

Middle leaders' identity–practice framings: A site-ontological view of identity *in* and *as* practice

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Abstract

This paper presents an examination of identity *in* and *as* practice as it relates to a group of educational practitioners known as middle leaders. Drawing on the theory of practice architectures as a site-ontological approach for conceptualising educational leading, the paper considers an individual's identity as being informed by, and accomplished amidst, the sayings, doings and relatings of practice. Although theorising the connections between identity and practice is not new, a central argument presented is that identity occurs at the nexus of the individual and social practices. Data are drawn from an empirical study of the practices of nine middle leaders responsible for facilitating a district-wide initiative aiming to improve literacy pedagogy in their particular primary schools. Thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with the middle leaders revealed 11 identity–practice framings which evolve over time and space, negotiated in response to site-based conditions. Findings contribute to understandings about the dynamic multifaceted nature of middle leaders' identities.

KEYWORDS

identity, middle leading, practice, practice architectures, self-concept, site ontology

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Key insights

What is the main issue that the paper addresses?

This paper addresses the limited research focused on the identities of school-based middle leaders with the dual roles of classroom teaching and leading professional development among colleagues. It applies a lesser employed practice-based lens to understand the distinctive work of middle leaders, increasingly recognised as important for facilitating school development.

What are the main insights that the paper provides?

Analysis revealed 11 interrelated identity–practice framings that school-based middle leaders attributed to their core work in schools. Predominantly, self-characterisations were directly connected to descriptions of practices. Findings contribute to conceptions of how a practice orientation highlights the iterative nature of identity as both formed *in* practices and displayed as practice.

INTRODUCTION

Understanding how, why and when educational leaders develop particular identities or self-concepts has preoccupied scholars for decades, prompting a proliferation of research on leaders' identity (Barker Caza et al., 2018). This paper presents an examination of the iterative and evolutionary nature of identity *in* and *as* practice as it relates to a group of school-based educators described as middle leaders, considered increasingly important for school-based development and change (Harris et al., 2019). Middle leaders and their roles have been variously defined (De Nobile, 2017; Hammersley-Fletcher & Strain, 2011), but for the purposes of this paper, middle leaders have those with dual roles of teaching in classrooms and leading staff development initiatives. Thus, a middle leader is a classroom teacher with a formal or designated leading role, not simply positioned between senior educational leaders of the school¹ and the teaching staff—they are an integral part of both (Grootenboer et al., 2015). Apart from their teaching responsibilities, middle leaders are required to lead school professional learning initiatives involving practices associated with facilitating, mentoring and coaching the development of individuals and groups of teachers (Edwards-Groves et al., 2023; Hammersley-Fletcher & Strain, 2011). Aligned with Leithwood and Riehl's (2003) notion of teacher leaders, middle leaders 'help other teachers to embrace goals, to understand changes that are needed to strengthen teaching and learning and to work towards improvement' (p. 3).

Although it is well established that the designations and practices of middle leaders are fundamentally different from school principals and other non-teaching leaders (Gurr & Drysdale, 2013; Harris et al., 2019), much international literature theorising educational identities focuses on academics (Reid et al., 2008), teacher-researchers (Castelló et al., 2021), principals (Molla et al., 2022; Nordholm et al., 2020), teachers (Day & Kington, 2008) and students (Grootenboer & Edwards-Groves, 2019). To date, however, there has been little identified research attention specifically centred on middle leader identities. This void provides the rationale for studying the identities particularly focused on middle leaders. Studying the identities of different designations of school leaders enables us 'to get in touch with the individual's passion, commitments, and shortcomings – important considerations which can

influence the practice [and development] of educational leadership' (Crow & Møller, 2017, p. 749, *insert added*). The importance of studying different educational identities was addressed by Castelló et al. (2021) in their review of empirical research, because of its potential for providing more nuanced understandings of educators' identities, especially for those with dual roles (like teaching and researching, or teaching and leading). This is particularly relevant for this paper.

Theorising the connections between identity and practice is not new; for example, Pratt (2012, p. 30) described identity in terms of 'identity practicing', stating that

Practicing elicits some of the same purposeful, learning-oriented, and often social nature of some identity/identity-related processes in organizations. And perhaps more so than working and constructing, practicing highlights the imperfect and iterative nature of these processes.

A central argument emerging in the literature is that identity occurs at the nexus of the individual and the social world (Barker Caza et al., 2018; Hand & Gresalfi, 2015), where the focus of attention is on humans in action and the mechanisms underlying this action. Thus, identity has been argued to be understood as site-based and locally formed in practices. In this paper, to examine middle leader identities we employ a leading-as-practice perspective (Raelin, 2016; Raelin et al., 2018), generally applied to understand the work of principals (Wilkinson & Kemmis, 2015). The practice stance enables conceptualising *identity-in-and-as-practice* (Grootenboer & Edwards-Groves, 2019). Furthermore, we attempt to advance Sfard and Prusak's (2005) conceptualisation of the relationship between actual 'practiced' identity and designated 'role' identity. It is argued that to comprehend middle leader identities more fully, we need to examine the accounts offered by middle leaders about what they actually do in practice. This is reciprocally reflective of their 'actual' self-expressed identities, not simply their designated roles (Sfard & Prusak, 2005). Thus, the research questions (presented subsequently) seek to draw attention to the relationship between middle leading practices and conceptions of middle leader roles.

The first section below presents a brief description of educational practices through the lens of theory of practice architectures, adopting a site-ontological position for conceptualising how particular practices, like middle leading, are practiced, developed and influenced in sites like schools. A brief review of related literature on leadership, identity and practice is then presented, followed by an overview of the empirical study and analytic approach. The key findings are subsequently presented, where 11 distinct identity–practice framings are introduced and illustrated with explanatory excerpts. The discussion applies the *identity-in-and-as-practice* perspective to focus on the self-characterised identities of middle leaders, positioned in accordance with their reported enactment *in* practices, and includes a brief treatment of identity as a dynamic site-based and locally formed practice. Finally, we outline the contributions that the identity-in-and-as-practice conceptualisation makes for deepening understandings about the dynamic multifaceted nature of middle leader identity, and benefits for these understandings for facilitating the further development of middle leading.

EDUCATIONAL IDENTITY AND PRACTICE ARCHITECTURES: A SITE-ONTOLOGICAL PREMISE

For many years, practice theory has been employed to understand education practices. In this paper, the theory of practice architectures (Kemmis et al., 2014) is used to situate the discussion about middle leading and identity within a site-ontological view of education as practice. Fundamentally, this position views '... human life and social phenomena as taking place in practice fields' (Schatzki, 2017, p. 23). Grootenboer (2018, p. 43) summarised:

Practices are coherent human activities that are made up of characteristic 'sayings', 'doings', and 'relatings' in the 'cultural–discursive', 'material–economic', and 'social–political' dimensions, respectively. Practices are situated and social, and they are undertaken within characteristic preconditions that enable and constrain the sayings, doings and relatings of the practice—the 'practice architectures'.

Context matters for school leaders' identities (Crow & Møller, 2017). Thus, a key affordance of a site-ontological approach to practice is that it allows a theoretically coherent and balanced discussion considering the individual (e.g., subject-centred leading practices) and the social (e.g., the enabling and constraining practice architectures of leading among collectives); this is because they are viewed as situated, dialectic and mutually forming (Kemmis et al., 2014). While this perspective has many implications for the discussion of educational middle leading and identity, we highlight two of particular importance: (1) unavoidable and existential pre-eminence of the site; and (2) focus on intersubjectivity and the activity of 'practicing' rather than characterising the 'practitioner' alone. Firstly, practices unfold in the moments of activity time-space in particular sites, and practice architectures (or conditions) enable and constrain the sayings, doings and relatings of those practices (Edwards-Groves & Grootenboer, 2023). So, even practices bearing the same title (e.g., leading) and sharing some characteristics (e.g., communicating) are fundamentally different and so practiced anew in each site and on each occasion of practicing (Kemmis & Edwards-Groves, 2018). Secondly, a practice focus enables the gaze to shift away from the qualities and personal attributes of a so-called 'ideal leader', since what matters and impacts education is the leading that is practiced (then *at that time*, and there *in that place*) (Edwards-Groves & Grootenboer, 2023). In this vein, for instance, educational leaders' identities (generally principals or district leaders) have often been characterised in terms of traits such as 'charismatic', 'authentic', 'pedagogical', 'instructional', and so on (see, e.g., Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; Raelin et al., 2018). A site-based practice orientation of leader identity resists the trend or tension reported by Crow and Møller (2017), which has moved towards a propensity for technocratic orientations that create the standardisation of 'idealised' characteristics and criterion-based assessment of school and district leaders—in turn, leading to an increased emphasis on leader skills and techniques. In the next section, literature about practice, middle leadership and practices is presented.

PRACTICE, LEADERSHIP AND IDENTITY

Leader identity is an enduring topic of study in the broader leadership field in terms of its relevance to understanding and facilitating leadership development; yet there is no one agreed-upon conceptualisation. A leader's identity has sometimes been captured as self-concept identity, marked by how one identifies and/or describes oneself (Markus & Wurf, 1987), although the terms *identity* and *self-concept* are often used interchangeably in the leadership development literature (Day & Harrison, 2007). However, as US social-psychologists Markus and Wurf (1987) argued decades ago, identity and self-concept cannot be explored as if these are unitary, monolithic entities outside the contexts in which they are situated. This paper applies this logic to the specific field of educational leadership.

Transcending notions of identity as a generalisable unitary notion, where self-concept is not merely expressed by a label encapsulating how one identifies oneself, are the dynamic, multifaceted and multidimensional cognitive representations humans hold of themselves. Although these self-perceptions inform our emotions, beliefs, attitudes, goals and behaviours (Markus & Wurf, 1987; Rosenberg & Gara, 1985), following Schatzki (1996), we maintain that one's identity and self-concept is inherently iteratively formed through

and displayed in practices (Grootenboer & Edwards-Groves, 2019). As educational theorist Wenger (1998, p. 149) stated, 'there is a profound connection between identity and practice', but 'self-representations' alone (Markus & Wurf, 1987, p. 302) fall short of recognising the inherent relationship between sociality, situated activity and identity formation. Thus, the development of personal and collective identities needs to be considered as being contingent on practice (Wenger et al., 2002). Lave and Wenger (1991, p. 151) further remarked that

... the experience of identity in practice is a way of being in the world. It is not equivalent to self-image ... who we are lies in the way we live day to day, not just in what we think and say about ourselves, though that is of course (but only part) of the way we live.

This view holds that it is in practices that people's identities (encompassing values, beliefs and 'self-image') are exposed and enacted, and thus espoused in relation to the particular practices towards which one is orienting. Crow and Møller (2017) conceptualised identity as involving understanding how it connects to practice, whereby 'identities are not simply who we say we are, but reflect the motivation, drive, and energy connected to our actual practices' (p. 751). Thus, as suggested here, the situatedness of identity as relating to practices is central to the argument presented in this paper.

The importance of studying the connection between site, practice and identity was also proposed by Day and Kington (2008), who found in their study of 300 teachers that identities are neither intrinsically stable nor intrinsically fragmented. Rather, identities can be more or less stable and more or less fragmented at different times and in different ways according to the influence of the interaction of a number of personal, professional and situated factors. This finding shows the importance of understanding that identity practices are understood as being iterative and evolutionary within ecologically arranged conditions in particular sites, whereby middle leading practices are inextricably intertwined with other educational practices, including teaching, professional learning, leading, student learning and researching (Rönnerman et al., 2018).

One's identity has been cast as continually evolving over the course of an individual's life (Barker Caza et al., 2018), suggesting that 'identity work and construction attempt(s) to view identity as a verb, a thing in motion, "a working subjectivity"' (Fairhurst, 2007, p. 104). Importantly, for the argument presented in this paper, Markus and Wurf (1987) showed how one's identity contains multiple constitutive and evolving roles—such as parent, teacher, leader and citizen—where each role holds meaning and expectations that are intricately interconnected and internalised into one's outward-facing identity. Furthermore, identity formation 'is a negotiation of simultaneously held identities (e.g., race/ethnicity, gender, social class) and individualized meaning-making in interaction with people and systems' (Lucas, 2011, p. 357). Thus, experience and changing social and site-based circumstances contribute to the dynamism of identities, since they morph and evolve over time (Molla et al., 2022).

In recent decades, sociologists' and psychologists' conceptualisations of identity and self-concept have converged. These notions have been more systematically implicated in all aspects of social formation and practice, especially in how individuals consider the self in relation to the social (e.g., Schlenker, 1985). More widely accepted is that 'the functioning of identity depends on both the self-motives being served (e.g., self-enhancement, consistency maintenance, or self-actualisation) and on the configuration of, and response to, the immediate social situation' (Markus & Wurf, 1987, p. 301). This shift in perspective emerged as a consequence of observing identity through more fine-grained enactments and detailed accounts of people's practices (see, e.g., Schyns & Sczesny, 2010), highlighting it to be more than one's self-declared traits or objectively idealised characterisations. Turning specifically

to Markus and Wurf (1987) as a central avenue of thinking, self-concept or identity is viewed as a dynamic interpretive structure that mediates most significant intrapersonal or subjective processes (including intonation, thought processing, affect, linguistic choices and motivation) *and*, at the same time, a wide variety of interpersonal, intersubjective or social processes (including social perception, choice of situation, arrangements of physical set-ups for meetings, procurement and use of resources, activity, actions and reactions, interactions and ways of relating with others). We suggest these subjectively and intersubjectively generated identity processes are practice architectures that, in turn, mediate a leader's practices; this is to say, one's identity is simultaneously formed by both internal-individually and external-collectively generated conditions that influence actual leading practices.

Schyns and Sczesny (2010) argued that the scientific concept of *valence* is useful for understanding the relationship between leadership-relevant attributes, identity, self-efficacy and practice. For example, they suggested that particular leadership-relevant characteristics of some teachers draw them to being 'naturally' attracted to leading, and that this is displayed in both their self-reported personal attributes and beliefs *and* their actual task orientations and enacted practices. However, the inter-relatability between identity and practice requires further research attention.

Fundamentally, a middle leader's identity must be considered directly in connection to practicing middle leading, since it is not possible to meaningfully separate the practice from the practitioner (Kemmis et al., 2014). This theoretical positioning attributes the influences of site-based conditions on a practitioner's identity formation, their identity-in-practice and ultimately their identity trajectories.

METHODS: THE EMPIRICAL STUDY

Findings from a broader 2-year qualitative study examining the practices, experiences and influence of nine middle leaders are presented. The study sought to address this overarching research question: What is the role and impact of middle leading practices on teaching change? The sub-questions guiding this paper are: How do middle leaders characterise their leading practices? What is the relationship between middle leading practices, conceptions of roles and teacher change?

The study involved middle leaders from seven primary schools located in regional New South Wales, Australia. The schools varied in size (between 55 and 580 students) and demographics (including two small rural village schools (55–95 students), four regional town schools (100–320 students) and two larger regional city schools (400–580 students), noting that two middle leaders from two larger schools participated.

At the time, the middle leaders (all identifying as female) were responsible for facilitating a district-wide initiative aiming to improve literacy pedagogy in their school. Part of their responsibilities included school-based practices of scheduling, planning and organising school/team meetings, ordering new literacy materials for the school, arranging interclass visits, mentoring teachers, modelling strategies, disseminating materials/resources, conducting follow-up team meetings and attending external district professional development workshops.

University ethics was sought and approved, and permission to conduct the study was granted by the district office and the school principals; nine middle leaders with varying years of leadership experience (1–9 years) and teaching experience (6–17 years) volunteered to participate. Data gathered in the overall project included video/audio-recorded observations of middle leaders facilitating at least one professional development session (with either their teaching team or the whole school, depending on the size of the school), follow-up classroom lessons where teachers were implementing the initiative, teacher focus groups in each

site, principal interviews, middle leader lessons and middle leader briefing and debriefing interviews. Data for this paper are drawn from audio-recorded and professionally transcribed semi-structured in-person interviews conducted with each middle leader; interviews were between 50 and 75 min. Among general questions about each school's particular approach to the professional learning initiative and the successes and challenges they experienced, specific questions were asked about the middle leader's role, experiences (background and present) and practices (what they did, how they arranged professional learning sessions, the nature of the relationships with teachers, other leaders, etc.). When applicable during the interview, an interviewee's reliance on self-representations about what they thought and believed was treated with overt prompts seeking to elicit specific descriptions of what they 'actually' said, did and how they related to their colleagues, providing a more comprehensive exemplification of practices.

Coding and deductive thematic analysis

Preliminary analysis applied Fereday and Muir-Cochrane's (2006) deductive thematic analysis which allows researchers to begin the process with a predetermined coding system, but also offers scope for inductively updating and refining that coding system as new content emerges. In this study, the interest in the roles and practices of middle leaders and the practice architectures which influenced their work formed predetermined categories used as a preliminary organising framework for coding and analysing data. The analytic process initially included identifying the descriptions of middle leader roles, involving a highly iterative and reflexive pattern of revisiting the data (Bruce, 2007). It was evident that orientations to 'identity' emerged as an overarching and predominant theme among interviewees, and hence became the impetus for deeper analysis of the material.

Multiple rounds of data interrogation and coding generated additional insights about identity and practice, where new connections between them were revealed and more complex formulations were developed, along with deepened understandings of each theme (Berkowitz, 1997). The recursive process was initially led by one researcher; tentative themes were critiqued and validated separately by the remaining three researchers to establish inter-rater agreement and analytic reliability, and to further refine themes where necessary. Analysis isolated 11 distinct themes where alignment between practices, identities and roles emerged in the middle leaders' orientations as they described 'what they said, did and how they related to others' in leading the literacy professional learning initiative in their school. Notably, across all the middle leaders interviewed, the teacher identity theme was spoken about with more frequency and certainty; this is not particularly unexpected, since these middle leaders held the dual role of classroom teacher and leader of curriculum development (literacy). The remaining ten themes were drawn out and exemplified clearly by each participant in their descriptions of practices. In cases where only a few participants oriented to a particular concept, for example coach or expert, although interesting and important, these were not included in the final analysis because they were not sufficiently prevalent across the corpus.

RESULTS

In this section, 11 identity–practice framings are presented in no hierarchical order, revealing the dynamic, multifaceted and multidimensional representations of middle leader identity. Whilst participant self-representations unsurprisingly included perceptions involving intrapersonal beliefs, attitudes and goals, it was found that in their accounts, their

self-characterisations were directly connected to descriptions of practices that included their sayings (what they spoke about), doings (what activities they did) and ways of relating to others in interactions. For example, in describing an aspect of their work in implementing a literacy initiative, one middle leader directly connected their leading practices to their teaching identity by explicitly outlining ways they practice a teaching strategy in their own classroom before sharing and presenting to the rest of the staff. Selected transcript excerpts will be used to exemplify each identity–practice framing. *Note:* all names are pseudonyms.

Teacher identity

Without exception, participants oriented first and foremost to their teacher identity, which undoubtedly formed a driving feature of their middle leading practice. For example, Grace connected her teacher identity to leading practice, saying

... I see myself as a teacher first and foremost, that gives me the 'in', not for any other reason than because that is me. I know what I want and need as a teacher, so how I lead, and what I do stems from that...

In Grace's view, how she leads stems from her teacher-first identity; her phrasing '*what I do*' is a direct orientation to the activity of practice. Relatedly, middle leader Penny provided more specific details about how her teaching identity connects to her leading practices, stating

... I believe I need to practice the initiative in my own classroom, prove that the strategy worked for myself and consider the student evidence from that before sharing and presenting to the team... that's sort of my idea about my role and a key part of who I am, to lead well you need to teach well, then I can lead on into it with others...

For Penny, beliefs about her teacher identity aligned tightly to her ideas about leading practices; that is, '*to lead well you need to teach well*'. She explained this in terms of practices—what she did in practicing the initiative, proving it, considering the evidence before sharing with other teachers in her relationships with her teaching team.

Planner–facilitator–initiator

Middle leaders proclaimed attributes relating to practices of planning, facilitating and initiating. In this example, Tyler acknowledged that being an initiator is '*who she is*' and that in her view, this characteristic links to '*what she does*':

... I know I am always initiating things, I'm known for that here, that's just who I am, and my enthusiasm for learning myself rubs off on the teachers in my stage group I think, well most of the time. Sometimes this starts off informally through sharing a reading or a website or a lesson strategy and often evolves into more focused action from there, where the talk turns into being in and out of each other's classrooms... trialling something on a more formal basis and sharing the outcomes... planning times to make that happen...

Recognising that part of her identity is being a planner and initiator in the school (where she is known), Tyler draws out a range of practices such as sharing readings or teaching strategies,

facilitating interclass visits, trialling and planning for future actions. For Tyler, who she is—her identity—connects to what activities she initiates, facilitates and plans (doings), which simultaneously influences the language she uses (sayings) and the power dynamics and ways of relating with others (relatings).

Next, recognised as part of her ‘belief system’, Oriana ‘informally recounts using good strategies’ as a practice to generate professional conversations:

... sometimes I plant the seeds deliberately by informally recounting a good strategy I used in the class as a way to instigate a more professional mentoring conversation, it's hard to explain but I see value in going gently and being the leader walking alongside the teachers, so that's a part of my belief system... then we organise times, plan the time and make time to meet after school, before school or during co-plan sessions, to sort of have a chat, no, I mean more formal conversations, about what I was initiating...

Oriana's belief system involves identifying as a leader who ‘walks alongside’ teachers; this activity of practice is coupled with her role as a planner, instigator and initiator. She illustrates the practical action of this belief about herself with examples of the kind of practices she planned, initiated and organised in her school.

Mentor

The mentor identity was commonly framed as a key conception of middle leading work among participants. Alison describes her role as a mentor being simultaneously influenced by her passion for literacy teaching, and important for building teacher knowledge, skill and confidence:

I mainly relate to my role as a mentor, because I am so passionate about literacy teaching... so that's an important ingredient for mentoring and guiding teachers... [it] helps with the professional relationships I am building, so that I am someone that teachers actually go to and just chat really informally, nothing you know, sort of set down, but making time in my day for just a bit of a chat over a coffee, sometimes modelling a strategy, or whatever about their literacy knowledge and teaching too, building their confidence, literacy knowledge and teaching skills, so it's really about being open to that as a mentor...

The identity–practice connection is exemplified in Alison's descriptions of mentoring practices such as making time, chatting over coffee or modelling a strategy. Her intrapersonal self-characterisation of being passionate about literacy, for example, generated an aspect of her identity as a mentor. For Alison, being passionate laid the grounds for practices designed to foster relationship-building and building teacher capacity.

Next, Tyler qualifies her identity as a mentor with examples linking her ‘personality’—the type of person she is—to what she naturally ‘does’:

Mentoring is key, I am the type of person, personality, that mentors the other teachers, it sort of comes naturally to me, I think it is my open approach, and I always start by listening—when you begin there, you can both support and then challenge them to think outside their comfort zones, so true learning and engagement happens... they know me as the literacy person so mentoring others makes sense...

Supporting, challenging and listening to teachers forms some of the practices Tyler mentions as exemplifying her identity as a mentor.

Co-learner

Across the data, middle leaders explicitly oriented a co-learner identity. Renee characterises herself as a mentor and co-learner as she describes practices, suggesting her belief that *'learning with them' 'makes it real to show' she is learning too:*

I see myself as a mentor but also as a co-learner, as we are all learning with and from each other... the important part is for me to always talk about my own struggles, this makes it real to show I am learning through this too... by not just telling them what they should do and we seem to then try to problem solve it together as co-learners, co-teachers, co-planners... I have a strong belief that this sort of guided reflective discussion and questioning leads to a shared commitment and responsibility to the initiative, and they see that I am learning with them too.

An important part of Renee's characterisation is ways that her practices of *'talking about her own struggles', 'problem-solving together',* conducting *'guided reflective discussions and questioning'* connect to her perception that her co-learner role makes possible a dynamic collective responsibility for learning among the teachers.

In the next example, the co-learner identity–practice framing is proposed by Penny:

I need them to know that I'm genuinely trying to make what I'm trialling, doing in the lessons better as well. Probably then, hopefully someone might share back and then we can build and grow together, being a learner with my team is important in my role.

Penny clearly relates to her role as a co-learner by expressing the idea that she, too, is trying to improve her own teaching. In her view, her genuine attempts to improve her own teaching, and sharing her trials with other teachers, is given importance in developing conditions for shared growth among them.

Supporter

The supporter identity role was characterised as necessary for building a professional network of teachers. Renee talks about her supporter role as being the glue that holds the *'flow of learning happening'*:

... build[ing] up that strong support network makes it easy for teachers to feel supported, that they will not be judged... a key has been that we have been able [to] consolidate our learning through focused and supportive discussions and identifying and addressing the challenges too... about managing opportunities to support teacher learning, you know keeping the flow of learning happening, this has been the glue that has held everything together in a supportive fashion.

To explain her supporter role, Renee named practices such as conducting focused and supportive discussions, identifying and addressing challenges and managing opportunities to support teachers. She considered these as part of the machinery of relational support necessary for developing individual and collective learning, through, for instance, developing strong teams.

Alison identifies that leading teacher learning involves guiding and supporting teachers:

The way I lead them is sort of about guiding and supporting not just telling... my desire to help is part of the jigsaw and I think completes the fit of all the pieces of leading their learning... it is significant for my leadership style, they have to feel supported but get the support they need... it fits with who I am, because I know how to help them really develop their deep knowledge about early literacy gets the traction for change in the whole project...

For Alison, ‘knowing how to help’ teachers is ‘significant for her leadership’, where both giving support and having teachers feel supported are considered to be a significant piece of leading. As she indicated, her role as supporter helps teachers develop deep literacy knowledge that provides the necessary ‘traction for change’.

Motivator

Motivation and being a motivator were considered important for the overall success and impact of the school-based professional learning projects. This was made possible by a motivator identity practiced by the middle leaders. Oriana considered being a motivator as being how she saw herself:

... for the success of the overall project... it needs to be kept alive and fresh, the fire needs to be stoked and that's part of where my energy and drive motivated others... this helps teachers to keep the momentum going... so part of how I see myself in this is to get them going and keep them going by being front and centre myself, sharing my enthusiasm for what I am learning too...

Keeping the project alive and fresh, stoking the fire, sustaining the energy and drive, sharing her enthusiasm were part of Oriana’s perception of her role for keeping ‘the momentum going’ and the ‘success of the overall project’.

Maintaining motivation and enthusiasm were considered by Mary as part of her role to offset barriers and resistance to change, ultimately changing the nature of relations:

Keeping up their motivation and enthusiasm is part of my job as I see it. Because when they're still working in silos, working in their own little room doing their own things and very threatened... then motivation for change drops... Lacking motivation and resistance to change is a huge barrier, so part of my job is turning that around by ensuring that the PD sessions are positive with open discussions where I get everyone's ideas including successes and challenges... but that's hard, because you only need one of those on a grade to break down that whole momentum going forward...

According to Mary, practices that ensure motivation through positivity and open, inclusive discussions form part of her identity–practice repertoire.

Culture builder

Building a professional learning community and creating a strong team culture emerged as an important identity–practice orientation. As Kylie suggested, leading honest conversations about the type of community the staff desire formed part of her culture-building mission:

Part of my mission, what I do, and know I can do, is to get upfront buy in, so from the beginning we need to know and come to consensus about the culture of professional learning we want to build together, leading that honest conversation leads us to the ideas of the type of community we want to be, this in turn leads us to the change we need to see in the school... I know I am good at creating a strong team vibe by the feedback from the principal and the teachers, that is a critical part of who I am, by building collective interest and responsibility, that's important for the learning culture of the staff.

Kylie recognised in herself that she is 'good at creating a strong team vibe' and she does this by 'leading honest conversations' important for the kind of sayings and relatings needed to build a learning culture, community, collective interest and responsibility among the staff.

About establishing a shared sense of professional learning, Susan drew on her belief that to build the school's culture required identifying reasons for the lack of teacher engagement and interest in the initiative and changing her own practices accordingly:

A key idea is recognising the reasons why they were missing the point at the start. And so that started conversations with the leadership team that the lack of engagement, interest maybe, was well something endemic in the culture of our school. I firmly believed that we needed to change, so I drew on my belief that to reset the culture I have to approach things differently... so I had an open meeting with the staff to get their perspectives and issue on the table, that's when I got more traction because some teachers really lacked basic confidence and literacy teaching knowledge and we needed to turn that around for them... this approach became part of who I am, building a shared sense of professional learning first...

For Susan, being a culture builder evolved in response to the existing conditions—such as staff disengagement, low confidence levels and literacy knowledge—among some teachers at her school. Practices such as conducting conversations with the leadership team and holding an open meeting with the staff emerged and became part of her approach to adjust the sayings, doings and relatings among the staff.

Data analyst

Participants attributed great meaning to their roles as data analysts. For Kylie, this part of her 'leadership toolkit' connects directly to her identity as a 'data expert' at her school and especially, as she indicates, makes her middle leading authentic:

In reflecting on my work, one of my traits is I am a bit of a data expert, analysing the assessment information is a big part of it... I emphasise my individual and shared work has to be research based, it's got to be data driven, it has to be site based and related to the work of teachers and students, I really believe this

makes my leading authentic as it begins from the student, being able to interrogate our school's data is a key part of my leadership toolkit...

Kylie relates that her self-identified trait—being a data expert—*'is a big part'* of her work, which aligns with practices associated with analysing assessment information. Importantly for Kylie, the validity of this orientation is directly connected to teacher and student work in her school, characterising her analyst role as relating to the practice of *'interrogating the school's data'*.

Examining student data and evidence, and her capacity for doing so, is valued as a *'key feature'* by Grace:

One of the things I really value is my capacity for examining student data and evidence, this is a key feature of my work and a critical part of leading professional conversations with teachers, by looking at student work, analysing their data, linking to the curriculum, etc.... so for me leading data-informed conversations is a critical piece, especially since a goal is to have teachers more able to do that for themselves...

In this example, Grace identifies part of her data analyst role as influencing the impetus for her practices involving analysing student data and leading data-informed conversations with teachers. In her view, being a data analyst *'is a critical piece'* for supporting teachers' own sayings and doings, to eventually take this on for themselves.

Interpreter

The role of interpreter is raised by middle leaders, where they explain that practices involving understanding, interpreting and making sense of situations, data, curriculum and teacher knowledge forms part of their identity. In this extract, Grace stresses her role as an interpreter as fundamental in helping teachers develop strong theories of action:

I am quite good at reading the room... so helping teachers interpret the data we analysed from the student work brought from their classroom and other diagnostic data, and interpreting their responses to it and making sense of that together is a key part... I believe this helps teachers to develop strong theories of action for them to put into practice in their teaching...

As Grace says, her capacity for *'reading the room'* and *'interpreting data'* is an important dimension of her identity. Her indication that she *'is quite good at it'* suggests that the practices involving helping teachers make sense of student work samples and their own responses to it exemplify this point.

In the next excerpt, Renee relates how she begins her leading with identifying her understandings, interpretations, reinterpretations and sensemaking:

I always try to drive our learning forward with a solid starting point, beginning with me understanding where they are coming from, their practice and pre-existing knowledge, and me interpreting and making sense of the syllabus for myself and then reinterpreting that for them where they are at; this also means... interpreting the teaching practices... mak[ing] sense of their roles as a teacher of reading and so they can interpret these things for themselves.

Renee attributes this identity–practice framing to her need to interpret teacher knowledge, practice and roles as reading teachers, as an important starting point and for driving their learning, and for supporting teachers to interpret these for themselves.

Negotiator

Negotiation practices emerged as characterising middle leader roles. For instance, Susan spoke about negotiating with teachers and the leadership team, and described the practices which facilitated this:

I mean you really have to actually listen to the teachers, and make the time for that, for getting their points of view for directions for the strategic plan and professional learning schedules, but also to the leadership team and their big picture agenda, so it's being in that position to negotiate on both sides trying to not only to advocate but be the voice for both teachers and the leadership...

Susan used the terms 'negotiate' and 'advocate' to describe her practice of being the voice for both teachers and the leadership, which involved, as she said, making the time for listening. This particularly requires agency and solidarity with the staff to raise matters about direction setting with the leadership.

Tyler, too, indicated negotiation as important for her leading work:

It could be negotiating with individual teachers too, trying to work around literacy blocks, timetables and duties, and so on. I learnt that I need to be more consultative early [on] as I came in all gung-ho at the beginning not giving them the choice, here's our time, here are our days, here's what you'll be doing in your collegial visits... but I realised quickly that I need to be a negotiator of sorts, because after I didn't have some people with me, then I personally went into bargaining mode, like what sort of collegial visits are you after, what would you like, how's it going to apply, it took me haggling at times to sort something mutually agreeable out together...

Tyler's comments provide evidence that she realised this role evolved because she needed 'to be more consultative early [on] as [she] came in all gung-ho at the beginning', indicating a shift in her own sayings, doings and relatings. In her explanation, she framed being a negotiator (also involving bargaining and haggling) as a necessary part of her role to bring people to mutually agreeable resolutions.

Barrier breaker

Participants perceived that breaking down or dismantling barriers (and walls, roadblocks and silos) and de-privatising practice form a central facet of their middle leader roles. In this next extract, to achieve success and make a difference, Susan indicated an important principle for guiding how she leads, following her conviction and trusting her instincts:

... to make a difference, it means addressing the obstacles front on, to see where we go now together and leading those sometimes difficult conversations, this means gradually changing or clearing the path for their success... for me one of the biggest challenges is to fob off ingrained ideas about that one-off

approach to PD, that's a big problem here... so I follow my conviction, by trusting my instincts, it's worth pushing through to get to that success with bringing in PD over time with learning-centred staff meetings, and that's an important principle for guiding how I work...

Susan suggests practices involving leading difficult conversations or facilitating PD over time with learning-centred staff meetings as practices that break down common ideas about the worth of one-off PD days. In this way, Susan's doings influence the doings of the staff.

Mary, next, also oriented to this identity–practice framing as she spoke about her strong beliefs about breaking down the walls, opening teaching and professional learning spaces and the need to get ‘cut-through’:

It's that whole de-privatisation of practice that people are afraid of—like in our Kindergarten classes and Year 1 classes you have closed doors and siloed teaching, opening the doors is a situation people really baulk at for some reason, so that's where my strong belief in opening up the teaching and the professional learning spaces... I get the cut-through when I push that and that's where we actually get the shift, by breaking down the walls sometimes by me leading the way, by me modelling the processes in real lessons is a way to dismantling those barriers, this is key, then they try it and the feedback they get is immediate about how they're going, what are they trying, what's working, and when that sort of stopped, or when we've hit a roadblock... this helps to build trust and a culture of shared responsibility so together we can dismantle the problems, analyse the situation and make moves towards a solution.

Aligned with the barrier breaker identity are examples of the practices Mary describes for dismantling barriers. These practices are site-based and reciprocally help to de-privatise practice, and build trust and a culture of shared responsibility, for example leading the way for the Kindergarten and Year 1 teachers by opening her classroom for observation, modelling the processes in real lessons, giving immediate feedback and collectively analysing and solving problems.

DISCUSSION: THE DYNAMIC MULTIFACETED NATURE OF MIDDLE LEADER IDENTITY

The identity–practice framings presented isolate specific self-concepts characterising how middle leaders perceived themselves and how, in their accounts, their identities appear to be tightly connected to their practices in ways that are multidimensional, dynamic and responsive to site-based conditions. Importantly, it was found that each identity–practice framing concerns being-perceptions or how middle leaders understood themselves in relation to their practices. These identity–practice framings are not discrete, their features are overlapping and mutually constitutive, and notably are imbricated in the sayings, doings and relatings that comprise its action in practices. As middle leaders described their work, they highlighted more nuanced multifarious conceptions of identity involving many complementary, constitutive identity roles, and illustrated how specific practices oriented to different roles, aligning with the work of Markus and Wurf (1987). The symbiotic relationship between identity and practice, and the dual roles of teaching and leading oriented as important by Castelló et al. (2021), is captured concisely by Oriana, who described her middle leading identity, saying ‘it's who I am and what I do—being a good teacher and being a good leader, and that means wearing different hats depending on what is needed’. As such, site-based

needs and circumstances are influential practice architectures that shape practices and the particular identity–practice framing employed at any given time.

Conceptualising middle leading through these identity–practice framings aligns with Molla et al.'s (2022, p. 155) description of identity in principal leadership, whereby multiple identities form part of a comprehensive dynamic 'dialogical self'. The findings presented in this paper extend this view by identifying an explicit connection between self-characterising roles and middle leading practices. Importantly, this finding contributes to Sfard and Prusak's (2005) conceptualisation of the relationship between actual 'practiced' identity and designated 'role' identity by providing: (i) more nuanced conceptions of actual educational leading identities practiced in a range of leading designations; and (ii) more complex understandings about the distinctive roles, experiences and practices of middle leaders. This has important implications for schools and school systems, where the work of middle leaders is becoming increasingly promoted and valued as a necessary part of the machinery of school development (Harris et al., 2019, Grootenboer, Edwards-Groves & Rönnerman, 2020). Specifically, results show that middle leader identities are not simply espoused traits or beliefs, or the simple enactment of a designated role, but are evidently formed and accounted-for practices which respond to their particular site and situation. This, we argue, illustrates Schatzki's (2017) recognition of the importance of a site-ontological view of identity *in* and *as* practice. In fact, we argue that identity is formed through practicing. These insights have implications for understanding middle leader identities, and so offer inroads into supports required for middle leader development, since it is not useful to assign narrow, externally imposed characterisations set down in 'professional leadership standards' designed for school principals, which essentially reduce the realities and nature of middle leading work and their identities.

Middle leading practices do not exist without those who practice, and conversely, people become middle leaders by engaging in middle leading practices. We suggest that identities influence practices, and reciprocally, practices influence identities. Therefore, we conceptualise middle leader identities in terms of the identity–practice framings we found. These are a function of practice and ultimately displayed outwardly in practices, rather than only being espoused as intrapersonal representations, or bestowed on a person as a positional title. Furthermore, middle leader identities can only be understood through the practices of middle leading.

Whilst we acknowledge that epistemological understandings of leading and identity are important, we argue for an alternative site-ontological view of middle leading. Thus, conceptualising identity in middle leading practice can neither be only individual (as, e.g., in psychological traditions) nor only social (as, e.g., in sociological understandings)—always both. This view is only possible by taking a site-ontological practice-based approach where participants, like those in this study, contextualise representations of their identities in what they do here and now, that is, in their practices. However, further longitudinal research is warranted to study the changing nature of middle leader identities across their professional careers.

Due to the length restrictions in papers such as this, a main limitation includes the capacity to provide more comprehensive descriptions of middle leaders' actual 'observed' practices as they pertained to their school site. A further limitation is that since the focus is on middle leaders, descriptions about how the different identity–practice framings are similar or different to other teachers or leaders—such as principals—are not accounted for. This point raises implications for the need for additional practice-based research investigating how the applicability of the identity–practice framings as identified relates to different educators (senior managers, principals, teachers) in primary schools, and subsequently in secondary settings.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, the identities of middle leaders were considered, not using common externally derived epistemological understandings of 'identity', but rather viewing identity as emerging from, and returning to, practice in practices. The practice lens calls attention to ways middle leaders orient to their identities as being contingent on, and intricately related to, their social practices. Findings highlight how both practicing and identities are iterative, reciprocally formed yet entangled in the reality of middle leaders' work teaching and leading site-based education development. The complexity of this core work is evident in the 11 interrelated identity–practice framings found to provide more refined understandings about the complexity of their designated roles, experiences and practices. The findings delineating distinctive identity–practice framings suggest a need to consider the situated, symbiotic, mutually informing relationship between middle leading, practice and identity. In general terms, identity is complex, dynamic, site-based, mutually constituted and reciprocally informed in and displayed as practice.

The results illustrate how identities can be understood as evolving over time and space, and under different practice conditions (e.g., middle leader practice identities involve multiple constitutive and evolving dimensions). The influence of site-based conditions on a practitioner's identity formation, their identity as displayed in practice and ultimately their identity trajectories (and potentially their middle leadership pathways) emerged. Thus, findings considering the identity–practice framings have implications for policy seeking to develop middle leadership in schools.

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Research data are not shared.

ETHICS STATEMENT

Permission to conduct the study was sought and granted by the Charles Sturt University's Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) (Australia). Informed consent processes were followed in the recruitment and involvement of relevant participants in each school, including system personnel, middle leaders, school principals, teachers, students and their care givers.

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ENDNOTE

ⁱ The term 'school' is used generally to refer to any formal educational institution (e.g., preschools, primary or secondary schools, college).

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