

Edited by
Elizabeth Benson, Patrick Duignan, and Barbara Watterston

Foreword by Lyn Sharratt



Middle
Leadership
in Schools

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

MIDDLE LEADERSHIP IN SCHOOLS

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

—Peter Grootenboer, Professor of Education,
Griffith University

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

—Lauren Sayer, Director Curriculum Victorian
Curriculum Assessment Authority

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

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

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

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

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

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

It is an important addition to school middle leadership literature.

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

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

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

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MIDDLE LEADERSHIP IN SCHOOLS

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

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emerald
PUBLISHING

United Kingdom – North America – Japan
India – Malaysia – China

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

First edition 2024

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

Individual chapters © 2024 The authors.

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

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

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

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

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



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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ABOUT THE EDITORS

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

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

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Barbara Watterston has extensive experience in education and has held several executive leadership positions across Australia within the education and not-for-profit community sectors. She is currently the CEO of the Australian Council for Educational Leaders (ACEL). Her national and international research, consultancy, coaching, and speaking engagements centre on leadership development that emphasises the impact of high-quality leadership on providing the enabling conditions for all to thrive. Recognised for her contribution to educational leadership and professional learning, her national research report, *Insights: Environmental Scan Principal Preparation Programs* contributed to five major national recommendations for preparing future school leaders. Her doctoral thesis focused on gender, leadership, and learning, which informed her contribution as Co-editor of the book *Women in School Leadership: Journeys to Success*, and, more recently, *Step In, Step Up: Empowering Women for the School Leadership Journey* with co-author Jane Kise, which received a Silver Medal in the 2020 IBPA Benjamin Franklin Awards. Recognised for her contributions to leadership and professional learning, she was the Inaugural Recipient of the Women of Achievement Award (WA DoE), a National Fellow of ACEL, and an Honorary Fellow of the Melbourne Graduate School of Education.

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

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Danielle Cioffi has been a High School teacher in South Australia for the past 12 years. She has taught English, Humanities, and Legal Studies from 7 to 12 and has recently been appointed to a Director of High School Curriculum position. She received her Bachelor of Arts and Secondary Education from Tabor Adelaide and her Master of Education, with a Gifted Education specialisation, from Flinders University. She is a SACE Legal Studies subject expert, and in 2021, co-authored a Year 12 textbook titled, *SACE 2 – Legal Studies*, on the subject, available through Essentials Education.

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Christine Edwards-Groves is Professor and Research Fellow at Griffith University, Australia. Formerly, she was an Experienced Teacher and Middle Leader, and now a Teacher Educator and Researcher. She has almost four decades of experience researching

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

Michael Harrison is a Senior Learning Lead, Leadership Development, Melbourne Archdiocese Catholic Schools (MACS). He has extensive experience of teaching and leading in three Catholic secondary schools in the Archdiocese of Melbourne and has degrees in Arts, Theology, and Religious Education. His current interest is the exploration of how the leadership of Catholic schools can respond positively to the many challenges facing Catholic schools today.

Steven Kolber works within the Faculty of Education at the University of Melbourne. Previously, he was an English Language teacher

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

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

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

Pamela Macklin has held several senior positions in Australian education. She is an experienced Senior Executive, Coach, Teacher, Education Consultant, and Writer. Most recently, she co-authored the highly successful *Driving School Improvement: Practical Strategies and Tools* (2nd ed.) with Vic Zbar. She has significant experience in the development and management of major community and education projects. Her interests lie in leadership coaching, the management of organisational change and improvement, educational policy, curriculum, assessment, and school improvement. Her national and international work has focused on education reform and has included the development of policy and implementation strategies in areas such as ICT in education, literacy, numeracy, studies of Asia, and gender equity. She is also an experienced Company Director and has held several positions on not-for-profit boards.

Wendy McKay is a Head of Department for Queensland Hospital Education Programs. She leads curriculum improvement with several teaching teams in mental health programs across the Southeast Region. She started her school career as a Primary School Teacher, quickly moving into middle leadership roles at the local level before accepting Senior Educational Officer roles at the regional level, working with over 100 state schools on curriculum improvement. She has her Masters in Educational Leadership and Management, and has continued to leverage this qualification over the years to develop models and processes for curriculum innovation and improvement specific to school systems, group of and individual schools, middle leadership teams, and teacher practitioner needs.

Professor Donna Pendergast is the Director of Engagement in the Arts, Education and Law Group and Former Dean and Head of the School of Education and Professional Studies at Griffith University. Her research expertise is education transformation and efficacy, with a focus on middle year's education and student engagement, early years, initial and professional teacher education, and school reform. She commenced her career as a schoolteacher working in secondary, P-10 and senior college settings before shifting to the role of academic at Queensland University of Technology, The University of Queensland, and since 2009, at Griffith University. She has served in roles associated with the profession at state and federal government levels. She has more than 170 refereed publications along with 23 books including the highly regarded *Teaching Middle Years: Rethinking Curriculum, Pedagogy, and Assessment*, now in its fourth edition.

Danny Pinchas has more than 15 years' experience as a Leader across the education sector and joined AITSL in 2013. As General Manager, Teaching and School Leadership, he leads AITSL's work across initial teacher education reform, quality teaching support, and school leadership development. His responsibilities involve driving and supporting the development and implementation of a range of policy initiatives and resources to empower teachers and school leaders. Prior to joining AITSL, he held positions at the Victorian Department of Education and before that spent several years in the Kimberley region of Western Australia, working in remote communities as a principal, teacher, and numeracy coach.

Jessica Pound is an experienced teacher specialising in Physical Education, Health, Dance, and Literacy in both primary and secondary settings. She is particularly interested in improving the education outcomes for students in regional areas, including in geographically remote First Nations Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory, where she worked on curriculum development for a brief period. She is currently a Specialist Literacy Teacher and School-based Middle Leader facilitating school development in literacy education.

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Stephanie Salazar is a Teacher, Assistant Principal, and Instructional Coach at John Purchase Public School. She is the Founder of the New Teacher Tribe initiative and #PSTchat, a Twitter chat dedicated to supporting pre-service teachers around the world. Her passion is inspiring educators to see more in themselves and their students. In 2022, she was a Commonwealth Bank Teaching Award fellow. She was awarded the Young Professional Award 2018 by the Australian College of Educators. In 2017, she also won the Executive Director's Recognition Award for Innovation and Creativity in Leading Learning Towards Improved Student Outcomes. She is passionate about building up new teachers, through middle leaders, so that we can all focus on doing spectacular work for our students.

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

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

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FOREWORD

Dr Lyn Sharratt

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Brief Bio for Lyn

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