

Connecting Education Using Middle Leadership: Reimagining Middle Leadership in the Futures of Education

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In many ways the structural organization and design of education has remained constant over the years. Teachers, school administrators and senior staff have continued to act as key agents in educational spaces; however, increasing demands in school accountability and managerialism have led to the introduction of innovative middle leadership positions, providing opportunity for increased connectivity, professional development, and support.

More recently, the overall shifts in practice as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic have highlighted that many limitations have become apparent, including: the need for a move from neoliberal accountability practices demanding big data through the promotion of EdTech privatized organizations (Lingard et al., 2021; Zhao et al., 2019); the limitations of continued teacher professional learning as a result of decreased opportunity and budget for training; the overall lack of communication of information between those engaging in innovative and new research with educators practice (Couture et al., 2020); and the lack of effective student monitoring practices to highlight areas of need and inequality to guide practice and informed response (Biesta, 2019; Lupton & Hayes, 2021). Considering these revealed challenges and the catalysed opportunity for change as a result of the pandemic, this paper aims to contribute to futures studies in education research and UNESCO's *Futures of Education - Learning to Become 2050* initiative by proposing a renewed vision of how the role of middle leadership can support in rethinking and shaping the futures of education.

This paper is organized into three sections, each consisting of existing topic research, guiding questions and anticipation possibilities for futures work. The first section provides an introduction and brief overview of literature on middle leadership as a means of setting the context for this avenue of focus. The following section assesses how middle leadership has and can be designed to support the identified limitations of education using *The Thing*

from the Future foresight framework tool. After having anticipated the potential contributions resulting from the re-definement of middle leadership, the third section elaborates on anticipated possibilities for the field using the *Three Event Horizon* futures studies framework, including detailed trajectory and timeline considerations. Overall, this paper aims to highlight the significant potential of the middle leadership role in responsively supporting existing and futures needs in knowledge, education, and learning, in alignment with the aims of UNESCO's *Futures of Education - Learning to Become 2050* initiative.

What is Middle Leadership?

When considering the organizational structure of K-12 education, the key roles of teachers and principals are typically profiled. But what of those roles that operate in the spaces in-between? It is this gray space in which the work of education's middle leaders exist. While a consistent definition of middle leaders varies across the globe (Lipscombe et al., 2021), scholars agree that it is the unique positionality held by those in this role, requiring a "brokerage" between principals and teacher colleagues that sets it apart (Grice, 2019; Grootenboer et al., 2015; Gurr, 2019; Li et al., 2018; Lipscombe et al., 2021; Ng and Chan, 2014; Tay et al., 2019). Many of whom operate as middle leaders represent instructional coaches, curriculum consultants, program leaders and subject leads with a common link to curriculum, teacher development, and top-down policies and practices as a means of supporting educators and schools in meeting student achievement goals and responsive learning needs. Many of these roles exclude managerial job characteristics, and rather aim to provide educational leadership and mentorship opportunities (Lipscombe et al., 2021).

While the creation of middle leadership roles has been more recent when considering the long history of education organization structures, it is important to consider

why the role now exists. More specifically, the creation and continuation of middle leadership roles is the result of “...the intensification of school administrative and compliance responsibilities, coupled with a greater focus on school improvement” (Lipscombe et al., 2021, p. 8) and correlates with funding for such initiatives. In many cases middle leaders work to mentor and train staff in roles responsively designed to satisfy funding criteria and system goals. With many roles working to satisfy both teacher development alongside school (and district) improvement, many also work to collect information and data at various scales.

It is the ongoing flexibility of the job role that suggests potential for futures opportunities to support in: consistently acquiring localized (small) data, provide connectivity between recent research and instructional practices in the classroom; and support an efficient use of an (potentially) existent resource through further defining the job characteristic of middle leaders more consistently.

Furthermore, those who operate in middle leadership roles have found themselves to be in uncharted waters, with minimal support and direction to anchor their contributions. While middle leaders operate as professional development facilitators for their colleagues (Byrant et al., 2020; Edwards-Groves et al., 2016; Grootenboer et al., 2015; Koh et al., 2011; La-Pointe-McEwans et al., 2017; Lipscombe et al., 2020; Willis et al., 2019) they also lack professional development opportunities to meet their needs as middle leaders (Basset 2016; Bassett and Shaw, 2017; Gurr and Drysdale, 2013; Lipscombe et al., 2021; Thorpe and Bennett-Powell, 2014). Through the clear and consistent definition of the role, as proposed in this paper, a better understanding of “what” middle leaders need to learn and “who” can support through increased partnerships between academia and public-private stakeholders can be better understood.

Futures Studies Forecasting and UNESCO's *Futures of Education* Initiative

“Futures studies is the systematic study of possible, probable and preferable futures including the worldviews and myths that underlie each future” (Inayatullah, 2012, p.37). Envisioning innovative and improved futures in education requires a recognition of the multitude of “pasts” that could have been, the present situation, and rigorous imagining of different futures based on an awareness and understanding of assumptions about the future. UNESCO's *Future of Education* initiative “Learning to Become 2050” invites such innovative and imaginative futures thinking to contribute to a global discussion on how to work to “...reimagine how education and knowledge can contribute to the global common good...to shape the future of humanity and the planet” (UNESCO, 2020). Using futures studies forecasting frameworks, this paper anticipates a means from which the rethinking of middle leadership can contribute an inventive, alternative narrative (in alignment with UNESCO's exploration of a forward-looking vision on how education and learning can enable a transformative future), while recognizing current and ongoing contextual challenges.

Foresight Tool: The Thing from the Future

One effective futures studies foresight framework comes from the work of Candy & Wilson's (2014) OCAD University based Situation Lab strategic model entitled *The Thing from the Future*. This narrative tool guides idea exploration through four primary domains: arc, terrain, object, and mood, to comprehensively describe what is to be “the thing from the future.” Using this tool, key guiding questions help to support in exploring each domain, thereby contributing to deeper anticipation and innovation. This application of this foresight framework works well to reveal existing challenges in education to inform futures

possibilities in middle leadership, as explored in the following section of this paper and summarized in Figure 1.

First Domain: Discipline Arc. Recognizing that more recently cultural, economic, societal and professional challenges have contributed to the development of middle leader opportunities in the organizational structure of education, *how will the reimagining of middle leadership change the discipline of education?*

Figure 1

A Thing from the Future and Middle Leadership (Placemat)

Arc	Terrain	Object	Mood
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - middle leaders hold unique positionality throughout educational scales - redefining the discipline of middle leadership will allow for increased understanding, growth, collaboration, and development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - increased market-driven systems through neoliberal standards-based testing reform - small data to support effective responsive action - reduced teacher autonomy and increasing isolation from current research - increased budget cuts contribute to blind loss of resources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - how and what data is collected needs to change - increase in effective, informative small data to inform localized impact - increased professional partnerships within (e.g., middle leaders) and beyond (e.g., with academics and key stakeholders in education) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - increased communication will ensure all key actors are informed - increased professional connectivity will lead to greater partnerships and overall impact - relevant data collection will better support student, staff, school, and community success (contributing to UNESCO's <i>Futures of Education</i> aims)
Description of the <i>Thing from the Future</i>			
<p>Redefining the role of middle leaders in education can help to support the localized acquisition of small data to better inform goal definition and support at various scales in education: classroom, school, and system; thereby satisfying terrain-based challenges, while informing tiered decision-making and support to contribute to a more personalized, efficient, and collaborative futures of education.</p>			

Source: Adapted from Candy & Wilson (2014) "A Thing from the Future" model.

Middle leadership has more recently (in the past few decades) emerged as an additional structural position to support the increasing neoliberal demands of school systems and organizations, specifically working to support teacher colleagues, school administrators and senior staff (Lipscombe et al., 2021). While this role fills a positional void in school organization, it also varies in its specific design. The development of middle leadership roles has resulted from top-down, localized funding initiatives responding to identified policy or system goals or needs, while simultaneously acting to responsively support identified needs from the bottom-up, together to maintain a common focus on supporting student and school improvement. It is important to note that many middle leaders do not hold managerial positions (Lipscombe et al., 2021), but rather transition fluidly between classroom, school, and system spaces providing coaching and mentoring at the classroom and school scale, facilitating professional development at the school and system scale, and sometimes even supporting in the collection of student data and school/system goal development and review.

This unique positionality and openness suggest opportunities through redefining the role of middle leadership and its contribution to enhance the capabilities of the discipline of education, as a means of better meeting the current and anticipated challenges in education (UNESCO, 2020). Furthermore, redefining middle leadership will help to further solidify the role and establish unity across the field, thereby better allowing school systems and middle leaders to understand, grow, and develop, collaboratively to best satisfy localized needs while balancing top-down initiatives.

Second Domain: Terrain. As reflected in the foundation of UNESCO's *Futures of Education* initiative, there exist a number of increasingly political, social, economic, and professional demands challenging the intended purposes of education. "Arguably tensions over the

purposes of education have grown deeper as the demands on education systems to meet multiple goals have increased” (Lupton & Hayes, 2021, p.3). *What course is the current terrain contexts (i.e., economic, political, social, professional) leading education?*

To begin, a growing shift has occurred in the field of education, adopting a neoliberal focus on accountability and big data to describe students’ learning status and drive policy and system decision-making. More specifically, “A broad political consensus, within and between countries, has supported the development of market-driven systems characterized by standards-based education reforms, test-based accountability, reduced teacher autonomy, and back-to-basics curriculum projects” (Lupton & Hayes, 2021, p.145). This shift has resulted in a globalized move towards the increased use of standardized assessment tools developed by privatized EdTech companies as a means of providing big data (Lingard et al., 2021; Lupton & Hayes, 2021; Wyatt-Smith et al., 2019). This digital disruption has contributed towards the prioritization of big data and a misunderstanding of its value by education policy makers and leaders. In fact, “There is ample evidence that in most schooling systems, the appetite for more and more data is insatiable. Schools and systems today are awash with data, much of which is underutilized for policy and learning purposes” (Lingard et al., 2021, p.7). The perceived value in the use of big data, especially by school systems who claim a “student-centred approach” can contribute to an illusion of rich decision-making as a result of the perceived “valid, reliable, and fair” information (Lingard et al., 2021, p.2) in which standardized testing conditions suggest (Wyatt-Smith et al., 2019).

Perceived outcomes as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic suggest a narrative of learning loss worldwide (Rivers, 2021; Zhao, 2021). While effective assessment of student understanding will be imperative, quantifying learning loss might not. This push towards “closing learning gaps” has already caused a rushed, blind push towards big data and EdTech

based assessment tools (Lingard et al., 2021, Layton & Hayes, 2021); however, the effective collection of small data might be more powerful (Salhberg, 2017).

The trajectory of the described terrain suggests a future focused on standardized curriculum, achievement, and facilitation, as defined by trends in big data and associated educational policy decisions. Drawing on object alternatives (including those shared below) can help to reframe possible futures of education, considering the key question in UNESCO's (2019) work "what do we want to become?" as a means of ensuring effective use of technology and data advancements, knowledge sharing, and equity and inclusive based practices.

Domain Three: Object. Considering the current terrain, many terrain shifts could contribute towards a refocus on student-centred education and increased exchange of knowledge and technological developments.

More specifically, the claim of a student-centred learning approach, is not enough. There, too, exists an immense need for small data (Salhberg, 2017) to truly act on this approach and support informative responsive practice, and thereby moving beyond solely thinking that big data is multifaceted enough to inform localized actions. While there has been a move from summative to interim assessments (Rutkowski, 2021), it is essential to consider assessment as a momentary understanding that is best understood when combined with ongoing teacher-based triangulation of data (i.e., consideration of ongoing observations, conservations, and products), otherwise known as small data (Salhberg, 2017). Therefore, "...big data advocates [for] the importance of small data, not as an alternative but as a complement to evidence-based practice and good data in schools" (Salhberg, 2017, p.19) and involves "...reconceptualizing teacher evaluative expertise for discerning what data are useful and how they can be used to inform teaching and improved

learning” (Lingard et al., 2021, p.3; Sellar, 2020; Wyatt-Smith et al., 2019). And who better to lead in this work, then middle leaders? As previously shared, middle leaders may already contribute to the landscape of small data collection (through mentoring, coaching and professional development planning and facilitation) and the analysis of big data (when supporting school and system administrators in the development and assessment of goals and initiatives). A commitment to the collection of intentional primary data at the classroom and school scales, as facilitated by middle leaders, could significantly support in balancing big data in education.

As such, redefining middle leadership positions to formally include the acquisition and collection of school-based data would benefit from specific professional development, especially that supported by a partnership with academic researchers. With strengthened data literacy, middle leaders would then be better equipped to develop and facilitate assessment based professional development with teachers using their understanding of research and instructional practices. Furthermore, providing opportunities for extended partnerships, such as professional learning communities both locally and globally can help the exchange of knowledge and professional growth (Campbell et al., 2017; Katz et al., 2018; Mehta & Peterson, 2019).

Lastly, integrating a data focused component to middle leaders’ role can further support in the overall understanding of system needs and trends, valuable in development and analyzing school and district wide goals and initiatives. This, therefore, can further contribute towards valid school-based data (e.g., how managing the shift in de-streamed grade 9 mathematics throughout Ontario, Canada) that can be used at greater scales to inform policy practices and initiatives.

Domain Four: Mood. Overall, an increase in communication, professional connectivity, and relevant data collection will significantly contribute towards the betterment of student learning in an equitable and inclusive manner, aligned with UNESCO's *Futures of Education 2050* initiative. More specifically, an improved opportunity for communication through the use of middle leaders would help to provide increased dialogue between teachers, school and system administrators. In addition, investing in the development of middle leaders will contribute towards the increased personalization of teacher professional development through mentorship, coaching, as well as school and systems-based learning opportunities. Similar to the value of responsively supporting students, providing timely, research-based profession development rooted in localized data collection can ensure connectivity between knowledge and practice. Lastly, the impact of the collection of increased personalized, local, primary data to inform responsive instruction, professional development and goals at the classroom, school and system scales would support student-centred, inclusive approach to learning for all participants in education, aligning with UNESCO's *Futures of Education 2050* aims.

Foresight Tool: Three Event Horizon situation model

When anticipating the implementation of a redefined middle leadership (ML) role, the *Three Event Horizon* forecast framework can help in drafting a potential narrative (as seen in Figure 2). For example, drawing on the current focus on education because of the impacts of the pandemic as a trigger event might suggest an opportunity to pilot this middle leader role in the areas of math and literacy, or redefine the role should these roles currently exist in alternative formats. Based on *The Thing from the Future* tool, the mood of those involved should improve as a result of informed, responsive action (see Figure 1).

Figure 2

Three Event Horizon Foresight Model: Redefine Middle Leadership (ML) in the Futures of Education

Redefine Middle Leaders (2022-2024)	Reimagined Profession (2026)	Increased Connectivity (2030)
<p>Trigger Event: Use the response on the impacts from COVID-19 and the push for accountable measures to minimize learning loss school boards redefine ML roles in Math/Literacy (pilot project)</p>	<p>Trigger Event: Education systems/governments move to permanently create ML role (and fund) as part of “learning acceleration” policy initiatives and support with localized data collection and research.</p>	<p>Trigger Event: Increased desire for connectivity leads to further collaboration and cross-sector work in research, resource development, and futures of education work.</p>
<p>Related Impacts:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Uncover localized needs (classroom, school, system) ● Collect purposeful primary (small and big) data at various scales (i.e., classroom and school based) ● Build capacity of school leaders/admin and educators through pilot projects in the form of instructional coaching/mentoring and collaborative research projects focused on student achievement in subject focuses. ● Provide professional learning opportunities for MLs in data literacy, research and coaching 	<p>Related impacts:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● System-wide implementation of role ● Ministry/Government funding to support permanent ● Classrooms, schools and systems have improved sense of local site needs and goal-set accordingly ● Increased development of ML role connected to current research in education ● Partnerships with academia and other MLs in local areas ● Increased focus into other spheres (e.g., well-being) 	<p>Related impacts:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Learning specific to student and teacher needs based on data results from ML ● Collaboration/partnerships between MLs and academic researchers (larger scale collection of data trends) ● Increase partnerships with other stakeholders to contribute to broader scale research and support ● Connect middle leaders in (international) leader learning teams to increase dialogue regarding problem solving/programming for localized challenges.

Looking forward, the success of the pilot initiatives would suggest increased permanency of the role and a “Reimagined Profession,” as defined in policy and government design. Increased investment in the role would provide for the expansion in focus (e.g., student well-being), and increased opportunities for communication, collaboration, and partnerships with other research-based stakeholders in education, such as academics and middle leaders in other local or regional areas.

The establishment of the redesigned middle leadership role will then lead to “Increased Connectivity” and therefore increased opportunities for partnerships both locally and globally at a broader scale. This may include other education stakeholders, researchers, and middle leaders around the globe based on collected data. This might also include public-private partnerships with EdTech organizations to support the effective design of digital resources.

Concluding Remarks

When reimagining the futures of education, as inspired by UNESCO’s *Futures of Education: Learning to Become 2050* initiative, the need for futures thinking is undeniable. Given the challenges of the current context and terrain, innovative reimagining of education is necessary to ensure increased knowledge exchange, equity, and inclusive access to education, while recognizing the increasing digitization and globalization of learning.

Reimagining middle leaders through redefining the focus of the role might help to both better establish the emerging position, while meeting systemic needs for increased communication, and data collection and analysis. While versions of this have been attempted in the past, formally establishing middle leaders as practice-based data researchers will not only contribute towards increased understanding of student strengths and needs at the classroom, school, and system scale; it will also support in the communication of such trends in broader research when partnered with academic researchers and non-profit organizations, as well as in the development of purposeful digital resource development and partnerships with stakeholder groups. There exists great opportunity in leading from the middle.

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