

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

What do effective instructional leaders at the middle tier do?



© Education Development Trust. Education professionals in Kenya in discussion at a workshop.

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 two of a three-part series focusing on the professional practices of instructional leaders at the middle tier and how they bring about change in teaching and learning. The other briefs introduce the middle tier and how to make middle-tier roles effective.

Building a learning system: Key activities of effective instructional leaders

Too often, professional teacher development is equated with occasional training courses or stand-alone lectures. In contrast, the work of instructional leaders across the five IIEP and EDT case studies exemplifies a much more mature model of professional learning and support for school improvement. The research identified five main activities that middle-tier instructional leaders can undertake to act as effective change agents and enable powerful professional development. These five intervention areas are explored below. Together they constitute a *learning system for education professionals*.



Intervention area 1: Providing support for school and teaching improvement

The IIEP and EDT research shows instructional leaders work closely with school-level actors. They can empower teachers and head teachers to improve teaching and learning by providing on-site, direct guidance and facilitating professional discussions based on mutual trust. This aligns with previous research on professional development that highlights the importance of practical training sessions and workshops tailored to the current needs of the school (Carvalhaes, 2017; Cilliers et al., 2018; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). In the case studies, the middle tier supports improved teaching in a variety of ways, in an iterative learning process, which included:

- *Coaching.* Teachers and head teachers participate in coaching sessions delivered by instructional leaders, centred on self-reflection and problem-solving.
- *Conducting lesson observations.* Instructional leaders conduct lesson observations as part of their routine to improve teachers' practices through constructive feedback.

- *Acting as role models for effective practices.* As expert practitioners, one of the main assets of instructional leaders is their ability to be role models for effective pedagogical strategies.
- *Delivering needs-based and practical professional development.* Because of their in-depth knowledge of the local context, instructional leaders can deliver practical training sessions and workshops to school-level personnel.
- *Providing non-judgemental feedback.* As a key feature of their support, effective instructional leaders consistently use positive and non-judgmental language in their exchanges with school-level professionals.

In all five case studies, instructional leaders partner with teachers and head teachers, supporting them to improve teaching and learning practices. This represents a major shift from a more hierarchical or inspection-oriented relationship. Teachers report feeling more at ease in a professional partnership setting, working to find solutions with instructional leaders. Moreover, the research highlights the impact of instructional leaders building a stronger focus on teaching improvement. Thus, instructional leaders are instrumental in bringing about a mindset change in the workforce and transitioning towards better practices and higher levels of professionalism. As a result of enhanced capacity at the school-level, teachers are motivated and feel responsible for teaching outcomes, and classroom practices improve.

BOX 1

Providing teacher support in Delhi: The Teacher Development Coordinator Programme

The Teacher Development Coordinator Programme was launched in all government schools in Delhi in 2017 and laid the foundation for supporting teachers. In this programme, *mentor teachers* – currently serving as classroom teachers – volunteer to help develop teaching practice across several schools. They organise professional learning sessions, provide formative feedback to teachers based on classroom observations, and act as role models for teaching methods and best practices.

One Delhi state official described the programme saying, 'The training for teachers used to be like an outside resource person would come with one thought and based on that, the training was given for all the teachers. But now it's need-based training, it's a workshop-based training'.



Intervention area 2: Promoting professional collaboration within and across schools

Effective middle-tier instructional leaders foster professional collaboration between school-based professionals across schools, within localities, and at system level. Past research has shown that professional collaboration has many benefits, from improving teacher effectiveness and student achievement, to facilitating innovation and

sharing of resources, and offering socio-emotional support (Hargreaves and O'Connor, 2018; Solvason and Kington, 2019). The IIEP and EDT research shows that middle-tier instructional leaders foster professional collaboration between school-based professionals and across schools by:

- *Facilitating professional learning communities.* A key function is facilitating collaborative professional learning through the exchange of practice and knowledge. Instructional leaders often lead professional learning communities (PLCs) either at the school-level or across schools at the cluster or district level. PLCs gather groups of peers to reflect collectively on the realities, challenges, and opportunities of their practices. In Shanghai, the Master Studio Programme works as a PLC in which outstanding master principals and master teachers provide hands-on training and coach teachers and head teachers.
- *Promoting connectedness using social media.* Middle-tier professionals encourage the use of social media to facilitate collaboration and keep community members engaged with peers. This was observed in Jordan and Rwanda, where supervisors established WhatsApp groups for teachers to share resources and challenges across schools, allowing for continued collective conversations.

Thanks to their role in establishing and facilitating collaborative networks, instructional leaders allow the spread of promising practices and new ways of working throughout the system. Middle-tier instructional leaders play a key role in reducing isolation of both individual schools and teachers. By promoting a collaborative learning culture, they foster collegiality between professionals and contribute to building a sense of community at different levels of the system. They enhance collective responsibility for educational outcomes by laying out common goals and objectives to affect system change and a mindset shift in the education workforce.

BOX 2

Promoting collaboration with Leaders of Learning in Rwanda

In Rwanda, *leaders of learning* – currently serving as head teachers – have a specific responsibility for developing collaborative professional practices at both school and middle levels of the education system. National leaders of learning facilitate PLCs to support head teachers to run communities of practice for teachers in their own schools. Interviewees report the development of a collaborative culture, providing a space where teachers and head teachers share successful strategies and ‘think together’ to find out solutions to their issues.

A national leader of learning reports on his experience: ‘Before, every head teacher worked alone, but now we share the experience. If I have got best practice in my school, I have to share with my colleagues in these PLCs. I became a model, they came to see, and I showed them how I have ... gained that practice. We have a strong collaboration because we sit together, and we share what we can’t do alone.’

Additionally, middle-tier leadership generates a push towards empowering a wide range of school-level actors. Instructional leaders in this research adopted a distributed leadership style by encouraging teachers to take full ownership of additional aspects to deliver quality education. Finally, as network facilitators, middle-tier instructional leaders pool resources and provide support tailored to teachers and schools’ needs. In this way, they contribute to redistributing resources and equity among schools.



Intervention area 3: Brokering knowledge to promote the use of evidence

While teachers and head teachers may strive to use internationally or nationally identified best practices in their everyday work, many front-line professionals simply do not have the time or access to appropriate resources to do so. Instructional middle-tier leaders help fill this gap by translating evidence generated

through research into practical solutions for teachers and head teachers to apply in practice. Instructional leaders generate new evidence that is contextually relevant at school level, acting as both knowledge-brokers and knowledge-producers by:

- *Encouraging engagement with evidence.* Instructional leaders often provide inputs to the local education workforce regarding national and international promising practices after studying and making visits to high-performing systems. In Delhi, for instance, all mentor teachers attend a leadership training course in Singapore and travel to different states in India to observe promising teaching and learning practices.
- *Turning evidence into practical solutions.* Instructional leaders contextualize professional knowledge and provide actionable guidance for busy school-level actors.
- *Producing new knowledge.* In some cases, the middle tier steps up to produce new knowledge that they feed directly into the education policy-making process. In Shanghai, for example, some middle-tier staff specifically focus on researching new and innovative strategies. They have a formal role in conducting ‘action research’ and promoting tested educational experiences by writing articles, editing books, and presenting exemplary cases in seminars and policy background papers.

As a direct effect of these functions, instructional leaders act as local expert practitioners to promote evidence-based practices in schools and contribute to improving educational outcomes. In many instances, evidence from the middle tier has led to changes in school planning and pedagogical practices. Furthermore, instructional leaders transform the professional culture in their assigned schools by fostering critical thinking and a research and development mindset in the workforce. This way, they are building collective capacity for education practitioners to become problem solvers.



Intervention area 4: Providing local instructional direction and system alignment

Their positions at the intersection of policy-making and direct support to teachers and school leaders allows middle-tier leaders to serve as a conduit both up and down the hierarchical education system. They provide a way for central authorities to cascade policies down to school level, allowing local practitioners to provide feedback and inputs into policy discussions from the bottom up. Involving teachers in decision-making and giving them a voice can increase their motivation and job satisfaction. IIEP and EDT found examples of instructional leaders’ professional practices exemplifying this through:

- *Translating policies into meaningful practices at the school-level.* Instructional leaders

BOX 3

Evidence-Based Supervision: Brokering knowledge in Jordan

Between 2017 and 2019, an innovative pilot programme in Jordan offered professional support to a group of specialist English language *supervisors* from across the country. The Evidence-Based Supervision model seeks to enrich the dialogue between supervisors and teachers by referencing international evidence. Supervisors provide diagnostic feedback to teachers using a bank of resources that summarise evidence about pedagogical effectiveness derived from international research findings.

Supervisors described themselves as mediators of new, evidence-based knowledge for teachers. One supervisor described the supervisory role as one that involved identifying evidence that helps teachers to solve classroom problems. Other supervisors spoke about increased capacity in their ability to ‘diagnose’ the problem, select the intervention, and work with teachers to implement the new practice.

serve an important role in system alignment by translating policies at school level and making them more ‘digestible’ for teachers and head teachers. The middle-tier space is increasingly relied upon by central education authorities when it comes to implementing reforms and policies. For example, instructional leaders assist teachers in dealing with change in practices by highlighting the hands-on implications and requirements of new measures. In Wales, the associate role serves as an advocate of policy at school level to make it more meaningful for teachers and head teachers. Past reforms have not always reflected on-the-ground realities in schools and struggled in the implementation phase.

- *Promoting the voice of practitioners in the policy-making process.* Middle tier roles also influence policy-making at higher levels as they bring credible feedback from the field. Thanks to their positioning in the system structure, instructional leaders are well placed to promote the voice of education practitioners and perform an advocacy role when called to participate in policy design. In this way, they open communication channels between central authorities and the local workforce.

The action of instructional leaders contributes to creating a conducive environment for reform implementation. Thanks to their mediating role, instructional leaders operate

as educational agents of change that help overcome resistance to education reforms. Instructional leaders also promote adaptive systems that respond more effectively to feedback from the front-line workforce. Several systems exemplified this through actions taken by instructional leaders during the COVID-19 crisis. Lastly, the middle tier contributes to aligning different system levels. Their position in the system allows them to navigate the complexity of education systems and of learning processes, providing a vital linkage between the central and local dimensions.

 **Intervention area 5: Testing innovations and scaling up promising practices**

At the crossroads between policy and practice, middle-tier instructional leaders are uniquely positioned to introduce and pilot innovative practices. These leaders can identify effective strategies that may emerge at the classroom or school level and spread them among multiple schools to boost systemic capacity for educational changes. The case studies revealed several professional practices in which middle-tier leaders tested and scaled innovation, including by:

- *Strengthening school-level actors’ agency to experiment new practices.* Middle-tier professionals consider teachers and head teachers as active agents. Establishing a

Acting as the ‘voice of the profession’ in Wales

BOX 4

In 2018, the Welsh government created the National Academy for Educational Leadership (NAEL) to assist school leaders with their professional development. A cadre of *associates* –serving head teachers with a reputation for excellence in their own leadership practice–was created. Associates participate in policy-making with central ministry staff through a formal process known as ‘the commission’. Each year associates consider a different policy problem and combine views from frontline experience with insights from evidence-based practices from around the globe.

One NAEL official reflected: ‘Your credibility as a school leader diminishes quickly the longer that you are out of that [school] setting ... So, [associates] are very credible ... when they start saying, “That is not going to work in schools”, the other people around the table have to listen’.

supportive environment makes teachers feel comfortable to embrace and experiment with new professional techniques. Instructional leaders often introduce new ideas, but the strategy and implementation phases are left to teachers. The middle tier in Shanghai illustrates instructional leaders driving innovative practices across schools towards whole system change. By supporting schools to innovate and fostering a trial-and-error spirit, they have helped establish Shanghai as a leader in education reforms.

- *Scaling up promising practices.* When methods show promise, the middle tier helps to scale up best practices by formalizing experiments into generalized frameworks, methods, and resources to be shared with other schools or districts. In Jordan, for example, supervisors scale up effective practices by making videos and sharing them in virtual communities of practice.
- *Monitoring and communicating on the impact of new practices.* Successful scaling-up of effective teaching and learning practices requires a robust monitoring system as well as a communication strategy. For instance, middle-tier leaders in Shanghai adjusted the design and implementation of a safety education curriculum reform after

its evaluation revealed that the students lacked the ability to apply new knowledge practically. The middle-tier leaders actively communicate these experiences through publications or articles and books, training workshops, or seminars.

One of the main consequences of this intervention stems from instructional leaders fostering ownership and co-constructing new practices. When the school workforce embraces a project or practice and co-constructs it alongside the stakeholders at a higher level, it is more likely to succeed thanks to the increased level of ownership. The interconnected nature of the position of middle-tier roles makes it possible to quickly transfer the benefits of high impact innovations and new policies to other personnel and schools, while fostering ownership and co-constructing new practices. Instructional leaders are also well positioned to provide feedback – for example, through data collection and analysis processes – so that interventions can be improved.

Takeaways

This research shows that the middle tier is a key stakeholder in leading change and improvement in education systems across vastly different demographic and geographic locations. When dealing with reforms and new policies, middle-tier professionals help to in-

Testing and scaling innovative practices in Shanghai

BOX 5

Initiated in the 1990s, Shanghai has a well-established, three-pronged supporting structure in the middle-tier that includes *teaching research officers*, *education research officers*, and *master principals* and *master teachers*. These instructional leaders closely track the implementation of new reforms as they scale and provide feedback to the centre. Policy implementation is adapted based on this feedback.

An education research officer describes this process, saying ‘We did not know whether it would work, how it could work, and what it would mean for teachers. We turned the reform needs into projects, and then we used projects to promote reforms and to lead reforms. We had to experiment and pilot first. We used the projects to investigate and discover rules (the theory for practice) and approaches to the reform. With that knowledge, we improved and expanded our practice to move the reform forward’.

spire mindset shifts in the systems they serve. Teachers are much more likely to accept and even embrace new programmes and practices if they trust that they work in a system that supports and develops them. Similarly, reforms are more likely to reflect on-the-ground needs and realities if the middle tier provides practitioner-level feedback to the central level. Building a sense of trust and supporting teachers through challenges or reform efforts may prove an important first step that middle-tier leaders can take in transforming the culture of the whole system. The increased motivation and professionalization that stem from this environment may not only improve teaching practices, but also allows for the further implementation of reforms and programming in the future.

This brief has covered some of the impactful professional practices of instructional leaders and their impacts on teaching and learning. But how do systems lay the groundwork for these middle-tier leaders to succeed? Brief 3 explores how the selected systems enabled instructional leaders to become change agents to improve teaching and learning outcomes.

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