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

How do education systems enable instructional leaders to be effective?

© STiR Education. Coaching session between a Mentor Teacher, a Teacher Development Co-ordinator and a programme manager in Delhi (India).

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 three of a three-part series focusing on enabling factors and system considerations for turning instructional leaders into change agents for teaching and learning improvement. The other briefs focus on what is the middle tier and the professional practices of instructional leaders that contribute to improving learning.

Enabling instructional leaders to realize their potential

How did policy-makers go about visioning, scaling, and sustaining changes at the middle tier? Although every education system across the five case studies had unique contextual features and different middle-tier roles, policy-makers applied four common success factors to enable middle-tier leaders to realize their potential.

Success Factor 1: Envisioning instructional leaders as change agents

Across the five case studies, the trigger for investment in instructional leaders was always a wider ambition to improve teaching and learning quality. Reform leaders recognized instructional leaders at the middle tier as critical actors to bring about wider change.

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In this way, policy-makers:

— *Took a systems perspective to improve teaching and learning.* Reform leaders were interested in all aspects related to delivering improved student outcomes. Policy-makers saw middle-tier professionals as an asset, critical to delivering policy visions to front-line professionals in every classroom. In Shanghai, for example, reforms in the 1990s sought to strengthen teachers, so policy-makers leaned heavily on the middle tier to achieve this at scale by developing a sophisticated three-pronged, middle-tier architecture.

— *Designed middle-tier roles expressly to deliver change.* Policy-makers gave middle-tier leaders a clear role in the accountability chain for teaching and learning: lead change and reforms on the front line. Instructional leaders became the professionals of choice for guiding the school workforce through the implementation of reforms. In Wales, Rwanda, and Delhi, this involved creating entirely new roles. Roles were designed to fill gaps in the delivery chain or bring new energy and momentum.

BOX 1

Creating change agents in Wales: The Academy Associates Programme

Following a disappointing performance during the 2009 PISA testing cycle, Wales developed comprehensive reforms for improving the quality and equity of its education system. As part of these reforms, the National Academy for Educational Leadership launched an innovative programme designed for highly effective head teachers, namely the Academy Associates Programme. The programme aimed to transform policy into practice and build professionalism among school leaders. While Wales already had a robust and complex middle tier, confused lines of accountability and a lack of supportive structures led to ongoing struggles in improving school leadership capabilities. Thus, this new role seeks to fill a gap in the system and aims to drive the reform effort around school leadership. As one associate put it, this new role could help 'clear up the muddle in the middle' and develop school leaders into system leaders.

In Jordan, policy-makers simply refocused established positions to ensure the roles could support the wider vision to improve teaching quality.

Success Factor 2: Professionalizing the middle tier

In the five case studies, policy-makers invested in strengthening and professionalizing their middle-tier cadres, starting with recruiting expert practitioners to middle-tier leadership roles. From there, systems recognized and professionalized these positions as part of the formal workforce structure. Policy-makers invested effort in making these peer leadership roles work by:

— *Recognizing and recruiting for the skills and competencies that differentiate effective instructional leaders.* Role holders are often recruited from expert practitioners who garner immediate respect from their peers. They are chosen both for their knowledge of the needs and challenges in the school environment and a specific set of skills and competencies (such as being a credible expert in the field, having critical thinking and expert communication skills, being open-minded, and challenging the status quo by offering constructive feedback). In some settings, these professional attributes have been well codified as part of the initiative. For example, in Rwanda and Wales, a competency framework for instructional leadership positions has been designed based on international evidence on effective collaborative leadership.

— *Improving recruitment procedures.* All systems sought to get the right people into posts. In nearly all case studies, serving practitioners are targeted and put through a formal screening process. For example, in Rwanda the recruitment process for leaders of learning focuses on sourcing candidates with instructional leadership practices and a demonstrated ability to lead improvement.

— *Seeing leaders as learners and providing ongoing training and support.* Once posted, middle-tier leaders benefit from training

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and support through ongoing professional development. In the five case studies, the training draws on international evidence and seeks to build a learning ecosystem where all role holders develop an improvement mindset. Middle-tier professionals receive peer-to-peer coaching and support to build the practices and competencies needed to act as effective instructional leaders. In Jordan, for example, supervisors who coach teachers have their own peer coaching sessions. Systems in Wales and Rwanda have developed a formal curriculum where leaders are awarded a professional certificate as evidence of their professional practice.

— *Making middle-tier positions attractive.* Improved status and recognition are an important part of re-orienting middle-tier roles. Many roles in the case studies do not offer monetary incentives. However, they recognize advanced skill sets and provide professional growth. For example, in both Rwanda and Delhi, the new leader of learning and mentor teacher roles are prestigious and highly visible appointments, and role holders are acknowledged expert practitioners.

BOX 2

Professionalizing middle-tier leaders of learning in Rwanda

The Rwandan system has developed a comprehensive plan to professionalize leaders of learning at both the local and national level. The recruitment process seeks candidates who have at least three years' experience as a head teacher; implemented a school improvement plan focused on improving learning; and illustrated an approach to distributive leadership with evidence of a collaborative approach to planning. The recruitment process is highly formal and visible, comprising a district panel with various local system stakeholders. Once selected, leaders of learning attend an accredited professional development course with a recognized certificate in system leadership. As the final step of this certification, participants submit a comprehensive portfolio. This step allows leaders of learning to codify their learning and more easily share their knowledge with others. They continue their professional development with professional learning communities that offer an ongoing means of support and skill development.

Success Factor 3: Nurturing an empowering culture and a collective vision

In all five contexts, policy-makers were eager to harness instructional leaders' deep practitioner knowledge and local influence to promote teaching and learning improvement. Middle-tier leaders used their status and position to collaborate with front-line professionals, building solutions together instead of simply mandating change. Policy-makers built a more empowering culture by:

— *Moving towards greater distributed leadership.* In the case studies, policy-makers sought to create a collective capacity by allowing middle-tier leaders to take ownership of reforms. This perspective is grounded in a vision of distributed leadership, in which knowledge, held by actors at all levels of an education system, is actively created through situated learning (Williams et al., 2021). In Delhi, for example, policy-makers want mentor teachers to ignite a collective conversation about teaching quality and build a shared vision for improvement across a locality.

— *Strengthening collaborative delivery structures.* Across all five contexts, instructional leaders' support for teachers flourished as collaborative delivery structures were strengthened. This validates past research from Hargreaves and O'Connor (2018), which shows professional collaboration can increase student achievement and teacher retention and enhance the implementation of reforms. In Shanghai, professional collaboration is at the heart of the sophisticated three-pillar institutional infrastructure created by policy-makers.

— *Ensuring an empowering culture based on trust and autonomy.* A critical success factor in all contexts is a culture of trust and a sense that middle-tier actors are being given autonomy to use their professional judgement to support teaching and learning improvement. In Rwanda, in the context of wider education system decentralization, leaders of learning

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BOX 3

Mentor teachers: Nurturing a collective vision in Delhi

Mentor teachers have developed into a key leadership role of developing a collective vision for the education system in Delhi. At the heart of this process is the Learning Improvement Cycle (LIC). Each LIC lasts approximately three months, with past iterations including topics such as building connection and lesson planning. Aligning with the overarching theme, specific classroom practices or pedagogical techniques are emphasized for the duration of the LIC. These common themes have allowed school-level professionals to start collaborating more easily.

One participant mentioned that academic discourse among teachers improved greatly due to the programme. Another noted how mentor teachers and LICs have helped them collaborate with their peers to build a collective vision for their schools. 'Now we are putting our heads together to see how we can solve [the problem]'.

review school performance and use their expertise and judgement to support head teachers to improve.

— *Moving from being decision-makers to solution-builders.* Middle-tier professionals began to think through teaching and learning problems, and did not simply implement prescribed solutions cascaded from policy-makers. As Lyons and Pritchard (1976:15) stated over 40 years ago, when there is this shift towards looking at problems with teachers and coming up with solutions together, this can represent 'a fundamental change in attitude' for managing the system. In Wales, one associate articulated the culture of autonomy and the focus on shared outcomes by saying, 'We are solution-builders, not decision-makers'.

— *Developing a culture of collaborative learning.* Evidence from the case studies shows that instructional leaders drive teacher development towards a collective understanding of accomplishments and responsibility, rather than on individuality and competition. In Shanghai, Master Studios are a professional learning community that set clear learning outcomes for a structured project to solve local educational problems. In Rwanda and Jordan, middle-tier leaders are required to submit portfolios to capture improved professional

practices. Leaders have to codify evidence of change, which in turn helps them to share and spread ideas with others.

Success Factor 4: Adopting a learning-by-doing approach

Across the case studies, reform leaders adopted a learning mindset to gradually improve the functioning of the middle tier over time, absorb new innovations, and address emerging issues. This allowed policy-makers to acknowledge tensions and adjust reforms to bolster the capacity of instructional leaders to improve teaching and learning outcomes. Reform leaders in the observed contexts improve their systems over time by:

— *Aligning reform efforts to the delivery capacity.* Time pressures experienced by instructional leaders, especially those still acting in their primary position of teacher or head teacher, was a recurrent theme. Policy-makers had to adapt roles quickly so that the workload did not overwhelm and demotivate individuals. For example, planners in Delhi had to adapt the original Mentor Teacher programme after realizing that they could not provide the proper level of support to teachers when each mentor teacher had to cover five or six schools. A new role, the teacher development coordinator, was introduced in each school to improve school-based capacity for teacher development.

— *Moving from an accountability frame to a collaborative frame.* The reforms explored required a shift from an accountability frame, where observations are more judgemental, to a 'critical friend' or collaboration frame in which teachers can be more open about their challenges. This shift can be unsettling for both middle-tier professionals as well as teachers. Instructional leaders may have to move away from a role of traditional authority to one that relies more on 'softer' influencing. On the other hand, research has found that teachers can resist peer coaching because it questions the established tradition of a hierarchy in training processes (Kelsall et al., 2016). Over time, as the purpose of each system's middle-tier role was clarified, resistance and confusion from all role holders waned.

— *Building buy-in.* Policy-makers in most settings encountered at least some resistance because of disengaged stakeholders. For example, interviewees described 'reform fatigue' and competing initiatives that placed demands on their time. As the local stakeholder landscape became better understood, changes were made to improve buy-in and gradually engage stakeholders effectively. In both Delhi and Jordan, a head teacher engagement plan and orientation sessions were quickly incorporated into reforms to ensure head teachers were brought on board as part of collective efforts to support teachers' practice.

— *Allowing time for the reform to generate results.* Systems should allow any new reforms time to take effect and demonstrate their worth. Though policy-makers or legislators may often want immediate results, the type of structural, systemic change that instructional leaders help facilitate takes time. For example, the most embedded and high-functioning system observed – the middle tier of Shanghai – has had several decades to grow, adapt, and establish itself as an integral part of the education structure. Allowing those middle-tier roles the time and space to find their proper place in the Shanghai system has led to a system that now seems to be flourishing.

Key considerations for programme design, implementation, and sustainability

Across the five case studies, planners deeply considered each programme's design from a standpoint of implementation and sustainability to ensure ongoing success. *Figure 1* highlights the three major considerations for each programme's design, as well as some of the key aspects of those decisions.

BOX 4

Combining accountability with coaching and collaboration: Supervisors in Jordan

In Jordan, supervisors have traditionally combined teacher performance evaluation with development support. Reforms in 2015 mandated a shift in the supervisor role to emphasize teacher support and formative evaluation. Supervisors took on responsibility for teacher training and coaching, and facilitating communities of practice. While this shift in role proved difficult at first for both teachers and supervisors, eventually more supportive relationships emerged where supervisors strengthened the formative feedback and coaching support offered to teachers. Interviewees explained that supervisors previously saw themselves as 'judges' or 'inspectors'. During interviews and focus groups, supervisors reported that changing the perception of their role resulted in teachers being more honest about their difficulties and more likely to seek advice. Teachers confirmed this, indicating that they had seen a change in the way their supervisors spoke to them after lessons, and said that they now taught 'as normal' when supervisors observed, rather than preparing special lessons. Teachers and supervisors referred to the supervisor as a partner who helps the teacher develop better teaching solutions.

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Figure 1. Considerations for programme design, implementation, and sustainability

Considering sustainability and scalability issues early on

- Considering costs and gradually building up funding
- Evaluating, communicating, and monitoring impact

Recognizing that middle-tier reforms are in effect system reforms

- Identifying roles with high potential
- Sustaining the motivation of instructional leaders
- Scaling up NGO-supported programmes

Committing resources to accompagny middle tier development

- Fostering a multi-layered system of support
- Shifting to collective responsibility

Considering sustainability and scalability issues early on

Identifying roles with high potential in the middle tier is a key early step. Planners must determine which roles have a high likelihood of acting as change agents for improved learning. They must further consider whether those role holders exist in the current system or can be recruited in sufficient numbers to fully deliver the reform's vision. Going a step further, planners must determine how to sustain the motivation of instructional leaders. This includes determining whether role holders should get additional pay, thereby formalizing roles as promotions in the career structure, or whether motivation should be sustained through non-monetary incentives. These questions surrounding instructional leaders' career progression went largely unanswered in the case study examples and should be addressed by future research.

Recognizing that middle-tier reforms are in effect system reforms

Reforming the middle tier has wide implications: in essence, it is about looking at the infrastructure of education systems and the relationships within them to promote a mindset towards collective responsibility. All five case study countries understood the importance of having a multi-layered system of support for all actors in the system, whatever their position. This process also built collective responsibility, with middle-tier leaders helping all personnel move towards a common goal, namely improving students' learning outcomes. A sign of growing maturity in a middle-tier system appeared to be what Hargreaves and O'Connor (2018) call collaborative professionalism, where there is a more collective responsibility for others' actions on student outcomes.

Committing resources to accompany middle-tier development

Governments should be prepared to commit resources to accompany developments at the middle tier and to invest in monitoring and evaluation. While most countries have district-level positions or actors at the school level that can be brought up to the middle tier, reforms do require management capacity. Ensuring sustainability implies carefully considering costs and gradually building up funds to respond to programme needs. One frequently overlooked but critical expenditure item is the monitoring, evaluation, and communication around results. A monitoring and evaluation system must be established to better assess the effectiveness and value of middle-tier roles, as well as monitor and adjust as the reform unfolds. In tandem with proper monitoring and evaluation, systems need to establish a clear communications or public relations plan to promote results. Designing and applying such measures from the start can help address the challenge of gaining initial buy-in from teachers and head teachers.

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BOX 5

A high-functioning, mature middle-tier system in Shanghai

Initially designed to develop pedagogical practices to improve learning, Shanghai's middle tier has evolved and its roles have been formalized into the system with highly competitive positions. Shanghai shows that a middle-tier structure, with continued support, can adapt to meet teachers' needs. A safety education reform provides an example.

Following a new policy to strengthen public safety education, Shanghai trained middle-tier leaders on the reform and piloted programmes in two schools. Instructional leaders helped teachers interpret and translate municipal guidelines into an action plan, working with them to design, implement, and improve a curriculum tested in practice. Their successful results mobilized the district leadership to scale up. Finally, a follow-up evaluation by a team of middle-tier leaders found that although students understood the theoretical content, they underperformed in real-life scenarios. These findings helped schools improve their planning to pay greater attention to practical training in the implementation phase.

Takeaways

Central to policy-makers' success across the five case studies was the careful and considered approach they took to cultivating instructional leadership. This research showed that policy-makers across the five case study settings perceived middle-tier professionals as change leaders rather than just another step in the hierarchy tasked to cascade policies. They trusted and promoted instructional leaders as local experts, capitalizing on the unique skills and knowledge they would bring to support front-line practitioners to improve teaching and learning. Planners sought to professionalize the middle tier by investing in improved recruitment procedures and professional development opportunities.

This helped establish an empowering culture that allowed middle-tier leaders to develop a professional identity as problem-solvers and solution-builders. Finally, policy-makers took on a learning-by-doing approach that allowed the appropriate amount of flexibility to adapt to challenges and continuously improve their reforms.

Being mindful of broader policy considerations is necessary to ensure that appropriate choices are made from design to implementation. They include considering sustainability and scalability early on, monitoring the effects the reform will have on the infrastructure and relations within the education system, and making the resources available for managing the middle tier.

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