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# GUEST EDITORIAL

## Supporting the development and professional growth of middle space educational leaders through mentoring

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to introduce readers to the special issue on “middle space” education leaders (those individuals who are second-in-command in schools). The special issue contains papers pertaining to mentoring those preparing for and aspiring to the assistant school leader role, as well as papers on programs that support new assistant principals/vice-principals through mentoring and coaching. The authors provide background on middle space leadership and mentoring from existing research literature, introduce the international papers selected for the issue, and identify unifying themes across the papers.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The authors provide highlights of relevant research literature on the importance of mentoring for school leaders in general, but also specifically address the need for mentoring for middle space leaders from the scant literature that exists on the topic. After reviewing the relevant literature, the authors provide an overview of the seven papers that were chosen for the issue through a rigorous peer-review process.

**Findings** – The co-editors of this special issue identify common themes that emerged from the papers chosen for the issue. In general, authors note that middle space leaders have unique mentoring and coaching needs, and there are few formal programs that address their needs. However, there is a growing awareness of the need to support assistant principals through structured mentoring programs, as well as preparing and mentoring those who aspire to the position.

**Research limitations/implications** – The seven papers chosen for the special issue represent a variety of research methodologies. A limitation is that the majority of the studies are qualitative, with small sample populations. However, even with small sample sizes, commonalities can be seen across the studies and across international contexts.

**Practical implications** – This review summarizes the issues facing middle space leaders in education and how they can be effectively addressed. The global audience that can benefit from engaging with the papers in this special issue includes educational leadership faculty, educational governing bodies, policymakers, school district central office personnel, senior principals, and assistant principals themselves.

**Originality/value** – This paper and the seven that follow extend the scant research literature in the realm of middle space leaders in education. They provide unique insights – from different international contexts including the USA, Canada, Hong Kong, and New Zealand – into the need for and potential benefits of mentoring and coaching aspiring and new middle space leaders.

**Keywords** Induction programmes, Mentoring in education, Mentoring, Professional development and mentoring, Educational leadership, Coaching, School management and leadership, Career identity

**Paper type** General review



This special issue focusses on international approaches to mentoring and coaching vice-principals, assistant principals, and deputy heads. For the purpose of this issue, these titles are used interchangeably and refer to the persons who serve directly below school principals in pre-primary through high school/upper schools. They work in the “middle space” position (Armstrong, 2015) between teachers and senior school leaders, so in this issue, we refer to them as middle space leaders. While countless research studies highlight the important role of the principal/head teacher as the instructional leader of the school and the need to mentor and support these individuals, important middle administrative leadership positions such as assistant principalships and deputy headships receive relatively little attention or support and continue to be neglected in leadership theory and practice literature (Armstrong, 2010, 2015). In Ontario, for example, while the Education Act clearly articulates the duties, roles, and responsibilities of teachers and principals, vice-principals’ duties are defined “as assigned to the vice-principal by the principal” (Mackinnon and Milne, 1999, p. 469). These vague definitions limit vice-principals’ ability to define their own role, placing them in an ambiguous organizational middle space between teachers and administrators. In addition, deputy heads are rarely mentioned in leadership preparation curricula or policy documents, even though they are most often located at the epicenter of the school’s organizational structure between principals and teachers and at the forefront of the school community (Armstrong, 2009). However, as second-in-command administrators, assistant principals tend to work quietly and diligently in the background, building relationships with students, teachers, and the external community, and maintaining stable and supportive school environments necessary for successful teaching and learning. Niewenhuizen and Brooks (2013) state that the typical duties of the assistant principal are “necessary, managerial tasks, including student discipline, supervision of hallways and lunchrooms, chaperoning dances and co-curricular activities, scheduling assemblies, meeting with parents, and when the principal is away from the building, performing the duties of the principal” (p. 187).

The deputy headship or assistant principal position is a key socialization point for upper management positions. Furthermore, because the deputy head position represents a stepping stone between the classroom teacher role and the principalship in many countries, it is usually where principals, superintendents, and other district leaders are first socialized into administrative roles and norms, and where they develop the early values, attitudes, skills, and behaviors that shape their career success and future leadership practices (Armstrong, 2009, 2010; Marshall and Hooley, 2006). Assistant principals/deputy head teachers/vice-principals move into their positions differently across the globe. In the USA, an assistant principal receives initial training from his or her studies of administration at the university level, while in Canada aspiring administrators receive their training from a variety of providers at the university, professional association, or school district level. For the most part, this training is based on the duties of the principalship. Although these professional training courses may provide valuable insights into principals’ roles, they seldom provide the knowledge and experiential base required to navigate the ambiguities inherent in the vice-principalship (Armstrong, 2009, 2010, 2015; Hartzell *et al.*, 1995). In other countries, teacher leaders are promoted because of their demonstration of competent leadership at the classroom/department level, and their training for a formal school leadership position may consist of working through online leadership modules (UK) or may be non-existent (Hong Kong). Therefore, all assistant principals, regardless of their prior preparation for the role, are socialized more through “on the job” training

(Marshall and Hooley, 2006). When combined with inadequate support and opportunities for mentoring and shadowing, these factors increase assistant principals' challenges and limit their ability to develop the kinds of leadership skills required to lead and transform complex organizations.

### **The importance of mentoring and coaching in leadership development**

Armstrong (2010) has noted that the assistant principal role is often "boundaryless," (p. 123) thus making it difficult to adjust to the position. She notes that vice-principals' "location on the margins of teaching and in the shadow of the principal places them in a psychological and professional middle space that makes it difficult for novices to develop a clear picture of their own professional place in the educational hierarchy" (p. 123). One aid to the socialization process that can support new administrators is the initiation of mentoring programs (Clayton *et al.*, 2013). Daresh (2004) stated that "having a mentor is the single most powerful thing an assistant principal can do to enhance personal survival and effectiveness" (p. 97). Mentoring can help an assistant principal navigate the transition to the role (Retelle, 2010) and it can serve as a specific form of professional development (Oleszewski *et al.*, 2012). Affirming this, Duncan and Stock (2010) assess mentoring as "a creative method of promoting professional development that encourages self-actualization and growth and focuses on developing the whole person" (p. 296). Intentional mentoring is particularly important for assistant principals from traditionally marginalized groups who typically lack access to powerful coaches, mentors, and sponsors.

Where and how do assistant principals receive mentoring? In a large 2016 study of assistant principals, researchers found that assistant principals chiefly receive mentoring informally, rather than from structured programs, and their primary mentoring comes from their senior principals (Searby *et al.*, 2016). However, these authors found that assistant principals also rely on peer mentoring from others in job-alike roles. Assistant principals in this US study reported that though their jobs focus much on management issues, they are increasingly fulfilling the role of instructional leader, and they acknowledge their need for mentoring in this realm (Searby *et al.*, 2016).

Most countries struggle with retaining good leadership in schools, as increased pressures contribute to high attrition rates (Day *et al.*, 2009). Several countries have made attempts at providing formal mentoring programs to support senior school leaders, yet budget constraints have often caused cessation of these programs, and little or no formal support has been provided for assistant principals/deputy head teachers (Armstrong, 2010; Marshall and Hooley, 2006). The authors of the papers in this special issue provide perspectives on how these concerns are addressed internationally and they provide empirical research on middle space school leaders in New Zealand, Canada, the USA, and Hong Kong. They illustrate how mentoring and coaching can be improved to support both aspiring and new assistant principals' leadership development and growth.

As we reviewed the papers chosen for this issue, we noted some common themes:

- literature on assistant or vice-principals remains minimal despite numerous and consistent calls to research in this realm over the past three to four decades;
- in this era of high accountability and increasing complexity of schools, there is a need to prepare both aspiring and new administrators for the challenges, building their leadership capacity and self-efficacy;

- there is a need to move away from approaches to assistant principal socialization and mentoring that further a custodial orientation and replication of outdated leadership practices;
- mentoring and coaching of assistant principals occurs within the micropolitical environment of schools; thus, mentors and assistant principals need to be aware of political dynamics of the particular school cultures; and
- mentors need to be aware of the importance of differentiated approaches to mentoring that are attentive to issues of diversity and equity.

Each of the papers in this issue provide a unique perspective on the topic of mentoring and coaching for middle space leaders in schools, whose titles are assistant principals, vice-principals, or deputy heads. The audiences who can benefit from reading the papers in this special issue include educational leadership faculty who train aspiring assistant principals; educational governing bodies, policymakers, and school district central office personnel who are positioned to create and maintain formal mentoring programs for newly appointed assistant principals; senior principals who are in the position to provide the most immediate mentoring to assistants; and assistant principals themselves, who will be the beneficiaries of the mentoring. It is our hope that in shining the spotlight on the role of the assistant principal, we will raise awareness of the importance of this leadership role, assistant principals' unique mentoring and coaching needs, international approaches to meeting their needs, and offer helpful resources for those who would support them.

We now offer an overview of each of the papers. The first two focus on the preparation of individuals aspiring to their first administrative position, the next three highlight programs and strategies that support the socialization and development of those new to the role of assistant principal, the sixth paper describes a shadowing program for assistant principals aspiring to the senior principalship, and the last paper is a viewpoint paper that affirms the need to support assistant principals and how local and district school leaders can do that in an intentional manner.

### **Mentoring aspiring racialized leaders: a review of a pilot program in the Peel District School Board**

David Jack and Robert Lobovsky report on the initial outcomes of a mentoring program that was designed to increase the advancement prospects of racialized teachers to vice-principal positions in Canada's second largest school district. "Racialized" is the term used to describe groups of people affected by a process that has created disadvantage based on their physical differences; in other words, minority ethnicities. As global migration results in increasing numbers of racialized people working in white-dominant countries; the disproportionality of white dominance has become more striking and subject to increasing criticism. Thus, this program was designed to encourage non-white teachers in the Peel School District to consider school administrator positions (most often, the entry point position of vice-principal). An analysis of survey data from 32 participants (13 mentors and 19 mentees) showed that racialized mentees generally rated their satisfaction with the program lower than did mentors. While the overall findings support the importance of leadership mentoring, the authors challenge the culture-free leadership paradigm that permeates western education literature and discuss how it is a barrier for aspiring racialized leaders in schools. They point out the resulting absence of literature and research on diversity, equity, and identity, and they call for new approaches to leadership and mentoring that are informed by research on these concepts.

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**The relevance and promise of relational mentoring for school leadership: a conversation**

Kathleen M. Cowin, Gordon Gates, and Kathleen Lockett draw on relational-cultural theory and propose that mentoring relationships for assistant principals should be based on three tenets: interdependent self-in-relation, growth fostering interactions, and an exploration of systemic power. The authors report their findings in a non-traditional retrospective manner, sharing stories from their own experiences, then making inferences about how relational mentoring aided the socialization of an AP or principal intern they each have mentored. The authors conclude that relational mentoring opens communication and builds trust between participants, as well as promotes the interests and identification of areas of expertise of both mentors and protégés. The authors explain the relevance of each of the relational-cultural theory tenets in detail and offer advice on how this approach to mentoring is an effective way to create a bond with a mentee who is struggling. This paper will appeal particularly to educational leadership preparation faculty, offering a pathway on which to prepare the next generation of school leaders equipped with the desired competences and experiences to transform schools.

**The politics of coaching assistant principals: exploring principal control**

Chad Lochmiller and Jennifer R. Karnopp's exploration of how school principals and administrative teams influence leadership coaches' work provides a critical lens on the political dynamics of mentoring, coaching, and supervisory relationships. This three-year longitudinal qualitative case study investigated how school principals influence or control leadership coaches working with assistant principals in urban secondary schools by drawing upon semi-structured interviews and program documents obtained from 22 participants in a university-based leadership coaching program. The findings revealed that principals controlled coaches' work with assistant principals both directly and indirectly, influencing how coaches developed confidential relationships with the assistant principals and the strategies they used to preserve and sustain authentic coaching relationships. This paper contributes to the sparse literature about leadership coaching for assistant principals, particularly those working in secondary school settings in the USA.

**Mentoring and induction for new assistant principals: the Kansas Educational Leadership Institute**

Jia Liang and Donna Augustine-Shaw report on the initial year of the Kansas Educational Leadership Institute's (KELI) mentoring and induction program for new assistant principals. In all, 12 new US assistant principal mentees and five mentors from the program participated in surveys and interviews in order to examine both groups' perceptions of the effectiveness of the mentoring/induction approaches used and the appropriateness of the intensity of engagement required, to identify the program characteristics that support leadership development for first year assistant principals. The findings revealed that mentees found mentoring/induction experiences with KELI highly valuable. Interventions such as the mentor-mentee matching mechanisms, the mentor coaching training, and multiple professional learning opportunities were instrumental in promoting trustful relationships, reciprocal learning, and personalized and growth-based assistance. These findings highlight effective practices and critical elements in assistant principal mentoring and induction that support new assistant principals' development of skills and dispositions required to fulfill the unique and varied responsibilities inherent in their leadership positions.

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### **Striving for a way out from between a rock and a hard place: vice-principals' development in Hong Kong**

Middle space  
educational  
leaders

Paula Kwan and Yuet-man Benjamin Li point out that in Hong Kong, vice-principals are chosen from among the teacher ranks and have no formal administrative training. The authors describe the unique context of Hong Kong culture, in which the power distance between top management and line workers (i.e. senior principals and teachers) is a cultural "rule" that must be honored. The vice-principal in a Hong Kong school is in a middle space that is ill-defined in the power hierarchy. In this qualitative study, Kwan and Li identify three common vice-principal dilemmas: juggling administrative work with teaching, standing by the management or siding with peer teachers, and forced innovation vs omnipresent conservatism. Given an absence of formal mentoring programs for vice-principals in Hong Kong, the authors make recommendations for how vice-principals can be offered support.

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### **Implications of a shadowing/mentoring programme for aspiring principals**

Brenda Mary Service, Gulay Dalgic, and Kate Thornton examine the impact of shadowing and mentoring components of a principal preparation program designed to prepare deputy and assistant principals for the principalship in New Zealand. The experiences of 13 aspiring principals who took part in the program were explored using semi-structured interviews. The program evaluation revealed that the shadowing/mentoring component allowed the aspiring principals to gain an understanding of the complexity of the principalship by shadowing and being mentored by experienced principals in a range of New Zealand schools. These experiences provided participants with opportunities to relate theory to practice, reflect on their leadership development, and access a network of effective principals.

### **As assistant principals enter their careers: a case for providing support**

Elizabeth Phelps Davidson and Catherine Marshall conclude the special issue on middle space leadership with a viewpoint paper in which they make a strong case for mentoring, coaching, and sponsorship of assistant principals. Catherine Marshall is perhaps one of the most widely cited authors in the body of assistant principal literature. She is especially known for her work with Hooley (Marshall and Hooley, 2006), which outlined the various types of assistant principal career orientations (upwardly mobile, plateaued, career, shafted). Davidson and Marshall remind us of the complexities of the assistant principalship and how assistant principals experience role ambiguity, personal, and professional dilemmas, and often even career-stunting detours out of the position due to "reductions in force" (in the USA, a situation in which employee positions are eliminated due to a suffering economy). They make a plea to school governance personnel to create sponsored and mentored pathways for assistant principals to grow professionally in the position, with the hope of mitigating some of the shock and stress that accompanies the assistant principal role. Their list of practical suggestions for creating within-school and district-level support for assistant principals is a fitting way to close out the special issue.

### **Concluding thoughts**

Jeffrey Glanz (1994) described the assistant principal as the "forgotten man" (p. 578), 22 years ago. It is true that the scholarly research in educational leadership has been overwhelmingly focussed on the role of the principal, to the neglect of those important

“middle space” (Armstrong, 2009) leaders across the globe: assistant principals, vice-principals, and deputy head teachers. Through this special issue, we aim to focus on the women and men who occupy that middle space leadership role in schools. We trust that we accomplish two objectives: first, we contribute to the thin body of literature and scant scholarship pertaining to the middle space leader in schools; and second, we raise an awareness of the need for mentoring and coaching for individuals who are middle space leaders in schools across the globe. We want to sincerely thank the Editorial Board of the *International Journal of Mentoring and Coaching in Education* for giving us this opportunity to shine a spotlight on middle space school leaders, so they will be “forgotten” no more.

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### About the Guest Editors

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