

Leading teaching and learning together: The role of the middle tier

What is the middle tier and why is it
important for improved learning?



© STiR Education. Mentor teacher in Delhi with his class.

Overview

To improve teaching and learning outcomes, teachers and head teachers need whole-system support to build professionalism and enhance their practice. Roles at the middle tier of education systems, or those professionals working between the school and central level, offer unique capacities to facilitate collaboration, broker knowledge, scale innovations, and provide instructional direction to school-level practitioners.

This research, conducted as a collaborative partnership between IIEP-UNESCO and Education Development Trust (EDT), explores how middle-tier instructional leaders can become a nexus for change to improve the quality of education. It focuses on highlighting promising practices globally and is designed to draw out insights and lessons for both policy-makers and practitioners.

IIEP and EDT conducted case studies in five jurisdictions – Delhi (India), Jordan, Rwanda, Shanghai (China), and Wales – where new roles have been created or existing roles re-oriented towards coaching and support. The studies explored the professional practices and perceived impacts of instructional leaders, and the enabling factors present in the systems in which they work.

This brief is part one of a three-part series focusing on what the middle tier is and why it is important for improving learning. Brief 2 presents the professional practices and perceived impacts of instructional leaders, while Brief 3 presents the factors enabling them to become change agents.

Strengthening education systems to better support teachers

The world is facing a learning crisis, and at its core is a teaching crisis (World Bank, 2019). Research has consistently singled out teachers as the most important school-level variable influencing learning outcomes for students (Chetty, Friedman, and Rockoff, 2014; Hanushek and Rivkin, 2010; Rivkin, Hanushek, and Kain, 2005). Until recently, scholars and policy-makers have predominantly focused on reforms directly involving teachers – education system front-line workers – as the main solution. However, this focus is inadequate, as teachers must be supported by the wider education workforce to deliver their full potential, especially if reforms are to be sustained at scale.

A growing concern for policy-makers is how to bring about the necessary changes across *whole education systems* to better support improvements in teaching and learning processes for quality learning outcomes. Most systems have a middle tier of administration and management that resides between the school and central ministry of education. By strengthening a cadre of middle-tier professionals dedicated to improving teaching outcomes, policy-makers can provide support to improve learning outcomes. In fact, the literature emphasizes the cost-effective impact of such support on learning outcomes of school and district leadership programmes (GSL, 2020).

What is the middle tier?

This research seeks to better understand the potential of the middle tier in the improvement of teaching practice and learning. In IIEP research, ‘middle tier’ refers to the sub-district, district, or regional levels of education systems – the often messy space between schools and state levels. The middle tier differs vastly between countries depending on country size and administrative set-up, level of system (de)centralization, and breadth and distribution of mandates. IIEP (IIEP-UNESCO and EDT, 2023:12) defines middle-tier actors as the

intermediaries responsible for implementing and monitoring national education policy at the local level, who can, when empowered to do so, drive the entire system by leading from the middle through innovation.

The workforce at the middle tier typically comprises the professionals responsible for planning, management, and pedagogical support functions. Although middle-tier professionals are traditionally located in decentralized offices, they include school professionals who offer leadership and support beyond their own schools. The focus of this study was intentionally limited to middle-tier instructional leader roles that directly lead to teaching and learning improvement. While administrative functions do play a critical role in education quality, looking at all middle-tier actors and their diverse tasks is beyond the scope of this research.

BOX 1

Defining the middle tier

‘Middle tier’ is a complex term for research purposes, as its terminology is not standardized globally. For example, the term ‘middle tier’ is commonly alluded to in the United Kingdom, while the term ‘district’ is more commonly used in other parts of the world. Likewise, although ‘instructional leadership’ may have synonymous terminology (such as pedagogical leadership, educational leadership, or leading learning), ‘middle tier’ and ‘instructional leadership’ are used throughout this work for the sake of clarity and consistency.

BOX 2

Nuances around the conceptualization of the middle tier

Existing literature views the role and potential of the middle tier in education systems differently. Hargreaves and Shirley (2019) describe the difference between leading ‘in’ the middle and leading ‘from’ the middle. Leading *in* the middle covers more traditional middle-tier roles and responsibilities as defined by scholars. For example, Mourshed, Chijioke, and Barber (2010) liken this relationship to a computer’s operating system that connects the user (teachers and schools) to the central processing unit (central education authorities).

On the other hand, Hargreaves and Shirley’s (2020) understanding of leading *from* the middle stems from research in mature, high-performing districts in Ontario in which districts began designing and circulating innovative new strategies on their own. They act as partners to the state and schools. In this way, the middle tier can be thought of as the heart or core of an education system that can foster collective responsibilities and build stronger communities.

The middle tier: A neglected asset for improving learning

A growing body of evidence is emerging in support of the potential of the middle tier as a key enabler in national education systems. Yet, in most low-and middle-income countries, its contribution has been omitted in discourses on educational quality improvement (Asim et al., 2023).

The initial review conducted by IIEP, EDT, and the Education Commission revealed one of the reasons has been the lack of visible middle-tier roles regarding front-line education workers, such as teachers and principals (Childress et al., 2020). The public is seldom aware of what middle-tier professionals do, and their contribution often goes unnoticed. While the decentralization of education systems has gained momentum in recent decades, this has often led to middle-tier leaders having to plan strategically but not having the authority and capacity to do so (De Grauwe and Lugaz, 2011). Finally, school-based management policies have become popular in recent years, shifting the focus away from the middle tier and its ability to support equitable and inclusive improvements in learning outcomes across schools.

[M]ost members of the public attribute what students learn exclusively to the very visible schools, teachers and principals with whom they have direct contact. While this lack of visibility should not be equated with lack of contribution ... it does substantially increase the vulnerability of districts in times of change, especially when such change entails reduction of resources. So the case for districts needs to be made explicitly; it will not make itself. (Leithwood, 2013:9)

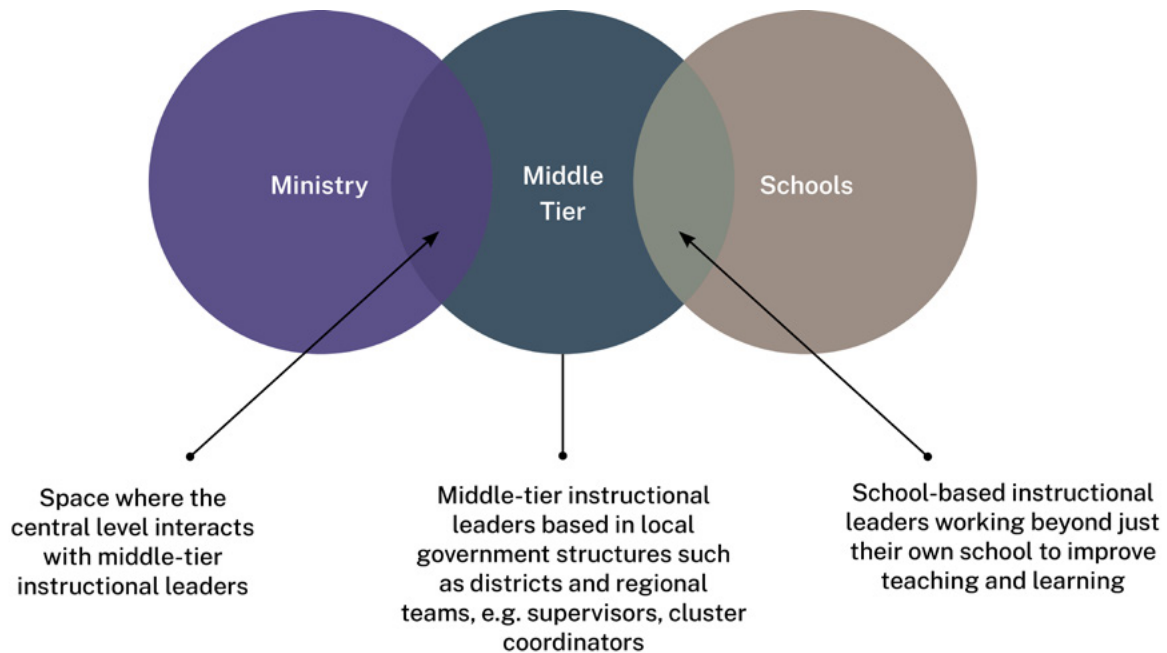
The middle tier represents an important source of untapped potential in which systems already invest and which they need to harness to better serve teaching and learning outcomes. As Asim et al. (2023) point out, in higher-income contexts, investments in the middle tier over the last 20 years have contributed to improved teaching and learning in schools. However, available research shows this has not been the case in low-and middle-income countries. Asim et al. (2023) conclude that ‘since middle-tier actors are part of existing bureaucracies across all education systems in LMICs ... there is significant potential and need for a more holistic understanding of their role in education service delivery’.

Instructional leaders as change agents

In their position just above the school level or across schools, middle-tier instructional leaders can directly support teachers and principals. IIEP (IIEP-UNESCO and EDT, 2023:12) defines ‘instructional leaders’ as leaders of learning who support teachers and school leaders in their practice and professional growth. As part of this responsibility, instructional leaders – such as teacher mentors, pedagogical coaches, cluster coordinators, and head teachers who act as system leaders – focus explicitly on improving learning.

The research model conceptualizes the education system around three groups of professionals, namely those working at state (national) level, those working at school level, and middle-tier professionals positioned between the state (national) and local levels. Representing those overlapping circles, as in *Figure 1*, allows for a better understanding of the relationships and interactions in education systems. This is especially true in large education systems in which the middle tier acts as a critical linchpin between the central and school level. Instructional leaders, such as supervisors or cluster coordinators, can be located in local government structures or be school-based actors brought up to the middle tier to intervene across schools while still practising in individual schools.

Figure 1: Where do instructional leaders at the middle tier sit?



Source: Authors

Which roles feature in this research?

Various roles and models exist for middle-tier instructional leaders. The selected case studies focus on roles working directly with teachers and principals, recognizing that each system has unique roles and structures with varying terminology. Most instructional leaders in this research are school-based professionals whose work is characterized by significant itinerant work between schools. This helped the research highlight systems based on peer leadership where the most exciting developments are taking place.

In Rwanda (leaders of learning), Delhi (mentor teachers and teacher development coordinators), and Wales (academy associates), the roles are built around peer leadership: acting head teachers or teachers take on teaching and learning improvement beyond their own schools. By both acting as practitioners in their schools and serving as collaborators, teammates, role models, and leaders, they provide support that is perceived as non-threatening compared with that provided by authority figures. In Shanghai, one of the roles is based on peer leadership (high-performing practitioners are brought up to the middle tier on a part-time basis), but others are full-time

positions dedicated to collaboration, research, and sharing of best practices. In contrast, in Jordan (supervisors), existing supervisory roles are re-oriented towards pedagogical support, coaching, and formative evaluation by partnering with teachers to adopt a critical thinking process.

Benefits of investing in instructional leadership at the middle tier

The [initial review](#) and [final synthesis](#) reveal that the middle tier is highly relevant for improving teaching and learning quality (Childress et al., 2020; Tournier, Chimier and Jones, 2023). Initially, middle-tier actors act as champions and mediators of reform by translating policy into meaningful statements of what needs to happen at school level. Middle-tier leaders also give teachers a voice by influencing policy decisions and providing policy-makers with invaluable feedback from teachers and head teachers. Laterally, they foster collaboration among school-based professionals to encourage the exchange of practice and knowledge. They further promote learning by translating and modelling evidence and research into practical school-based solutions.

BOX 3

About the case studies

- **Delhi:** Introduced in 2012, mentor teachers organize professional learning sessions, provide feedback, and spread best practices to teachers based on classroom observations. Since 2017, the system has been strengthened by assigning teacher development coordinators, who are practising teachers overseeing the programme at school level.
- **Jordan:** Supervisors are middle-tier officers who operate at district level and monitor the work of teachers. Since 2015, the government has emphasized the need for supervisors to provide developmental support for teachers through coaching and facilitating communities of practice.
- **Rwanda:** The Rwandan government created a new middle-tier role in 2017, namely leader of learning. They are serving head teachers who act as change agents to lead teaching and learning improvement beyond their own schools, working across their locality to offer professional development support to peer head teachers.
- **Shanghai:** Shanghai has a well-established, three-pronged professional supporting structure, initiated in the 1990s. Today, high-performing instructional leaders are competitively selected for three middle-tier roles to implement national education reforms and spearhead innovative school practices across schools.
- **Wales:** In 2018, Wales created the National Academy for Educational Leadership to assist the professional development of school leaders along with the role of academy associates. These associates are practising head teachers who are released one day a week to undertake system leadership activities and work beyond the leadership of their own schools.

These case studies viewed the middle-tier workforce as respected professionals and vital assets. Officials saw them as pivotal in achieving policy implementation and transformational change. Policy-makers experienced a range of benefits from middle-tier instructional leadership investment. Governments should consider the following as reasons to further invest in the middle tier:

- **Cultivating a learning system.** Since the 1980s, many public sector reforms have focused on technical solutions and tight management control. Yet successful reforms are often associated with shifting day-to-day professional practices, which is far harder to accomplish than delivering outputs such as training sessions or new textbooks. Well-designed middle-tier instructional leadership roles thus contribute to cultivating a learning system that ensures professional development for school-based professionals and builds their capacity to solve problems collectively.
- **Enhancing motivation and stimulating a professional outlook.** By leading initiatives that directly engage with head teachers or teachers, a strong middle tier improves collaboration within and across schools. This shifts the overall culture positively by improving motivation and encouraging teachers to innovate.
- **Balancing out accountability measures.** Alignment and direction provided by the middle tier, based on a shared sense of purpose, help offset the tendency to focus on accountability routines that are excessively compliance-oriented. If done badly, external accountability can hinder the professionalism of teachers and school leaders (Greany and Higham, 2018). Middle-tier instructional leaders help offset this and reset priorities around learning by giving more agency to teachers for problem-solving and professional growth opportunities.
- **Avoiding upfront or complex system changes.** Governments are already

investing in the middle tier. Thus, strengthening this level does not require considerable system change. Simply refocusing a position's role or trying to find a better balance between support and accountability can make a strong impact on system culture and professionalism, and improve teaching and learning outcomes.

Takeaways

Through five practical case studies, this research demonstrates that middle-tier instructional leaders can be a driving force for deep change. By gearing systems towards more collaboration and professional develop-

ment, the middle tier as a catalyst harnesses the intrinsic motivation of the workforce and contributes to teaching and learning transformation. Middle-tier instructional leaders have the potential to improve quality and reset education systems with a greatly strengthened focus on student learning.

Brief 2 provides more information on the case studies and highlights some of the specific professional practices that middle-tier instructional leaders have used, as well as the perceived impacts thereof. Brief 3 focuses on what needs to be in place to enable middle-tier actors to act as change agents and outlines considerations in terms of programme design, implementation,

Authors

Barbara Tournier, Chloé Chimier,
David Childress, Charlotte Jones

Contacts

For more information, please
contact:
Barbara Tournier
Programme Specialist
b.tournier@iiep.unesco.org
iiep.unesco.org/en/instructional-leaders
educationdevelopmenttrust.com

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