practices”. As an example, the leading practices of a middle leader will be enabled and constrained by a school principal’s leading practices as they relate to collaborating, distributing and delegating. These, at the same time, will be enabled and constrained by the experiences, dispositions, attitudes and capacities of each teacher on the staff; or the experiences, needs, circumstances, dispositions, attitudes and capacities of individual students. And so, a fundamental aspect of a middle leader’s practice will be to act ethically and with the practical wisdom that genuinely responds to the site, to the individuals and to the circumstances that will most likely promote student learning. So to understand middle leading, we extend the suggestion made in the previous paragraph that the sayings, doings and relatings of practices ‘hang together’ and make sense in unison, we also suggest that practices need to be considered within an ecologies of practices.

When considering the implications of middle leading, we recognise that middle leading is both a mediated practice and a mediating practice (in terms of educational

outcomes). By this, we mean that middle leaders are in a position to enable and constrain the practices of others, but at the same time their practices are enabled and constrained by other practices (leadership, policy, resources, state testing and so on). Middle leaders are in the position to create conditions or arrangements that can assist in promoting student learning, although they cannot directly influence it (except in their own classrooms through their own teaching practice and development). In essence, middle leading is a *practice changing practice*, yet this is accomplished through the practice architectures of their colleagues' teaching practices. Middle leaders promote student learning by developing and sustaining arrangements that enable (and constrain) quality teaching practices across classrooms, and they do this primarily through curriculum and staff development. Their success, or otherwise, is doubly mediated by the teaching and learning practices of the teachers and students involved, or by the school's policies and resources. Taken together, therefore the practices of middle leaders are mediated by both shaping and being shaped, by both acting on and being acted on, and by both enabling and being constrained by the practices and practice architectures that exist at the site.

In reflecting on these points, and after considering the empirical work we have been involved in over the last few years, we have tentatively concluded the following:

**The practice of middle leading** involves engaging in (simultaneous) *leading-teaching* by *managing and facilitating* educational development through *collaborating and communicating* to create communicative spaces for sustainable future action.

We will expand, discuss and illustrate this view throughout the rest of this chapter, and while some of the rationale behind this view is yet to be explored, we provide a little detail in Table 13.1.

To exemplify the key points raised in the next sections of this chapter, we will draw on empirical material from a single case as a way to illustrate the intricate details of middle leading in practice. Excerpts from transcripts gathered in this empirical case will be presented across the chapter as a running example.

## The Case of Hilltop Primary School—A Running Example

Hilltop Primary School<sup>4</sup> Action Research Project – *Improving classroom pedagogies: incorporating a dialogic approach to instruction*

Hilltop Primary School is a large school in a regional city in inland NSW, Australia. Its 550+ students are drawn from the surrounding suburb. The school-designed professional learning project, *Improving classroom pedagogies: a dialogic approach to instruction*, was led by middle leader Jana who worked with the 23 full time staff (including the principal Martin and the deputy principal Marcia) and

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<sup>4</sup>All the names used in this article for schools and individuals are pseudonyms.

**Table 13.1** The practice of middle leading

Practices		Practice architectures
The sayings, doings and relatings of <i>simultaneously leading and teaching</i>	Leading and teaching	Structures and arrangements that enable and constrain <i>simultaneous leading and teaching</i>
The sayings, doings and relatings of organising and facilitating <i>professional and curriculum development</i>	Managing and facilitating	Structures and arrangements that enable and constrain <i>professional development</i>
The sayings, doings and relatings of creating and sustaining <i>communicative spaces</i>	Collaborating and communicating	Structures and arrangements that enable and constrain <i>communicative spaces</i>

a number of part-time staff. The project emerged as a response to a collective staff concern about the growing issue of student engagement in learning and fluency with oral language among the diverse student population in the school. As a consequence, teachers recognised their more limited teacher knowledge about appropriate pedagogical approaches that could address the concern. The project therefore broadly aimed to address the development of oral language and critical thinking among the culturally diverse student cohort. It was designed as a whole-school action research project, where teaching teams from across the year levels developed a specific pedagogical focus that was particular to their age group.<sup>5</sup>

Jana, who in her role as curriculum co-ordinator with one day a week release from face-to-face teaching her Year 5 class, was responsible for taking the lead in facilitating the development of the team projects. This involved supporting each of the year level teaching teams to change their teaching practices, to reflect on changes and to re-develop and evaluate their projects (in terms of pedagogical change and student learning). Jana also provided support for teachers to develop a plan for gathering and sharing evidence (for instance they began video and audio recording lessons, writing in reflective learning journals, writing field notes from collegial visits) and to respond directly to issues and concerns arising from the project. For Jana, who had been working mainly as a teacher but also the curriculum co-ordinator for 6 years, this also meant making adjustments to her own teaching practices and working with her teaching team to design and implement the Year 5 project; that is, her investment in her own professional learning about teaching was instrumental in the development of her leading practices (Edwards Groves and Rönnerman 2012). At the same time it meant that she also needed to

<sup>5</sup>Empirical data for this chapter is drawn from a range of qualitative approaches, including field observations of three whole school professional learning days, three after school workshops and two planning meetings; surveys from the three middle leaders Sean, Jana and Lena (responsible for different curriculum areas); two interviews with middle leader Jana; teaching observation in Jana's Year 5 classroom followed by a de-brief interview; observation and de-brief interview with Year 5 teacher Phillipa; Focus Group interview with the Year 5 teaching team (Phillipa, Tegan and Stephanie); interviews with deputy principal Marcia and the principal Martin.

consult with the school leadership team (including other curriculum leaders, the principal and the deputy principal) to design ways that she could make changes to the practice architectures of the school that would enable her to support individual teachers and the teaching teams to implement and develop their projects.

### **Excerpt 1**

According to Jana

... after organising the initial professional development days that provided teachers with some basic input from [outside experts], I had find ways to support the teaching teams, that meant even my own, to collaborate with each other, and for some that was a first, they had always planned and taught in silos ...some resisted... I then helped them in planning meetings to develop team theories of action that would keep them focused; this was a way that the focus came from them, not me or Martin... So, for example, if we engage in more dialogic instruction approaches we believe our students will improve their ability to communicate their thinking, or if the focus might be on developing our feedback or getting student feedback, meaningful feedback, it might be if we focus on developing learning focused feedback in our responses to students we believe students will improve their ability to communicate their thinking to others. Those teachers they would then bring examples or anecdotes of feedback and what they noticed in the student talk, was it descriptive or focused on the learning agenda.

Our school goal became a common conversation all teachers were having. Even if it was hard for some who were quiet, or too shy to have class visits, or some wanted to do their own thing, I had to keep trying to keep it going; I knew it was important. But what that developed in the end was, I guess, focused professional talk around feedback or extending student thinking or whatever, so you'd see teachers talking about it in the hallways, they would be sharing examples, they would be looking again at the student work and re-evaluating their teaching.

In her description of the project in Excerpt 1, above, Jana oriented to the changes to the practice architectures that shaped her work as a middle leader. Finding ways to support teachers required changing the sayings (e.g. bringing in new language such dialogic instruction or theories of action into their common conversations), the doings (e.g. making collegial visits, bringing examples or anecdotes of feedback, developing theories of actions in planning meetings) and relatings (e.g. collaborating as teaching teams, communicating as peers). These changes to the practice architectures were also acknowledged and described by members of the Year 5 teaching team, Phillipa, Tegan and Steph (who worked with Jana). Below they outlined the practices Jana enacted as they discussed their project in a focus group interview.

### **Excerpt 2**

Phillipa: We started the project from a staff discussion because it was seen that there was a need with the children here right through from Kindergarten to Year 6 that they didn't have the skills to express their thoughts deeply and in a more detailed manner. So I think that's where it originated and we wanted then to extend on their answers from just one word. So once we asked the kids a question we would just maybe jump all around to someone else to get something else. ...not giving the kids a chance to give fuller responses...but I've sort of been a bit sporadic.



Steph: We had to change our individual release to be co-ordinated with each other in the team so we could be released and plan together. This time became our sharing time where we really began to critique our work.

Phillipa: Like after our first couple meetings, yeah I was really good, gung-ho and then I'd forget about it. And then I'd feel guilty, then I'd get back into it. So I've got to work out a way to be a little bit more systematic to make sure it's happening consistently rather than up and down.

Tegan: That's where Jana is really good, she's focused, and she keeps us focused, keeps the momentum going for the project and all the teams. I feel like I have more control though because we can steer it in our own way, you know have a say. The way we have now made our release time a time for our project development is important for keeping it ticking along. ....

Phillipa: Well she'll come to you and she doesn't keep everything to herself. She shares what she learns, doesn't she? She gives you things, time and she just shares whatever she does to see how you go about doing it or how it works for you and then she can get feedback to see whether you're doing it better than her and it gives her ideas. But just I think with the actual sharing of what she finds out, she doesn't keep it all to herself.

Tegan: And even in sharing I find too, she doesn't share with the thought that-she wants something in return.

Phillipa: At first I panicked a bit, I was worried about the NAPLAN test and our kids results, but Jane reminded us about this type of classroom dialogue will really help in the longer term it is more important, the big picture of it.

Steph: She is generous in her feedback too when she observes our teaching, she is thoughtful and helpful as a critical friend and never makes you feel awkward because she always talks about how she is also working on this, or struggling with that, not judging you, but also challenging you at the same time; it helps to see things differently.

Phillipa: What she has is the way that you have to do it either, as if it's the perfect way to teach. She seems to – the way she shares I think is the way that you get – I get the impression that she's trying to make what she's doing better as well. Probably then, hopefully someone might share back and then you can build and grow together.

Steph: Well she's very educated too. She reads.

Tegan: You need knowledge to build knowledge in others.

Phillipa: She does obviously a lot of work and she knows her stuff so she's – and if it's new then she's interested to see how other people go with it as well but she doesn't force it on you. It's there as an option or something to try.

Tegan: Part of it is that we are now talking differently with each other about student language learning, as they are learning a new way of interacting lessons, so are we.

This excerpt provides some evidence of the particular practices and practice architectures that comprised the project this group of teachers participated in. For instance, Steph's comment that they "had to change individual release time to be co-ordinated with each other" to enable the team to be 'released' to 'plan together' indicates how Jana facilitated changes to the ways that teachers engaged in professional development. Jana assisted the staff to change from more individual practices that were, at the time, more typical in the school to team-based professional learning through action research processes. From a practice theory

perspective, the changed physical set-ups (or material-economic arrangements), enabled the teachers in the teams to have the time to work together thus changing what these teachers did. As she continued, Steph recognised the impact that this change had on their professional learning, “this time became our sharing time where we really began to critique our work”. Tegan added that they began “talking differently”; that is, the changed material-economic arrangements changed their sayings and doings and relatings. Phillipa commented on the way Jana ‘shares’ as a way to ‘build and grow together’, not ‘forcing change’ and ‘offering choices and flexibility’ orienting to ways of relating that reflect agency, solidarity and equality. These social-political arrangements influenced the shift in power experienced by the teachers who felt like they had more control, could ‘steer it in their own way’ and have a ‘say in what they were doing’. As the conversation progressed, Phillipa, Steph and Tegan, in turn, acknowledged the specific practices (the sayings, doings and relatings) facilitated by Jana that formed the foundation for their particular project “to develop more dialogic approaches to pedagogy”.

In the next excerpt taken from an interview with Martin, the principal, descriptions of the project and the role of Jana, as a middle leader, are outlined.

### **Excerpt 3**

I had organise for her to release teachers at the same time to be part of the team project development so they could lead their own learning; that was her idea, and I trusted her with this, she really drives it and the teachers respond to her...I was restricted a bit by the availability of the relief teachers, but we did our best.

For me, through the project myself, I began asking better questions about teaching that focused on the change agenda of the school, I really listened to what the teachers wanted and were noticing and tried to accommodate them the best I could. I could sense teachers were making better observations about what was happening with students when they were visiting each other’s classrooms, they were engaging students more in around the feedback over a piece of work.

So these conversations I believe, in terms of the collective professionalism at the school, were much richer and focused...it was both ways learning for the staff, for me as the principal and for the teachers who were trialling the approaches...we were all focused on improving our own learning as teachers as well as the learning of our students... It was a real shift in the traditional ways I did things.

According to the principal Martin, changing practices required recognising and responding to the material-economic arrangements that enabled and constrained Jana’s middle leading practices. That he had the authority to organise the release time to enable team meetings but at the time was constrained by the “availability of relief teachers”; a point that orients to the significance of the practice architectures of middle leading. Aligned with this, Martin’s own sayings, doings and relatings were shaped by particular cultural-discursive arrangements (that enabled him to ask better questions focused on the change agenda, have richer and focused professional conversations), material-economic arrangements (by releasing teachers for planning meetings, by accommodating inter-class visits), and social-political

arrangements (by trusting Jana, by listening, by accommodating requests, by shifting the power to Jana) to facilitate ‘both-ways learning’. These were facilitated by the practices of Jana.

## **Middle Leading Practice as Site Based Educational Development**

As proposed in the preceding section, we see a most fundamental feature of middle leading practice is site based educational development. Even when innovations and curriculum reforms are externally mandated, to make them come ‘alive’ in the day-to-day work of teachers, they need to be realised, actioned and outworked in the particularity of the school sites. From this then, curriculum and professional development must be fundamentally responsive to the learning needs of the students in the particular school site; that is, in sites middle leading is ‘practiced’ by *managing and facilitating* educational development through *collaborating and communicating* to create communicative spaces (for teachers). In Table 13.2 we have outlined some of the aspects that may make up this practice.

In outlining these aspects of the practice of middle leading, we are not implying that is some form of essential list, or indeed a representation of ‘best practice’, as this would fundamentally contradict our site-based view of the nature of practice. However, they do represent some of the key dimensions that emerged from our studies across different educational sectors in Australia (and Canada and Sweden in the broader study). To illustrate we draw on the running examples from Hilltop Primary School introduced previously.

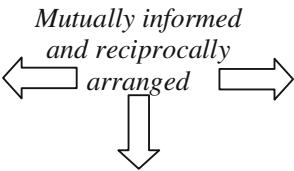
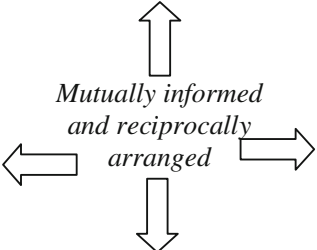
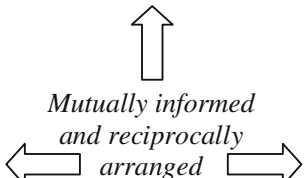
## **Leading and Teaching**

Site-based education development involves middle leaders in simultaneously leading and teaching. In other words, middle leaders have to both lead professional and curriculum development and engage in the professional and curriculum development in their own teaching; these aspects are connected and integrated. This could involve things like being an exemplary teacher, and sharing their teaching practice with their peers through having colleagues visit their classroom and visiting others’ classrooms themselves. To illustrate this relationship we return to our empirical material from the running example.

### **Excerpt 4: Jana**

So I guess in terms of curriculum my role is to support teachers in their development in professional learning and classroom learning and teaching. So it could be as basic as supporting them in the purchasing of resources that are going to help them teach or it could be seeking out professional learning opportunities for them to improve what they need to

**Table 13.2** Aspects of middle leading practice

Practices		Practice architectures
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Leading by being an exemplary teacher (including personal professional development)</li> <li>· Sharing their teaching practice (e.g., inviting colleagues into their classroom, sharing resources and ideas)</li> <li>· Engaging in the teaching practices of others (e.g., visiting the classroom of colleagues)</li> <li>· Balance between tangible expectations and freedom to try things</li> <li>· Mediating between the staff and the senior leader(s) (e.g., advocating for staff with the principal)</li> </ul>	<p><i>Leading &amp; Teaching</i></p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· School professional climate</li> <li>· School physical structures and organisational structures (e.g., timetables)</li> <li>· Relationships with teaching peers and senior manager/leaders</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Organising pd meetings and events</li> <li>· Administrative tasks (e.g., compliance issues, school management)</li> <li>· Facilitating strategic professional development opportunities for others (e.g., through action research)</li> <li>· Focusing development on educational issues, particularly improving student learning</li> <li>· Maintaining the momentum</li> </ul>	<p><i>Managing &amp; Facilitating</i></p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Expectations/requirements of management</li> <li>· Time</li> <li>· National, local and school-based initiatives</li> <li>· Sense of collegiality v autonomy</li> <li>· The educational philosophies/views/beliefs of the community, managers and teachers</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Developing a shared 'sense of purpose'</li> <li>· Creating 'space' for others to learn</li> <li>· Communicative action, communicative space and public spheres</li> <li>· Professional dialogue—shared language/ understandings</li> <li>· Developing and sustaining relationships 'up' and 'across'</li> <li>· Supporting teacher development through sustained support and descriptive feedback</li> <li>· Creating and sustaining 'relational trust'</li> </ul>	<p><i>Collaborating &amp; Communicating</i></p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Trust—between principal and ML, and ML and teachers</li> <li>· Collegiality</li> <li>· The professional engagement (or otherwise) of colleagues (e.g., resisters)</li> </ul>

know. And it's also I suppose being a member of the executive is whatever else needs to be done in the school. So sometimes that's being a mentor and sometimes it's providing emotional support for staff that are just going through a bit a personal crisis and at other times it could be something completely different, really random – the fine print.

I am the in-between person in the school, the Year 5 teacher, the facilitator of the curriculum and teaching development and a part of the exec; lots of balls to juggle, but I try not to see them as separate, for me they sort of work together, each one feeds the other.

Comments made by Jana (who described herself as the 'in-between person') explicitly direct us to considering her role in the school as one that sits between teaching in the classroom, and being a member of the staff *and* of the executive team; she both leads and teaches. In this, Jana discusses how leading and teaching 'work together', that these dimensions of her work are mutually informed and reciprocally arranged as she facilitates curriculum and teaching development (her own as well as that of her colleagues). Her role in the school is one that is both mediating and mediated by practice architectures. In Excerpt 5, below, these considerations are also raised throughout the teacher focus group interview.

### **Excerpt 5: Year 5 Teacher Focus Group**

Phillipa: I think what we touched on just before put it in a nutshell, that our principal doesn't teach in the classroom and Jana does. Here she is leading us and leading them too in a way.

Steph: Yeah I think that just having somebody that's dealing with the everyday issues in the classroom is so important. ...Because when you're not in the classroom you forget what it's like. ...

Tegan: But there just seems to be so much extra added pressure and more work for the teachers to do in all different areas of being a teacher and school life that you don't realize it unless you're actually in there doing it. And Jana is more involved in the teaching -

Phillipa: Just what they're bringing that teachers have to deal with everyday, different things happening at home. That's not teaching, it's the caring side of it, and Jana has that understanding. She brings that to her role in mentoring us through the PD.

Tegan: So, when you think of her or someone in that position, I think of her as a teacher first.

Tegan: And then in a whole – I look at it in a whole school as Jana and the assistant principal, whoever that might be. Only simply because they generally run staff meetings and that's often when the professional development's happening or the messages are being delivered to the whole school. So I see those two as the driving force in their curriculum change side of things. And I see Michael as more of a-

Steph://administrator or overseer

Phillipa: Yeah and he's more of a people person, more so heavily involved in that with the parents. Jana is more involved in the teaching -

Tegan: Curriculum and development side of things. But that's just my perception. I don't exactly know how it works, who does – I don't actually know which leader has what particular role in the school, in this school. So they've been very mixed in together as a team. I do know that each role is necessary to keep the school moving forward and keeping

up with new ideas; but Jana is so important for that part of it keeping us in touch with the big plan, but at a practical level too.

Phillipa, Steph and Tegan bring forth ideas about the reciprocity between leading and teaching. For them they think of Jana ‘as a teacher first’; but aligned with this is that, as suggested, Jana is “leading us and leading them”, that she “Jana is more involved in the teaching”, that “Jana gets our issues” because her role is one of leading and teaching.

## Managing and Facilitating

While there has been a considerable debate in the educational leadership literature to conceptualise leading as more than administration and management, it nevertheless always has a managerial dimension. However, in the studies we have undertaken, managing and facilitating have been fundamentally different from the administrative practices undertaken by senior leaders/managers such as deputy principals or principals. In general, we argue, that this is because the work of the middle leader is more directly related to classroom teaching and learning practices, and it was constituted in more *collegial-like* relations.

### Excerpt 6: Jana

But basically, although I am responsible for managing the whole thing, I like to think that I’m – I’m like them; I’m struggling with a lot of things about my classroom teaching too and I don’t try and put myself up on a pedestal and model myself as the perfect teacher. And I’ll seek help from people too when I don’t know a lot about something. And I’m very open about the fact that that’s the way that I am that I’m happy to learn from anyone who can give me advice. And quite often if I see someone doing something great I’ll go and say “I love what you’re doing there can I borrow that?” Or “Could you show me how to do it?” And I think that fosters that two way understanding as well, they know I understand teaching – this has implications for my ability to facilitate their development too, so then they’re quite comfortable thinking well, she asked me about that, she said she liked that so maybe I can go to her and say “Well I – I just need some ideas about this.” I’d like to think that’s part of it.

The classroom too I’m like them. I’m teaching, and managing all that comes with that, and I’m struggling and I’m trying to find a balance and I’m not someone who’s sitting in an office saying “This is what you have to do” with no understanding of all of those day-to-day things that happen that encroach on that.

Jana clearly raises the tensions and struggles between her role managing as a teacher and managing as a facilitator, as she tries to ‘find a balance’. Her response to this tension is revealed in her point suggesting that she is “happy to learn from them”, that “she is not the perfect teacher”, and that by her going to others in the team for ideas and advice she opens up her facilitation relationally in ways that “fosters that two way understanding”. This orients to the mutuality and reciprocity between these two dimensions of her work. She positions herself as a manager and

a facilitator in the practices she enacts, and her comments direct us to particular social-political arrangements that shift the power and agency of her practices to situate herself ‘among’ the staff she is leading. These ideas are illustrated in the comments made by teachers in Excerpt 7 below.

### **Excerpt 7: Teacher Focus Group**

Phillipa: It’s hard to keep it going sometimes when you are in the classroom though

Tegan: Yes, it is. But you need to have something in place... Just to keep the ball rolling.

Phillipa: I think that because she’s enthusiastic, she’s keen, she’s all for it and doing it too. So if someone’s keen and enthusiastic, well you’re going to try something hard or new and we get a bit motivated off her.

Steph: She is good at picking up on what is realistic and manageable for us, and goes from there, her way of working with the staff by including us in it as experts too really keeps the momentum going, I think because it is important to her classroom too.

Tegan: Sometimes it helps to, like Phillipa was saying before, she is open too, sometimes if you have someone like her to speak to, discuss and have conversations with about any.. topic, it makes you think this is worthwhile or I’m almost doing that if I just tweak a little bit I could cover that as well, refreshing and refining what you do in that crowded classroom.

Steph: And like you say you do it at first and then it sort of peters off a little bit and then you realize, keep it going, refreshing your teaching. So I think if you do more of it and keep at it, and coming back to it-

Tegan: Keep it at our forefront, but realistic at the same time.

Phillipa: For me it’s also about when we hit the brick wall – she is the go-to person. Until it becomes something that’s an everyday thing, more so than a one off thing, by the way she organises things she helps us see that...and to strike the right balance for our own classroom.

Across the transcript, Tegan, Steph and Phillipa highlight the connections between managing and facilitating and the enabling conditions created by Jana that shaped their teaching change. Jana’s managing and facilitating practices reveal a kind of praxis that shows her way of recognising and responding to the particularity of circumstances of the teachers in her school. They acknowledged this. For example, her practices of finding ways to “keep the ball rolling”, “keeping it realistic and manageable”, “including the staff as experts” and by being ‘open’ orients to a particular way of managing and facilitating that create conditions that enable the teachers to “strike the right balance for [their] own classroom”. This is a critical point when considering the ways that particular sayings, doings and relations that are facilitated by the practices of middle leaders such as Jana for educational development and change.

## Collaborating and Communicating

As with *managing and facilitating*, middle leaders' practices substantially involves collaboration and communication among and across with teaching peers. However, their leading practices also involve collaborating and communicating 'upwards' with the senior managers/leaders of the school (as illustrated in Fig. 13.1).

This positioning for Jana is "is not either-or; it is both-and". For her, "having been in the assistant principal's role once" she realised "there is a different perception of leadership" when you are in that position. According to Jane, "there's almost a separation between just the classroom teacher and the principal but I am like the middle man". In this sense, the relatings associated with middle leading are complex in that they have to negotiate relatings 'across' and 'up'—in a kind of relational sandwich. This positioning as being crucial for dealing with the day-to-day issues of classroom teaching is discussed by the teachers in the next excerpt.

### Excerpt 8: Teacher Focus Group

Tegan: Well, [she is a] co-coordinator, because there's also the positioning of this sort of person as a go-between, is sort of in the middle because they're also the same as you because they're a classroom teacher going through the mess of all of the issues that you're dealing with on that day-to-day basis.

Steph: But they also have a responsibility for driving staff development, but they're also not necessarily the principal. So in one sense they're sort of the one that sort of is feeding both.

Tegan: Probably in the exec meetings [on Wednesdays], I would assume that they would discuss a lot of whole school development in there.

Phillipa: They have a good working relationship with each other...well I know that she feels that she can go between us and them and be an avenue of communication between the both of us if we don't have the time. Because often we try and catch up with the principal or the deputy and we can't. But if you talk to Jana you know that eventually, if you can't get to them, she will pass on what you're feeling or what you're thinking and I think that's really good. She's a great go-between between the exec and the staff.

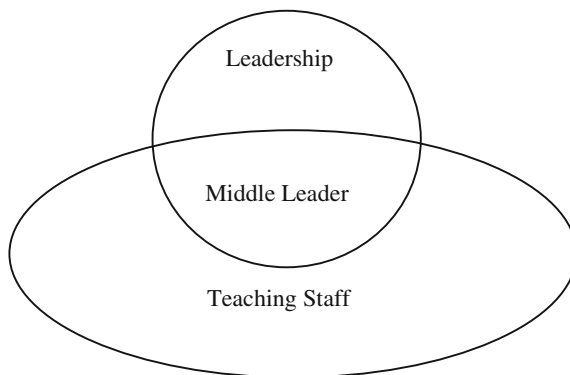
Tegan: Yeah, that's exactly right; she's that, she's so reliable. So you can go to her for advice or – and she can take it back to them and can come back to you; and I trust her with that.

Phillipa: They're all willing to listen to each other. And Martin doesn't really know what it's like, even though he is the boss, he doesn't – he makes the final decisions but he's someone that will listen to everyone's input so he's not just going to make the final decision. If Jana has something different idea that he hasn't thought about, he would go with that, he trusts her.

Tegan: I was going to say and that's what – and you know who you go to about certain things.

Their views are important for conceptualising the practices of middle leading, since her 'go-between' practices that enable collaboration and communication from this middle position require different practice architectures. Phillipa clearly orients





**Fig. 13.1** Positioning of the middle leader

to the notion of Jana being a trustworthy messenger in that part of her practice takes on the responsibility for going between the principal (Martin) and the teachers where otherwise a more direct contact is not possible (or desirable in some instances). In one way her work creates a communicative channel where ideas, issues and decisions flow between the people on the staff. Notions of trust, willingness, responsibility, discernment and good working relationships are mentioned as conditions that shape these avenues of communication that make collaboration possible. This is important for the practices of middle leading. For Jana and the teachers with whom she works, there is a tight connection between collaborating and communicating dimensions of middle leading. Jana explains

### **Excerpt 9: Jana**

So because I'm a classroom teacher as well as an executive member often I'll have people coming to me to talk about a problem that they've had or a question that they have and they feel probably more comfortable because I'm not going to be judging them or I'm not their employer as such. It's the day to day things, so I'm – I'm the person on the ground so to speak and Martin [principal] and Marcia [assistant principal] are very supportive of that and I can take the information that staff are giving to me and present it to them if I think that they need to follow anything up. As well as sometimes just keep it to myself and work through it with the staff member.

There's just little things like dealing with parents, or an emotional child, or doing the actual assessments and reports, I think that there is an artificial barrier – that no matter how the executive tries to set themselves up as being open and approachable, there is an attitude there is always going to be that feeling of they 'just don't understand what we're going through at a classroom level'; it is an common anthem among teachers... I am the connection between them.

Being the person “on the ground” is in itself a practice architecture that opens up spaces for collaboration and communication among peers and between the staff and the school leadership team. This positioning creates opportunities for people to approach her with high levels of comfort about issues of concern, affording their

voice to be heard “without judgement”. As such, she is a broker (Bennett et al. 2007) of relational trust that leverages communication over the ‘artificial barrier’ often felt by teachers in schools. As she states, she is often the ‘connection’ between the staff and the executive that addresses, through her practices, commonplace anthems of a workplace divide that can exist as obstacles for curriculum and pedagogical development in large schools like the one Jana works in. These kinds of practice-based tensions experienced by teachers often require a delicacy in both her collaborative and communicative practices (not afforded by the pressures of whole scale accountability and standard-based reforms, for instance). Her responsiveness to both individual and collective needs and concerns makes visible an orientation towards praxis, a point reflected in the excerpt below.

### **Excerpt 10: Teacher Focus Group**

Tegan: And I think too she also understands how good a teaching tool dialogic pedagogies are, and so is going to do anything that she can to make sure that other people have a chance to see how good it can be, trying to get people out of their comfort zone and change their teaching style but she does it in a way as well that is supportive. And she’s someone who would be willing to give up time to get someone to go talk with individual people, and watch someone in their class as a critical friend, like she would do that in her role as well.

Steph: The way she talks to you, like she sort of models the kinds of dialogic pedagogies are trying in our classrooms. When she is facilitating the PD days and our team planning meetings she really tries ways to get us talking openly, to say reasoning why we doing things in particular ways, providing evidence from our own classrooms to support our practice.

Phillipa: Well she’ll come to you and she doesn’t keep everything to herself. She shares what she learns too, doesn’t she? She gives you things, time, ideas and readings and she just shares whatever she does to see how you go about doing it or how it works for you and then she can get feedback to see whether you’re doing it better than her and it gives her ideas, sort of learn from each other as we share. But just I think with the actual sharing of what she finds out, she doesn’t keep it all to herself.

Tegan: And even in sharing I find too she helps us understand what she means by things; she doesn’t share with the thought that she wants something in return.

Phillipa: What she has isn’t a way that you have to do it either, as if it’s the perfect way to teach. She seems to – the way she shares I think is the way that you get change – I get the impression that she’s trying to make what she’s doing better as well... and that is sort of what makes it real for everyone. Probably then we share and then you can build and grow together.

Steph: And, she makes us feel she is on the journey with us.

Phillipa’s final comment suggests that communication and collaboration need to reflect the kind of open sharing that enables them to “build and grow together”; it is a comment that directs us to the role middle leading practices have for generating an open space for professional learning, collaborating and communicating. For these teachers, this is about the practice architectures that enable this to happen; for instance practices that shape distinctive kinds of sayings (sharing ideas and giving feedback, making sure they understand meanings), doings (modelling, participating

in PD days and team planning meetings, giving time and readings), and relatings (sharing, not keeping things to herself, being supportive) that are experienced as a genuine sense of equality as they all walk ‘on the journey’ with one another as colleagues. Their words capture the genuineness of Jana’s practices’; in that, her practices both form and open up communicative spaces (Rönnerman et al. 2015) built on dependable and trusting interrelationships.

## Middle Leading as Praxis

Finally, we want to discuss in more detail the conception of middle leading as a form of *praxis*; that is we want to draw out the *praxeological* dimension we introduced earlier in the chapter. In a broader sense, education is an ethical and morally dense practice that is enabled and constrained by practice architectures that are experienced in local sites. But as was clear from the excerpts in the preceding sections, middle leading is a practice that involves a range of sayings, doings and relatings that responds to the persons and circumstances at any given moment in any given site. These responses draw on particular kinds of practice wisdom that are shaped in time and with experience of conducting oneself in morally and ethically rights given the particularity of the circumstances at the time. Actions, and so practices, in particular sites and circumstance—such as those demonstrated by the middle leader we described in this chapter—form an empirical example of a particular kind of professional; one who acts with the best intentions and with practical wisdom and ethical judgement, given the circumstances at the time. From this, a praxeological stance means middle leading, therefore it requires people who work with others in site-based education development- education to account for, respond to and display particular kinds of knowledge of curriculum and learning theory, pedagogical skills and practical wisdom for effective teaching (Edwards-Groves and Grootenboer 2015). Therefore, what is required is a stronger conception of middle leading as praxis.

Praxis is a term that has been used in a range of ways, but simply it has dual roots

1. an Aristotelian sense sees it as morally committed action that is aimed at good for individuals and society; and,
2. a post-Hegelian/post-Marxist sense, it can be understood as history-making action with social and ethical implications (Kemmis et al. 2014).

For us, both views can be understood as complementary and significant. Educational middle leading is a practice, like education more generally, that is moral and ethical in nature, and the practices of middle leaders have historical consequences for all involved. Thus, middle leading needs to be understood and nurtured as a form of praxis. With these points in mind, we view praxis as, “what people do when they take into account all the circumstances and exigencies that

confront them at a particular moment and then, taking the broadest view they can of what is best to do, they act” (Kemmis and Smith 2008, p. 4; emphasis original). Therefore, middle leaders can be said to be engaged in *middle leading praxis* if in their everyday practice, they are thoughtful of the ethical and historical implications of their work for the students and the community.

## Conclusions

In this chapter, we have focussed on a particular dimension of educational leading practice—middle leading. We have marked out this educational leading practice as unique and distinct in that it primarily focuses on professional and curriculum development. It is a kind of leading practice that is often neglected in the literature, since it is a position that is predominantly a teaching one but at the same time it sits between the formal leadership and classroom teaching. We argue that middle leading is a leading practice that is essential for real (and realistic) change in classrooms and so in schools; we say this because of the middle leaders ongoing everyday connection to the day-to-day issues of being a teacher in a classroom, of dealing with the ‘real-life’ issues of students, parents and communities as they are played out in classrooms, and of keeping abreast of curriculum mandates and policies. So, our empirical work provided illustrations of middle leading from a critical perspective, to show the relational context of being a middle leader and highlight the ethical and moral dimensions of middle leading.

Across the chapter, we have endeavoured to characterise the work—the practices—of the middle leader as one that is *both* an everyday teacher and an everyday leader. In other words, it is our view that is a role that has a closer ecological arrangement with the classroom practices of teaching and learning than the leading of principals and systemic managers/administrators. We have endeavoured to draw out, through the words of the teachers involved in a particular case, the practices of middle leading. These are practices that encompass leading *and* teaching, managing *and* facilitating, and collaborating *and* communicating. In describing and discussing these middle leading practices we have also tried to highlight their importance for educational development in the prime educational site—classrooms and schools. For us, recognising their role as pivotal in the continuing development of any school site is crucial for understanding individual and collective development, and for understanding the real drivers of educational change, learning and development. However, this recognition itself gives rise to enduring questions about school leadership, “does the recognition of middle leaders and their practices in the development of schools imply a new hierarchy or new division of labour—even if they are “practicing members of both groups?”. This problem is one that should be considered more explicitly in future research in this field.

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