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Middle Leading Practices of Facilitation, Mentoring, and Coaching for Teacher Development: A Focus on Intent and Relationality

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Abstract

While educational institutions are increasingly acknowledging the importance of middle leaders for improving teaching, there is little research on middle leaders' specific leading practices compared with, for example, principals. Evidence delineating and describing specific middle leading practice is scant. Drawing on practice theory, this article presents preliminary results from the first phase of a four-year Australian project examining the "flow of influence" of middle leading practices on teacher development. Thematic analysis of interviews reveals the multidimensionality of middle leading, and specifically, ways in which the practices of facilitating, mentoring, and coaching are nuanced and distinctive in their arrangement, intent, and relationality. Results have important implications that cannot be ignored by school leaders and policymakers seeking to improve broader systemic support for building and refining middle-leading practices.

Résumé

Bien que les établissements d'enseignement reconnaissent de plus en plus l'importance des cadres intermédiaires pour l'amélioration de l'enseignement, il existe peu de recherches sur le leadership de ces cadres relatives, par exemple, à celui des di-

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recteurs d'école. Les descriptions et analyses des pratiques spécifiques aux cadres intermédiaires sont rares. Cet article s'inspire de la théorie d'entraînement pour présenter les résultats préliminaires de la première étape d'un projet australien s'échelonnant sur quatre ans qui examine les « flux d'influence » des cadres intermédiaires sur le développement de l'enseignement. Une analyse thématique d'entretiens révèle le caractère multidimensionnel de la direction intermédiaire et, plus particulièrement, les manières dont la facilitation, le mentorat et l'accompagnement, en ce qui a trait à leur structure, leurs intentions et leur relationnalité, sont nuancés et distincts. Les résultats de cette recherche ont des implications importantes que ne peuvent pas ignorer les dirigeants et responsables des écoles qui cherchent à offrir un meilleur appui systémique pour améliorer et peaufiner les pratiques propres aux cadres intermédiaires.

Keywords / Mots clés: coaching, facilitating, mentoring, middle leadership, practice architectures / accompagnement professionnel, facilitation, mentorat, cadres intermédiaires, architectures des activités

Introduction

The work of middle leaders in schools is acknowledged across the world to be critical as a locally situated practice for improving teachers' disciplinary knowledge and pedagogical practices. Amidst the increasing recognition of the connections between school-based teacher development and the practices of middle leaders, less empirical evidence exists about their specific leading practices compared with, for example, principal leadership (Harris, Jones, Ismail, & Nguyen, 2019). Coupled with the complexity of the dual responsibilities of teaching in classrooms and leading instructional development among colleagues that many middle leaders undertake in their school, research delineating the specific dimensions of their leading practice remains relatively scant. Whilst it is generally accepted that leading professional development in schools involves facilitating, mentoring, and coaching, these terms are often “glossed over” or used interchangeably to describe the developmental work of leaders (Smith & Lynch, 2014). Although the literature generally corroborates the necessity of these practices for exercising effective leadership in school-based development (Fullan, 2011), understanding their differences and purposes in actual middle leading practices requires focused attention.

This article seeks to address a recognized gap in what is known about the practices of teachers as leaders leading professional learning in their own contexts. Although leading site-based education development is well established as a relationally constituted shared transformative practice” (Edwards-Groves, Wilkinson, & Mahon, 2021, p.117), the lack of precision and clarity in understanding the particularity of such development practices as facilitating, mentoring, and coaching adds uncertainty for middle leaders expected to lead instructional change. Furthermore, whilst it is understood that middle leading is intensely relational work (Edwards-Groves & Grootenboer, 2021; Grootenboer, 2018), there remains a dearth of research examining the nuanced social-political arrangements (or relationality) that comprise

these practices of middle leading. In this article, results from empirical research delineating facilitating, mentoring, and coaching as important commonly described middle leading practices are presented. Insights from findings contribute to the literature, arguing for policy shifts towards empirically driven supports for the development of middle leadership. First, a brief description of middle leadership and its place in site-based education development is provided. Second, literature reviewing research focused on the practices of facilitating, mentoring, and coaching for professional education development is presented. This is followed by a brief introduction of the theory of practice architectures and the description of the study, presentation of results, and discussion.

Middle leadership and site-based teacher development: A practical and theoretical position

The term “middle leadership” has been used increasingly in education to describe a range of formal teacher leader roles, practices, and responsibilities (de Nobile, 2021). Generally, middle leading is understood to be a professional practice focused on education development in schools. It has variously been described as the kind of leadership designated to lead education for teaching development among colleagues, and practised *from* (Grootenboer, 2018; Grootenboer, Edwards-Groves, & Rönnerman, 2014, 2020; Rönnerman, Edwards-Groves, & Grootenboer, 2018)), *within* (Edwards-Groves & Rönnerman, 2013; Rönnerman & Edwards-Groves, 2012), and/or *beyond* (Day & Grice, 2019; Fullan, 2011; Lund, Nehez, Gyllander Torkildsen, Olin, & Wilkinson, 2018; Wilkinson, 2018) the middle tiers of schools, classrooms, and school systems.

Grootenboer, Edwards-Groves, and Rönnerman (2014) conceptualize middle leading as complementary to, but not the same as, the leadership practised by the principal or other non-teaching school executive leaders. Since 2014, their research has studied the practices of middle leaders with both an acknowledged leading position *and* regular classroom teaching responsibilities, describing middle leaders as teachers with:

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, p. 509)

Alternatively, Lund, Nehez, Gyllander Torkildsen, Olin, and Wilkinson (2018), Wilkinson (2018), and others argue that principals or non-teaching executive staff, when engaged as co-participant learners with teachers in their schools, are also middle leaders who act between the school and system change agendas. In this article, the focus is on middle leaders who have a face-to-face classroom teaching role, since their *middleness*, as Edwards-Groves, Grootenboer, Hardy, and Rönnerman et al. (2019) put it, sensitizes us to a nuanced relational positioning, since middle leaders’ teaching, leading, and professional learning practices provide an unparalleled opportunity to impact the pedagogical practices in classrooms.

Since education development happens in sites, the focus is on the distinctive kind of leadership that produces site-based education development among teachers in schools—here, leading from the middle by teachers with student-facing roles. Thus, considering leading professional development in schools from a middle vantage point orients to the “situatedness” of practice (Hoekstra, Beijaard, Brekelmans, & Korthagen, 2007; Lave & Wenger, 1991). *Site based education development* (no hyphen in original) is a phrase coined by Kemmis, Wilkinson, Edwards-Groves, Hardy, Grootenboer, and Bristol (2014) to capture the situatedness of locally enacted leading and teacher learning practices that respond to local exigencies and contingencies in schools and their communities. Derived from a theory of site ontologies (Schatzki, 2002), site-based education development is a useful concept for considering the practices and the impact of practice change endeavours, such as those led by middle leaders in schools. Kemmis et al. (2014) state:

Practices are not performed from predetermined scripts; the way a practice unfolds or happens is always shaped by the conditions that pertain in a particular site at a particular time. The practices that we observe in real life are not abstractions with an ideal form of their own; they are composed in the site where they happen, and they are composed of resources found in or brought to the site: cultural-discursive resources, material-economic resources, and social-political resources. (p. 33)

On this basis, Kemmis et al. (2014) suggest that the cultural-discursive resources, material-economic resources, and social-political resources are *practice architectures* or site-based arrangements that enable and constrain what happens in the activity timespaces of interpersonal encounters. The notions of site ontologies and activity timespaces compel us to conceptualize educational development as site based, where practices always must be understood and enacted locally. This is not to deny that educational reform and change agendas can be initiated centrally (e.g., national government, district education offices, or perhaps even school principals’ offices) or demean the importance of a teacher-centred view where an individual’s attitudinal and/or intellectual changes are apparent (Evans, 2014). Rather, these conceptualizations only have meaning and existence because they aspire to make a difference to the everyday changed teaching and learning practices that happen in the school site (Grootenboer, 2018).

As Edwards-Groves et al. (2019) argues, adopting a site-based approach to education development moves away from broad and generic conceptualizations of middle leading and teacher development, toward understanding ways the inherent complexity of the site informs how practices change. Knowledge of specific sites and the conditions that influence what happens is critical for informing how teachers develop professionally, providing additional benefits for offering more meaningful elucidations about what is required to support the practice development of those with the responsibility for leading professional development (Evans, 2014). This is critical since in countries like Australia, for example, it is reported that at least 91 percent of middle leaders hold dual roles of face-to-face teaching and leading professional development (AITSL, 2021). Thus, understanding the distinctiveness of their practices is necessary to address limitations of loosely applied conceptual

models of middle leadership where an imbalance in the empirical knowledge base creates an over-simplified interpretation of what professional development in schools involves. Consequently, middle leadership research must seek to uncover the specific nuanced details of practices in both their distinctive nature and situatedness (Grootenboer, 2018). Understanding the dynamism of middle leading as an intensely relational practice is necessary for orchestrating conditions that enable shared educational transformations in schools.

Facilitating, mentoring, and coaching for site-based change

Organization studies, professional development, and education policy literature frequently use the terms facilitating, mentoring, and coaching to characterize the vexed work of development leaders. Yet, many descriptions of these “learning-in-context” practices tend to be generically portrayed, implied, or even taken for granted (Cordingly & Buckler, 2012). Although empirical research findings seek to heighten the potential efficacy of facilitating (e.g., Fryer, 2011; Highfield & Robertson, 2016; Raelin, 2013), mentoring (e.g., Stanulis, Little, & Wibbens, 2012), and coaching (Desimone & Pak, 2017; Neuman & Cunningham, 2009; Zwart, Wubbels, Bergen, & Bolhuis, 2007) as professional development tools, the lack of clarity about what is understood (in terms of distinctiveness and similarities and differences) by each as a *site-based practice* remains under researched. As Beattie, Kim, Hagen, Egan, Ellinger, and Hamlin (2014), point out, few empirical studies investigate how actual practices of facilitating, mentoring, and coaching influence teaching change.

Facilitating for professional development

Understanding the role of facilitation in leading professional learning has moved away from prescribed bounded roles such as managing meetings, disseminating information, or conducting a workshop, toward encompassing more person-directed and dialogic approaches to leadership (Perry & Booth, 2021; Raelin, 2013). For example, in their study investigating the under-researched area of facilitation in professional development in England, Perry and Booth (2021) found facilitation practices of a group of educators described as teacher leaders to be generally related to developing content knowledge, pedagogy development, and embodiment (related to facilitator presence, personality traits, and dispositions). Their analysis shows ways these three practices overlap with and influence each other, and are coupled with the need for modelling and responding to ongoing participant feedback and emerging needs of individuals and collectives (Perry & Booth, 2021). Although their work does not pertain directly to school-based middle leaders, Perry and Booth concede that further work is necessary to understand the variations and nuances of site-specific facilitation practices.

According to Raelin (2013), “facilitation has one purpose: to help the participating members achieve their purpose by assisting them to have a constructive exchange, as free as possible from internal dynamics that may get in the way of productive discourses” (p. 823). This point aligns with Highfield and Robertson (2016) who indicate that effective facilitators “have and promote agency” (p. 11) among participants. As pointed out by Raelin (2013), dialogue among colleagues is

the primary modality of facilitating that requires leaders, as facilitators, to take a more neutral stance on the content of the discussion, allowing members to examine their own values, assumptions, and choices without suggesting or advocating what they should be. Yet, Highfield and Robertson (2016) report of results from their New Zealand study of one-to-one individual facilitator interactions with individual middle leaders, indicated more didactic notions where to utilize their in-depth content and pedagogical knowledge to change practice, a facilitator must also act as a coach. Although, the findings provide useful insights about facilitating in more general descriptive terms, by drawing facilitating and coaching together here, understandings about the actual *in practice* intent and action of facilitating are conflated.

Mentoring for professional development

Mentoring research suggests, in the main, mentoring is a multidimensional practice aimed to enable the co-construction of informed enactment of teaching as more knowledgeable experts (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 1999) guide development through practice and theory development (Hennissen, Crasborn, Brouwer, Korthagen, & Bergen, 2011). A synthesis of research extends this view to encompass the multiple roles of mentors such as being a critical friend (Day, 1999), or a “role model, friend, encourager, counsellor, nurturer, evaluator or expert who model specific teaching practices” (Jaipal, 2009, p. 257). Mentoring has been described simply as a helping activity (Clutterbuck & Ragins, 2002), or as encompassing more dynamic instances of co-learning (Jaipal, 2009) or reciprocal mentoring (Grove, Strudler, & Odell, 2004), whereby a reciprocal equitable relationship exists between colleagues. It has been described as “both a relationship and a process” (Kwan & Lopez-Real, 2005, p. 276) but also conceptualized by Finnish researchers as a dialogue (Heikkinen, Jokinen, & Tynjälä, 2008). Mentoring as co-learning or democratic dialogic practice re-envision the supervisory nature of a more traditional mentoring relationship where the formal assessment of the other often drives the relationship (Tillem, Smith, & Leshem, 2011). Alternatively, empirical research by Edwards-Groves (2014) found that

Mentoring is a dialogic pedagogical practice. It is a communicative and transformative practice whereby two or more people engage in learning conversations facilitated by an experienced other. These conversations are focused on learning, critical in nature, based on evidence from experiences and actions, accountable for making connections between theory and practice and involve timely responsive feedback and collaborative goal setting. The intersubjective dimensions of mentoring practice—their sayings, doings and relatings—are coherent and comprehensible to each interactive participant. (p.163)

This suggests that effective mentoring conversations are pedagogical, collaborative, analytic, and dialogic, and raises the question as to what developing teaching practices looks like in the moment-by-moment unfolding of any practice development initiative.

As a democratic practice, mentoring has been reported to form:

a collaborative, dynamic, and creative partnership of coequals, founded on openness, vulnerability, and the ability of both parties

to take risks with one another beyond their professional roles. Relationships become opportunities for dialogue, and expert and learner become arbitrary delineations. ... the relationship becomes interdependent. (Darwin, 2000, p. 206)

What Darwin is describing here is the dynamic interplay between the cultural-discursive (sayings or language), the material-economic (doings or activities such as participating in opportunities for dialogues), and social-political (relatings such as collaborative and interdependent relationships as coequals) dimensions of the practice arrangements that influence mentoring. These arrangements exist as iterative dialogic practices (Heikkinen et al., 2008), proposed by Edwards (1995) as the constant “zigzag of action and discussion” (p. 598) with someone with more expertise in the practice. Some empirical studies on mentoring suggest that its purposes and practices are overlapping and multifarious. For instance, mentoring can be formal and informal, structured and unstructured, be arranged in one-to-one, peer group, and/or team configurations, and aim to support personal and professional wellbeing, professional learning, and career transition and advancement. However, as Cordingley and Buckler (2012) highlight, substantive training that supports leaders’ mentoring practice development falls short of satisfactory.

Coaching for professional development

A synthesis of literature on instructional coaching for professional development by Smith and Lynch (2014) identifies 37 definitions of coaching, variously considering it as a focused and sustained way to develop technical know-how, enhance performance, and support knowledge and skill development with the aim to improve efficacy for individuals, groups, and organizations. Beattie et al. (2014) describe coaching as enacted with “the explicit and implicit intention of helping individuals to improve their performance in various domains, and to enhance their personal effectiveness, personal development, and personal growth” (p. 186), but that it also involved “facilitation activity or intervention” (p. 186), “supporting” (p. 188), and “mentoring” (p. 291). Similarly, Desimone and Pak (2017), in their detailed review of research on instructional coaching, draw out consistencies across the research base related to its need to fulfil five key features of effective teacher learning including content focus, active learning, duration, collective participation, and site-based coherence. In some jurisdictions (e.g., in the United States), instructional coaching in schools has been mandated as a lever for site-based, individualized, and sustained professional development that involves the multifaceted orchestration of teacher understanding, skill, and identity and relationship building to accomplish change (Desimone & Pak, 2017). Notwithstanding the developing body of research arguing for coaching to be recognized as a critical practice for professional development in schools, Desimone and Pak (2017) call for more empirical investigations to be conducted to firmly establish coaching as a valuable professional development opportunity for teachers.

The research indicates the inter-relatability between facilitating, mentoring, and coaching practices that also seem to be similarly responsive, dialogic, interactive, and site-based professional development practices. However, what is distinctive about the relational nuances of each practice remains more elusive. This article seeks to address this shortfall.

Theoretical framework

This article draws on the theory of practice architectures (Kemmis et al., 2014), which attends to the situatedness, sociality, intersubjectively, and practical realities of practices as they occur in sites like schools. The theory argues that practices are always comprised of characteristic language and discourses (sayings), activities (doings), and relationships (relatings), enabled and constrained by site-specific conditions or *practice architectures* described as cultural-discursive, material-economic, and social-political arrangements. These arrangements influence and are influenced simultaneously, and in interrelated ways, by local conditions, history, and traditions in a field. The site ontological nature of this theory allows educational practices to be conceptualized and interpreted as mechanisms for understanding how educational practices like middle leading occur in the activity of *timespace* (Schatzki, 2010). Thus, by applying a social-practice theory lens to school-based instructional improvement, the article aims to establish deeper conceptualizations of the distinctiveness of facilitating, mentoring, and coaching as relational practices that characterize the intent and activity of school-based development work of middle leaders.

Materials and methods

The study reported is guided by the following research question: What is the nature of middle leading practices that facilitate strategic curriculum delivery and drive effective pedagogical practices in site-based teaching teams? To answer this question, in-depth semi-structured interviews with 32 middle leaders, with varying leadership experience from primary and secondary schools, were conducted over 18 months. The interview schedule was collaboratively designed by the researchers. Items were based on results from previous research conducted by Grootenboer, Rönnerman and Edwards-Groves, (2017) who developed a middle leading practice model based on empirical research focused on establishing middle leading practices across several countries (including Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and Sweden). Questions were organized to elicit information related to the six key elements of the middle leading practice model, including how participants accounted for: teaching, leading, managing, facilitating, collaborating, and communicating, along with other relevant demographic and experiential data, and descriptions of the enabling and constraining conditions that influenced their middle leading work. Researchers each conducted between six and 10 interviews.

Data include recorded, transcribed, and analyzed interviews with the volunteer middle leaders from different educational jurisdictions and demographics across Australia who participated in the online interviews conducted via Zoom; these varied in length from 50–75 minutes. Participants were recruited using a general snowballing technique applied through initial callouts made through: i) Australian educational leadership organisations (e.g., AITSL), ii) local known contacts from school district offices of which the researchers were closely affiliated; and iii) advertised at a national online seminar held for middle leaders. Researchers either directly contacted nominated middle leaders, whose details were provided by the relevant organizations, or interested middle leaders initiated the contact via the information provided at the seminar. Efforts to establish trustworthiness in the data were made through: i) an ini-

tial screening of respondents through an email process to ensure they fit the criteria of having both a leading and a teaching role in their school, and ii) asking participants in the interview specifically to exemplify responses with details of their practices to maintain a focus on practices rather than opinions. Email contact also made it possible to negotiate a suitable time with individual participants. Note, Zoom was selected as the interview mode since in-person contact was restricted at the time due to the COVID-19 pandemic, along with its convenient recording facility.

Analysis involved applying Fereday and Muir-Cochrane's (2006) deductive thematic approach that allows the coding process to begin with a pre-determined coding system, but also offers scope for inductively updating and refining that coding system as new content emerges. In this study, the three realms of cultural-discursive, material-economic, and social-political arrangements, which constitute practice architectures, were overlaid with participant-reported orientations to practices in terms of discourses (what they said), activities (what they did), and relationships (how they related to others). This dual purpose was applied as a framework to code and analyze data organized in a "table of invention" (Kemmis et al., 2014), and allowed the distinctiveness of the discourses, physical set-ups and activities, and relationships to emerge as participants described their leading practices. The analytic process involved: i) each researcher initially reviewing the corpus to elicit preliminary themes, ii) researchers comparing first-wave impressions and reaching consensus about the dominant themes to be explored and coded, iii) coding the data to identify emerging themes relating to the development practices and related practice architectures described by middle leaders, iv) reviewing the codes to establish reliability and to further refine themes for interrater agreement, v) completing a further data-sweep to substantiate thematic refinements, and vi) repeating the process in two further iterations, with one researcher leading and others cross-checking the analysis.

The practices of facilitating, mentoring, and coaching were consistently described in these data, and through an iterative process of comparison, cross-referencing, and collation, were subsequently brought together with the dominating themes interactional arrangements, intent, and interpersonal intensity emerging. Although some respondents did not frame their practices using these specific terms, their descriptions of practices distinctly oriented to the differently nuanced intents and relationships comprising facilitating, mentoring, or coaching; for example, some participants spoke more generally about supporting, guiding, encouraging, informing, modelling, demonstrating skills, or working alongside.

Results

Thematic analysis of interviews with middle leaders reveals that, without exception, the three practices of facilitating, mentoring, and coaching are intentional relational practices core to site-based education development, but that they shift across interactional lines, purpose, and interpersonal intensity. The following section presents excerpts illustrating these three discrete, yet interrelated, themes: interactional arrangements, intent, and interpersonal intensity. It begins with extended orienting extracts from two experienced middle leaders whose accounts typify the kinds of

descriptions, in general terms, they ascribed to their middle leading practices. All participant names have been replaced with pseudonyms.

This first interview excerpt, from middle leader Maisie, illustrates how, in her view, middle leadership involves a continuum of flexible responsive support, where facilitating, mentoring, and coaching practices (explicitly named) are purposefully and deliberately customised to meet the professional education needs of the teachers in her large secondary school. She said:

Leading needs to be flexible, and purposeful, to be almost fit for purpose so you can bring along everyone ... but a bit tailored to suit the different teacher's ways of learning, their curriculum knowledge and professional experience or stage, that sort of means that the support for change deliberately takes on different forms; like running, facilitating the PD is like floating the idea to generally everyone, your planning for the session and designing how to support people after that so they see the idea as necessary, and important.

Her point that leading needs to be “fit for purpose,” “adjusted,” and “tailored” to suit teachers’ needs and experiences means designing different “forms” of support. Maisie also directly illustrates the strategic, yet shifting, interpersonal and interactional arrangements, and that these shifts are necessary “to bring everyone along.” As she continues, Maisie orients to the specific interactional shifts between running whole staff professional development and conducting small group or individual mentoring as ways to respond to teacher differences and needs that are related to the purposes or intentions the initiative is designed to meet, for example, to float the idea, build the language or knowledge, or discuss its value or utility:

Mentoring, well mentoring is more close and intensely personal, like supporting a teacher or the curriculum team to understand the project, to discuss and challenge the ideas but in the end feel okay about the idea, like to plan together, to get used to knowing the ropes, build the language or the subject knowledge, to how it fits their daily work, to feel the use of the idea or strategy as something valuable they can do with their class.

In her description, Maisie clearly orients to the changing interpersonal dynamics and the closer personal intensity required for mentoring individuals or small teams as connected to supporting teachers’ understanding the project in relation to their own teaching. Next, she suggests attending to the “nuts and bolts” requires different interactional arrangements and interpersonal intensities. Here, Maisie’s comments further delineate her middle leading activity by specifying ways the practice of coaching requires distinct interactional arrangements; for her, coaching can be framed in terms of one-on-one teacher visits:

Coaching is different again, it is the nuts and bolts, about seeing the idea in action and the skills it takes to make it work, either you’re modelling in a one-on-one teacher visit or in lessons where we might co-teach, then they take over and practice, trial it in their lessons and keep working on it with you prompting and guiding

and sometimes correcting; you are the one who knows what to look for to help them move forward. So yeah, they are different but all lead forward to teacher development.

Specifically, drawing out modelling, co-teaching, prompting, guiding, and/or correcting illustrate some composite coaching practices Maisie identifies as necessary but different to mentoring and facilitating. Further, as she indicates, they “all lead forward to teacher development.”

Similarly, sentiments offered by middle leader Sherrie, from a small primary school, draw attention to the fundamental aim of middle leading being about bringing people along and developing them, but to do this means being flexible, adaptable, responsive, and purposeful. In addition, Sherrie states different phases require different practices:

One of the fundamental aspects of leadership is actually bringing people along with you and developing them. This means being flexible or adaptable, and always responsive to the needs of both individual teachers, and the phase and overall purpose of the project. Like setting it up as a bigger staff group where introducing the initiative or whatever is more formal, has a different goal to working in the smaller teaching teams where the mentoring can be formal often to begin with then informal at point of need.

As Sherrie suggests, relational differences are evident between leading the whole staff, mentoring people in smaller teaching teams, or coaching individuals. Levels of formality and informality are raised as differences in descriptions of these development practices. As she implies, the specific goal or intent changes the nature of the “alongside relationship,” but at the same time, the nature of the interactional arrangements reciprocally influences possibilities for supporting both teacher pedagogical growth and their wellbeing:

It’s not necessarily because you’re an expert or you’re the best in the field, but it works because of the alongside relationship that you have with people, so mentoring is like when you’re working at the elbow encouraging over longer periods of time, where you’re supporting and listening, developing them for teaching growth but this has a flow on effect to their wellbeing. But coaching individuals is more formal and organised in shorter bursts, when necessary, it’s different because you are targeting the support, demonstrating, and refining what they are actually doing in the class to be absolutely the best practitioner they can possibly be, it’s about getting the details, the knowledge in practice right.

For Sherrie, like other experienced middle leaders, mentoring involves supporting education development and teacher wellbeing by “working at the elbow” over longer periods, which enables more intensely personal relationships. These, as she indicates, are distinctly different to a coaching relationship established around targeted support and shorter timeframes focused more specifically on refining knowledge and in-practice actions.

Drawing across the larger corpus, thematic analysis reveals a recursive continuum of intentional relational middle leading practices. Middle leader accounts reporting the development practices they employ in their schools indicate an iterative continuum of responsive support contingent on establishing different, yet interrelated, interactional arrangements to meet the practical intention of individual and collective school-based development initiatives, and thus involves different intensity levels in their interpersonal relationships. Next, these themes are discussed and presented in summary tables, which include selected data excerpts delineated in terms of the different practices of facilitating, mentoring, and coaching.

Interactional arrangements

In their responses, most middle leaders spoke about their practical work in terms of changing interactional arrangements with different individual and collective configurations, and that these changed in accordance with the nature of the professional development initiative they were leading. Here, the different development practices of facilitating, mentoring, and coaching required distinctly different interactional arrangements that, in turn, influenced the material-economic and social-political arrangements, in terms of their *doings* and *relatings*. For example, the material-economic conditions changed depending on whether they were: facilitating a whole school information session with bigger whole staff groups; mentoring smaller teaching teams as they coming to deeper understandings about a new curriculum or system assessment requirement, or an individual new to a position or discipline; or in one-on-one or smaller group coaching situations designed to provide higher degree of specificity in the stage of the development initiative. Grace’s comment that her support “varies between being the guide on the side or the sage on the stage” orients to the deliberate shifts in the different material-economic arrangements she organizes. The selection of excerpts provided in Table 1 illustrates a continuum of reflexive interactional arrangements similarly aligned with points raised by Maisie and Sherrie in the previous section.

Table 1: A continuum of interactional arrangements for facilitating, mentoring, and coaching

Theme	Excerpts from the field
<p>Interactional arrangements</p> <p style="text-align: center;">↕</p> <p><i>“Varies between being the guide on the side or the sage on the stage”</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">↕</p>	<p>Facilitating</p> <p>Bigger groups for delivering the big picture introductions with the whole staff or subject teams.</p> <p>Trying to set things up for others, align them with targeted support, sometimes that’s me...matching people up as good working pairs.</p> <p>Making things happen for others in the teaching team.</p> <p>Encouraging and arranging for them to go across to other schools.</p> <p>Arranging a coaching peer, there might be a peer I could get her to go have a look at and letting them come up with solutions together rather than me.</p> <p>Arranging times and spaces for teachers in the team to get together.</p> <p>Facilitating times for them to go on learning walks to go around and see what it looks like in other classrooms.</p>

Table 1 (continued)

Theme	Excerpts from the field
	<p>Mentoring Being the trusted “go-to” person to run things by. You’re sitting and working alongside that person or teaching teams. Sharing their expertise too, in formal and informal just-in-time support. It’s really a very clear process that we work through, so it’s lots of modelling to individual and small teams and then working beside teachers in their classes.</p> <p>Coaching Expert-learner model, one-on-one communication the discussions and demonstrations are more technical, so you work closely with individual teachers who need specific targeted support. I am in their rooms, providing closer more formal work with individuals working closely beside teachers as they practice, guiding and prompting.</p>

Intent

It was evident that many middle leaders made distinctions about facilitating, mentoring, and coaching practices in relation to the intent and stage of the development activity they were leading in their schools. This is a position indicated by middle leader Heath: “We need different approaches depending on the teacher’s professional and personal needs, knowledge and experiences, but also the overall purpose of the project or stage of the initiative.” Table 2 provides examples of ways the interviewees described how what they did, in terms of facilitating, mentoring, and coaching, aligned with the overall purpose of the initiative, stage or phase of the project, and specific type of development support teachers required.

Table 2: Deliberate alignments between project intent and middle leader’s practices

Theme	Excerpts from the field
<p>Intent</p> <p>↕</p> <p><i>“We need different approaches depending on the teacher’s professional and personal needs, knowledge and experiences, but also the overall purpose of the project or stage of the initiative”</i></p> <p>↕</p>	<p>Facilitating Big picture stuff. Getting on the same page about where we are heading, helping to lay out the shared language and designing opportunities got all to sharing ideas and strategies. When it’s more whole scale professional learning around data for example, it’s a more formal process so less personal as I am delivering to staff meetings. There’s some meetings that aren’t for coaching, they’re just for the business going over the strategy, developing the big ideas or getting the language right. Bring on everyone in ways that suit the intention of initiative, the person’s needs their expertise levels and or their stage of career.</p> <p>Mentoring Mentoring is the opposite to the speed dating that facilitating alone is. Working through, discussing, debating the new initiative or curriculum with smaller teams to develop coherence of message and competence of practice.</p>

Table 2 (continued)

Theme	Excerpts from the field
	<p>Focused targeted conversations about their wellbeing, where they are up to, how they are coping, feeling.</p> <p>I probably use the term mentoring when we're actually engaging in a new role or at the beginning of the career.</p> <p>Like including nitty gritty things that just help the person in the day-to-day functioning of getting to their role.</p> <p>Co-planning.</p> <p>Coaching</p> <p>Using my knowledge to working in a closely guided way with individuals showing them what it [the strategy] looks like in practice, jumping in to demonstrate in a co-teach situation.</p> <p>Coaching is about having specific targets in mind, so it might be a data focus or it could be an assessment focus.</p> <p>To support some people to have the difficult conversations, or it's just elements of developing their practices well.</p> <p>You're working beside the teacher, modelling but also kind of prompting them, jumping in to show them when necessary.</p> <p>Model a lesson for them so that they can see how to teach something that they're struggling with, like model-coteach-debrief.</p> <p>Shorter cycles, more specific focus.</p> <p>Teach together and bounce off each other or I could just go in there in what I would class as a purely observational role to provide feedback.</p> <p>Coaching is for getting to the detail of how, the showing how it could be done, the procedures and skills of teaching a strategy like reciprocal teaching.</p> <p>Could be at any point in a person's professional cycle it is details, about seeing the idea in action and the skills it takes to make it work either you modelling in a teacher visit.</p>

Interpersonal intensity

The third theme involved recognizing how the practices of facilitating, mentoring, and coaching are comprised of different relational dynamics. As middle leader Lucinda said, "Varying levels of formality changes the kinds of relationships I have with the staff, teaching teams or individual teachers...and these relationships are critical for how responsive I need to be, or can be," In Table 3, interview extracts illustrate how the practices of facilitating, mentoring, and coaching form different social-political arrangements affording changing interpersonal intensities, and these reciprocally determine the possibilities for responsiveness and the kinds of relationships developed with teachers.

Whilst analysis predominantly showed that the practices of facilitating, mentoring, and coaching could be characterized differently in terms of distinctiveness of interactional arrangements, specific of intent, and the dynamics and intensity of the interpersonal relationships (as exemplified in the above data tables), some vagueness, perhaps even ambiguity, about the different middle leading practices were notable in the responses of some interviewees. Importantly, analysis across the larger corpus revealed that for some respondents (generally, those newer to their middle leading

Table 3: Shifting relational intensities and responsive practice

Theme	Excerpts from the field
<p>Interpersonal intensity</p> <p style="text-align: center;">↕</p> <p><i>“Varying levels of formality changes the kinds of relationships I have with the staff, teaching teams or individual teachers ...</i></p> <p><i>... and these relationships are critical for how responsive and direct I need to be, or can be.”</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">↕</p>	<p>Facilitating</p> <p>A bit less personal because it more formal, it’s a bit of me delivering to the bigger group, although I try to build in time for them to work and talk in smaller groups.</p> <p>A bit of me being the expert leader out the front presenting to them, a bit of a power position to be honest, as it changes the way you are treated and you treat them.</p> <p>All support involves a feedback loop which, of course, is more general in when I am facilitating a whole group discussion, more like keeping the ideas that flow on track, but for me it’s also noticing different opinions and acknowledging the extension or deepening relevant points.</p> <p>A lot less intimate in the whole staff scenarios.</p> <p>Mentoring</p> <p>In a mentoring relationship it’s normally rather intense but planned.</p> <p>Mentoring is more close and intensely personal where informal meetings sometimes begin to happen organically.</p> <p>Bringing theory and practice together through open professional learning conversations, sharing ideas, strategies, and information — this means being open to everyone’s ideas and knowledge, and this really fosters the sense of a community of practice.</p> <p>Sometimes debating and challenging means getting into each other’s heads.</p> <p>Using my knowledge to their advantage means working closely and openly.</p> <p>Providing mentoring feedback is a key part of it, like keeps people honest but more importantly provides open space for that trust to build over time so you can be more direct.</p> <p>Coaching</p> <p>More of a one-to-one situation because teachers want to change the specifics of a practice.</p> <p>Coaching is different, it’s more direct and to the point, sometimes that is needed.</p> <p>Seeing the idea in action and the skills it takes to make it work when they have a go themselves, this takes a very close and trusting relationship that in the end allows for that difficult conversation.</p> <p>A very clear process that you work through, lots of demonstrating and modelling to individuals and small teams.</p> <p>It can be really intense because sometimes you are correcting and showing a different way.</p>

Theme

...and these relationships are critical for how responsive and direct I need to be, or can be”

roles), there seemed less clarity about what middle leading practice entailed. The problem here is that, although some middle leaders may have indicated that their roles included facilitating, mentoring, and/or coaching, their descriptions lacked insight, precision, detail, and/or connections to the actual practices they enacted. For example, some middle leaders, when pressed to provide examples of their leading practices, indicated that they “can’t put it into words,” “did what they were told by the principal,” “made it up as they went along,” “tried to keep everyone happy,”

“actually didn’t know what they were doing sometimes,” or “jumped over system hoops.” We argue that these less-than-clear comments are equally illuminating for the purposes of the study reported in this article, since if ambiguity and uncertainty about the nature of the practices of middle leading remains, the efficacy for educational development in some sites may be jeopardized or at best compromised.

Discussion

The results presented contribute to both literature on middle leadership and that describing the professional development practices of facilitating, mentoring, and coaching. Overall, the analysis revealed the middle leading practices of facilitating, mentoring, and coaching were distinct in practical and relational intent, and form part of a myriad of interrelated interpersonal interactions that comprise the dynamism of middle leadership. While the professional development practices facilitating, mentoring, and coaching are prevalent in the literature, the practice perspective offers a unique conceptualization for educational middle leading and the development of it. The data presented in both the tables and extended extracts, as typical of points raised by most middle leaders interviewed, illustrate ways the different relational constitutions and intensities are dependent on the specific purpose of the school development initiative and the teacher needs, experiences, and project phases; that is, that each of these elements is a practice architecture for the other. It was evident that these were influenced by different locally arranged site-based measures that generated different cultural-discursive arrangements (evident in the language, discourses, and interactions involved in facilitating, mentoring, or coaching), material-economic arrangements (evident in the different organisational sets-ups, activities, and use of resources when working with whole staff groups, or mentoring working alongside small groups or teaching teams, or coaching individuals in one-on-one situations), and social-political arrangements (through shifting power relationships and interpersonal intensities as experienced when, for example, one is a deliverer of programs, expert-learner, team member, colleague, peer, co-learner, knower, supporter, coach). Yet, insights also reveal a need for a shared language, and clarity, coherence, and precision of knowledge concerning the practical understandings among middle leaders about the education development practices they arrange for teachers in their own schools.

The findings have important implications for middle leader practice development, since middle leaders themselves need tailored support, training, and coaching to effectively transform from being a good classroom practitioner (as often reported) to being an effective leader of change in their school contexts. As the analysis implies, significant planning and strategic investment is needed to adequately support and develop the specific middle leading practices of facilitating, mentoring, and/or coaching. This is necessary in terms of understanding the nuanced ways these distinct practices, depending on their purpose at the time, shift across interactional lines that, in turn, enable relational intensities as middle leaders move between their facilitating, mentoring, and coaching activities. These relational architectures (Edwards-Groves, Brennan Kemmis, Hardy, & Ponte, 2010) reciprocally shape the *cultural-discursive*, *material-economic*, and *social-political* arrangements that support teacher development in schools. Therefore, attention to

what these shifts mean for successfully conducting site-based education development is required by middle leaders. Strengthening middle leaders' practice knowledge base consisting of more overt knowledge about the connections between their facilitating, mentoring, and coaching practices and the interactional arrangements, intent, and interpersonal intensities that each require is necessary. Furthermore, the results have important implications for school leaders and policymakers seeking to improve broader systemic support for building and refining middle-leading practices in schools.

Conclusion

Persistent scrutiny on the performance of school systems, leaders, teachers, and students, within a constantly changing education sector, makes the demands on and provision of education for teaching development perpetually challenging, and a constant source of tension for policymakers and system leaders alike. Results presented in this article seek to develop more comprehensive understandings about the efficacy and impact of middle leading on teachers' development by interrogating the direct relationship between leading professional learning (through middle leading) and the practices of facilitating, mentoring, and coaching. To strengthen their repertoire of site-based professional development practices, middle leaders require clarity around what precisely different practices mean for their leading work. The interchangeable usage of these practices, as currently found, compromises important distinctions between the dynamics of middle leading. Thus, understanding and accounting for the nuances of these practices is both timely and necessary because social science research continues to invest much in isolating the specific drivers that support (and inhibit) educational development (for teachers and students) (Fullan, 2011). Developing shared and more precise understandings of the nuances of the practical realities of these practices is necessary to advance middle leading itself. The provision of such support must overtly address ways to alleviate untimely restraints on the work of middle leaders, and ultimately contribute to broader societal, political, and media conversations about the impact of middle leadership on site-based education development.

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