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Leading for Sustainable Educational Development: 'Middle Leaders'

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Overview

- Educational Development
- Middle Leading
- Critical Participatory Action Research (CPAR)
- Practical Considerations
- Conclusions and Implications

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Educational Development – Key Factors

- Educators as learners
- What matters in education?
- Teachers as the key agents
- "… principal effects on student outcomes were small and indirect", and, "teachers have the greatest impact upon student learning of all 'educational variables'". (Lingard, et al., 2003, p. 51)

To transform education we need to start with, and focus on, the practices of learners and teachers in 'classrooms'

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Leading for Sustainable Educational Development – The principal

- Educational leadership has usually centred on the important practices of principals
- Principals are critical leaders in educational development, but their impact is mediated.
- Principals can create space and conditions for development, but they have limited capacity to actual make change happen.

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Leading for Sustainable Educational Development – Systems

- Systemic leadership is even more distant from the classroom – hence more mediated and less able to actually make change happen
- Systems 'lead' by changing the arrangements that enable and constrain educational practice and development.
  - NAPLAN, Curricula, initiatives

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Leading for Sustainable Educational Development

- What sort of leading is required if educational development is site-based?
  - Systemic leading;
  - Principal leading; and,
  - Middle leading.
- Here we will focus on the latter

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Middle Leading

- *Middle leaders* are those who have an acknowledged leadership position, but are also involved in teaching in the classroom.
- Middle leaders practice their leading close to the 'hot site' of education – the classroom

Middle leaders can have the greatest impact on teacher learning and development and more directly impact classroom practices.

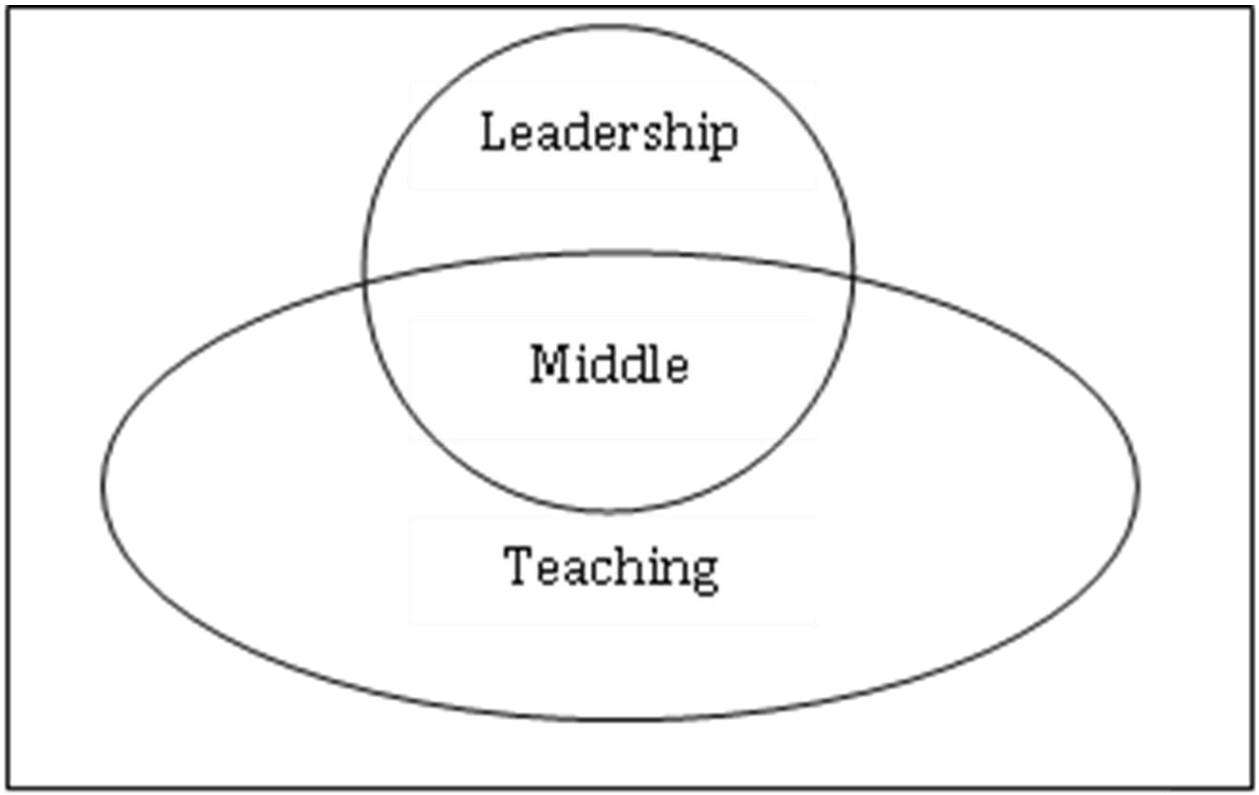

Figure 1: Positioning of the middle leader

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3 characteristics of Middle Leading

- **Positionally** – middle leaders are structurally and relationally situated 'between' the school senior management and the teaching staff. They are not in a peculiar space of their own, but rather than are practicing members of both groups.
- **Philosophically** – middle leaders practice their leading from the centre or alongside their peers. In this sense they are not the 'heroic crusader' leading from the front, but rather alongside and in collaboration with their colleagues.
- **Practically**– middle leading is a practice and is understood and developed as a practice. To this end, the focus is on the sayings, doings, and relatings of leading rather than the characteristics and qualities of middle leadership.

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Leading Learning and Teaching

- The focus for improved student learning is site-based professional development.
- Effective and sustainable teacher learning has to also be fundamentally site-based
- Pedagogical development needs to be responsive to the particular needs of the school site
- Student identities and learning contexts vary greatly from site to site, and so notion of ‘best practice’ can only have meaning at a very general level.
- Professional development should be collaborative and critically reflective.

Lingard, et al. (2003) commented:

… productive leadership encourages intellectual debates and discussions about the purposes, nature and content of a quality education; promotes critical reflection on practices; sponsors action research within the school; and seeks to ensure that this intellectual work connects with the concerns of teachers, students, parents and the broader educational community. Such leadership also ensures that teachers, and others working within schools, are provided with the support structures necessary to engage in intellectual discussions about their work, to reflect on the reform processes within their schools, as well as their pedagogical and assessment practices. (p. 20)

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Critical Participatory Action Research

- We need to actively pursue the re-emphasis of *educational research* that places the interests of students, teachers and societies at the centre of the research process/project.
- CPAR is one way to promote *educational research*.
- We can only know the impact of our reforms historically – CPAR helps us see and reflect on the impact of the developments we have made

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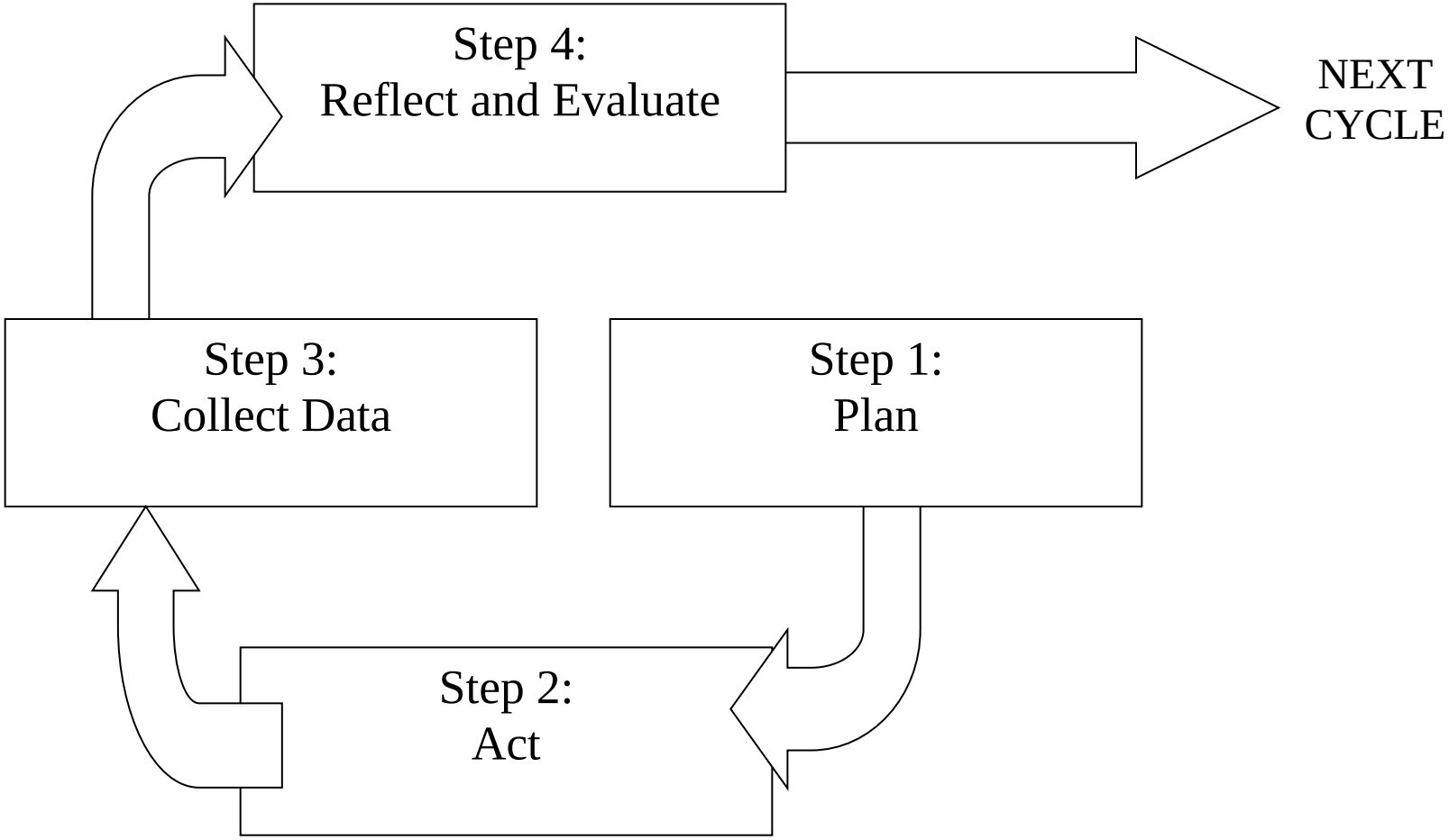
Typical Action Research Cycle



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Critically considering current practice

Asking, are our current practices:

- **irrational** — unreasonable, incomprehensible, incoherent?
- **unsustainable** — ineffective, unproductive, non-renewable?
- **unjust** — adversely affecting relationships, serving the interests of some at the expense of others, causing unreasonable conflict or suffering?

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Example: Engaging pedagogy in mathematics

- Is it **rational, reasonable and coherent** to have teaching practices that do not engage learners?
- Is it **sustainable** to have students under-achieving because they are not engaging?
- Is it **just** to have pedagogies that seem to engage some learners but not others? Who seems to be missing out?

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Critical **Participatory** Action Research

- ***A community of practice*** - a communicative space:
  - where people can think openly, respectfully and critically together; and, decide whether practices are rational, sustainable and just.
  - that is inclusive but permeable; voluntary and autonomous;
  - that has communicative freedom (to speak, to listen, to remain silent, to leave).

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Critical **Participatory** Action Research

- ***Communicative Action*** is what happens when people interrupt what they are doing to ask:

  What is happening here?

- A conscious and deliberate effort by participants to reach
  - *agreement* about the language and ideas we use, as basis for
  - *mutual understanding* of one another's points of view and perspectives, in order to reach
  - *unforced consensus* about what to do in a particular situation in which we find ourselves, and in which we must act.

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Critical Participatory **Action Research**

- The *purpose*, the *site* and the *focus* of teacher action research is on the practices of learners and teachers,

AND

- the associated practice architectures (practice arrangements or conditions).
- This research aims at *understanding* a situation (rather than *explanation*), and at *transformation* of situations that are irrational, unsustainable or unjust.

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Critical Participatory **Action Research**

- Systematic inquiry
- Involves collecting evidence (rather than data per se)
- The process should also be:
  - Manageable
  - Site-based
  - Meaningful and informative
  - Inclusive
- CPAR is not research that is done on top of regular work – it is an integral part of teaching practice

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Critical Participatory **Action Research**

- Example: Asking good questions focus

- We visited each others' classes and recorded who were asked questions in the first 15 minutes

Teacher Desk

Matt	Ellen
Andrew	Charlie
Rick	Buck
Jake	Cameron
Callum	Rich

Jane	Julie
Charlene	Mary
Myf	Andy
Donna	Mia
Billy	Amanda

Tilly	Danneke
Alan	Adam
Becky	Rachel
Celine	David
Mike	Declan

Teacher Desk

Matt I	Ellen II
Andrew IIIII III	Charlie I
Rick	Buck I
Jake II	Cameron I
Callum II	Rich

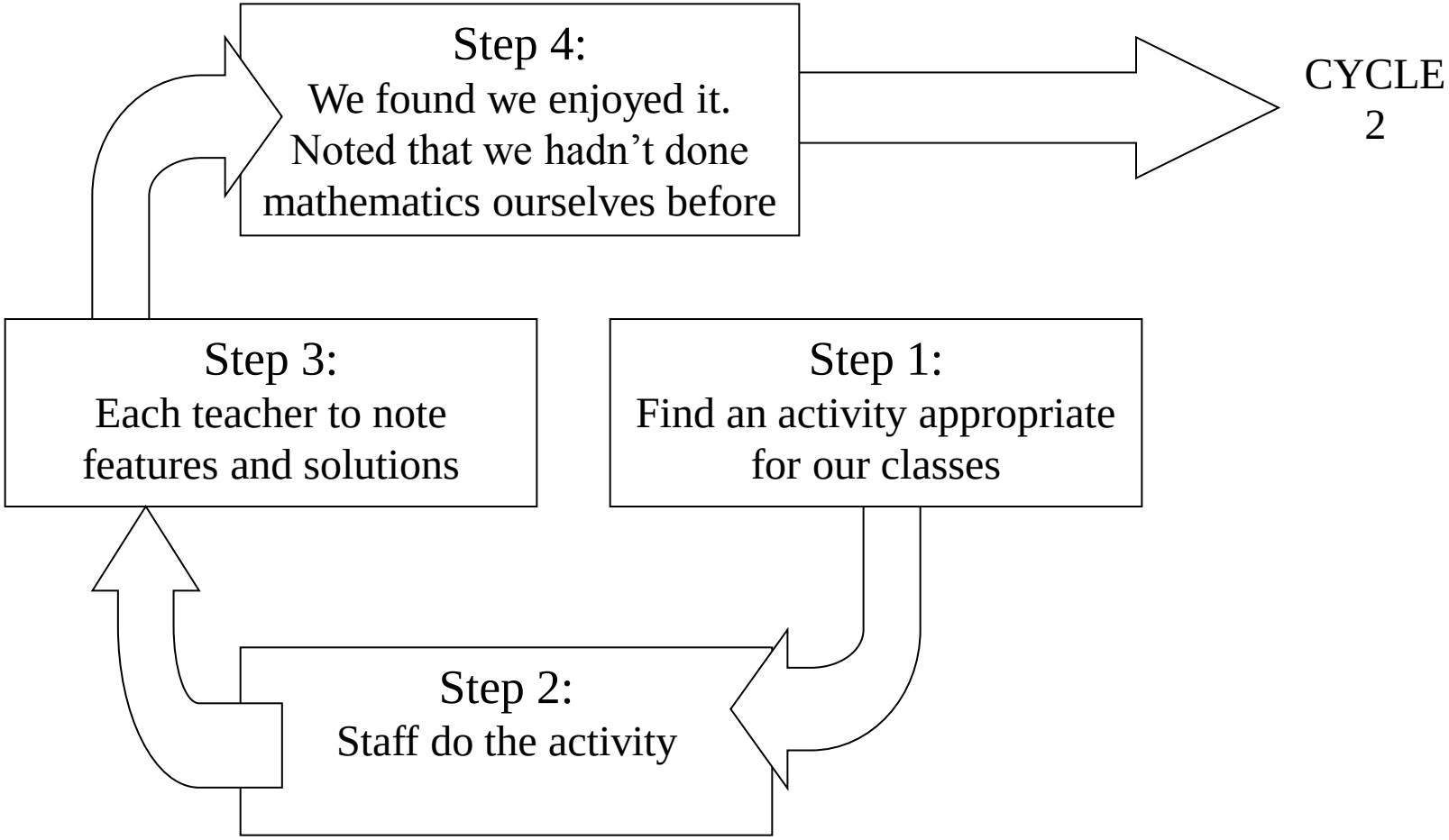
Jane IIII	Julie IIIII IIII
Charlene IIIII II	Mary III
Myf	Andy I
Donna II	Mia I
Billy II	Amanda

Tilly II	Danneke
Alan IIII	Adam
Becky	Rachel
Celine	David
Mike	Declan

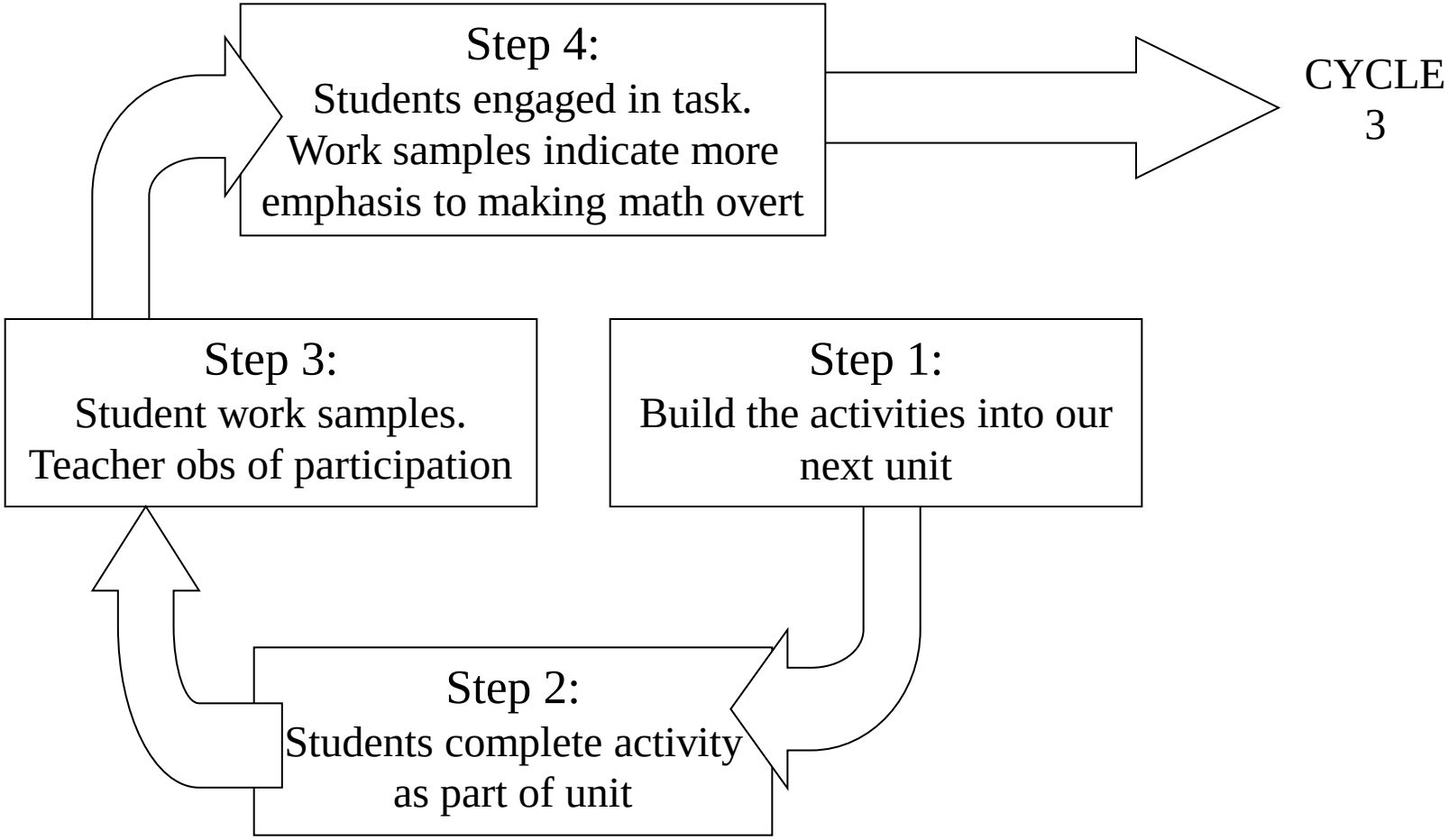
Example: Building engagement in mathematics

- A mathematics department
  - 8 staff with a range of ‘teaching styles’ and courses
- Issue of disengagement:
  - Results were ok but not outstanding
  - Students not engaging – doing bare minimum
  - Many students disliked mathematics
- Issue: To have mathematics education that is more engaging but does not impact achievement or curriculum coverage.

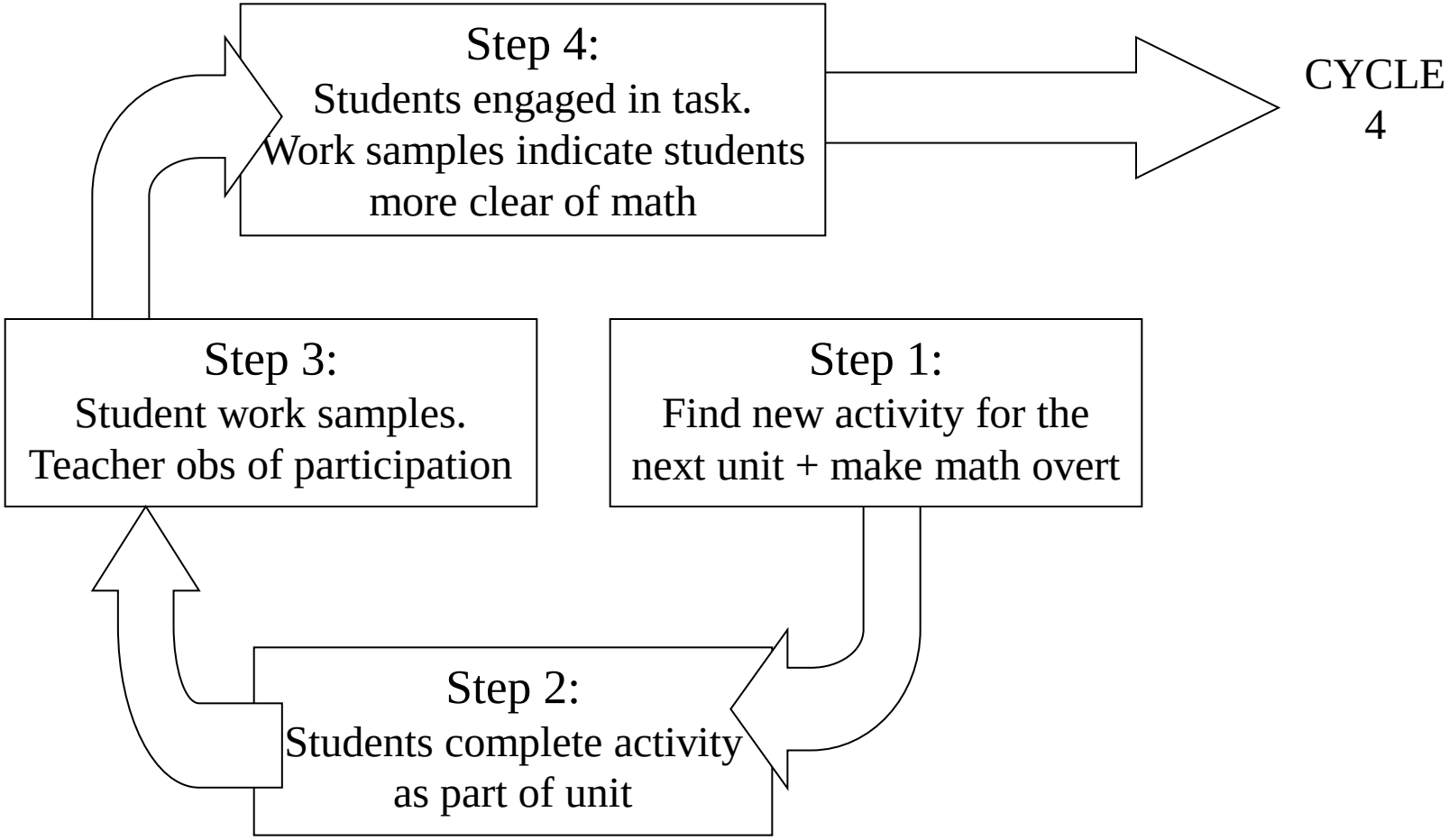
Building engagement in mathematics



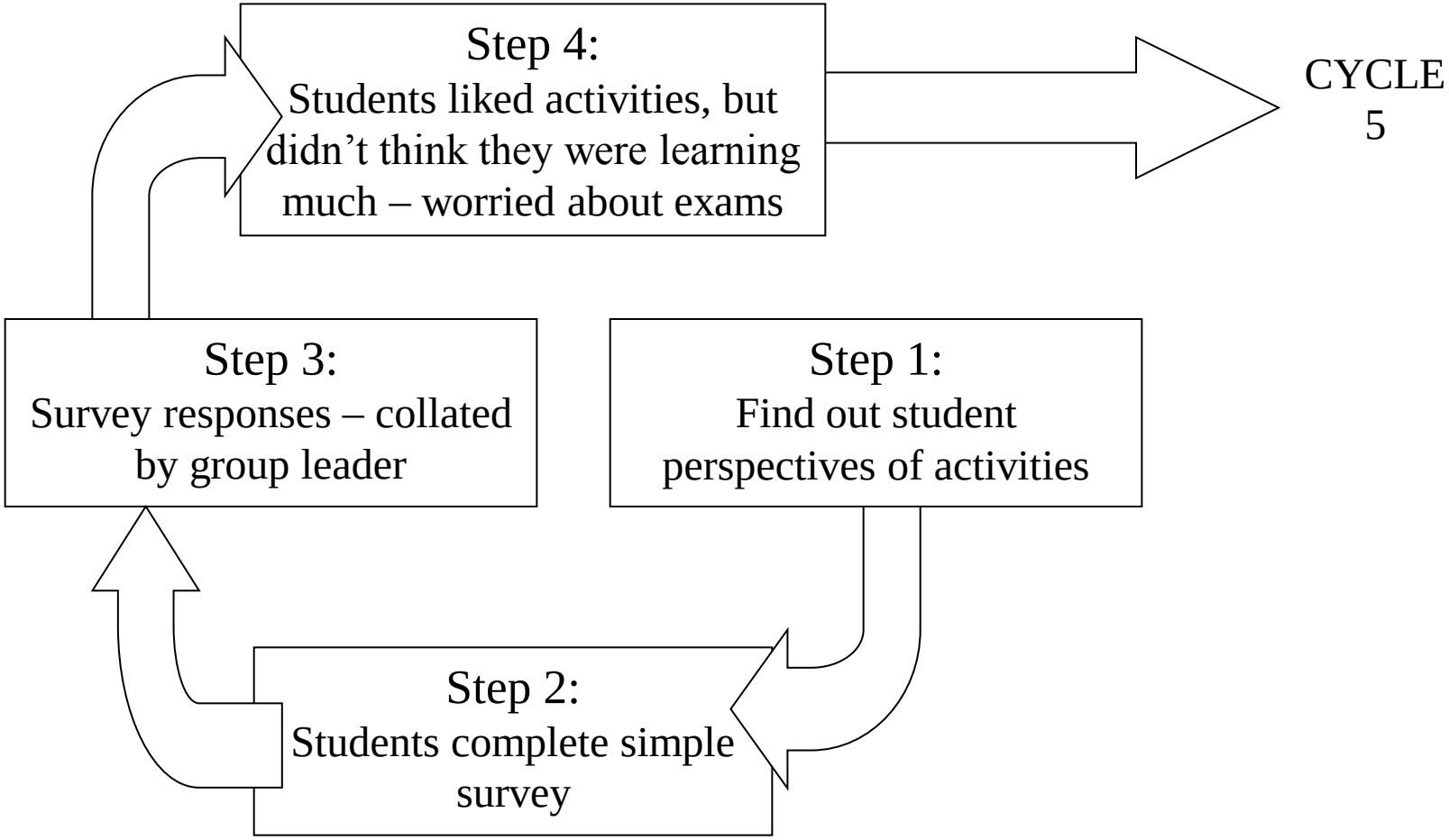
Building engagement in mathematics



Building engagement in mathematics



Building engagement in mathematics



Example: Building engagement in mathematics (cont.)

What we learned/changed

- We included a greater variety of pedagogies in our classes
- We connected students learning more to their previous learning and their lifeworlds
- We changed our PD approach (and staff appraisal) from ‘courses’ to school-based action research cycles.
- We developed a more collegial and collective approach to mathematics education in the school

There were changes in classroom practice and the department ‘culture’

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Meta-Reflection

- *Noticing* and *noting* after 3 or 4 cycles
- After a few cycles it is important to stop and reflect, not just on the last 'cycle', but on the processes overall
  - What have we learned about students' learning?
  - How has our pedagogy changed?
  - How have we changed?
  - …
- In making small changes through each cycle we bring about transformation in our educational practices more broadly.

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Practical Considerations

- Time
- Funding
- Collaboration across sites

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Practical Considerations - Time

- Time is, and always has been, the main confounding factors in any educational development.
- Given that there is never enough time, it is important that development is an integral part, and directly related to, the normal everyday teaching and learning in schools.
- Ideas:
  - First focus of reform is on ‘time’ and ‘priorities’: auditing time to see how much we actually have
  - Useable time and quality time
  - Using meetings for development rather than management

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Practical Considerations - Funding

- When extra funds are made available for initiatives it is crucial that:
  - The development is sustainable (i.e., when the extra funding is finished)
  - It is for changing pedagogy so the teachers and leaders are different afterwards
  - It relates to learning and teaching
- The focus is strategically chosen so there is a ‘synergy of initiatives’ in the school and leaders, teachers and students don’t experience ‘innovation fatigue’.

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Practical Considerations – Collaborating Across Sites

- Collaboration across school sites can be helpful in educational development when:
  - They can find common areas of interest/concern and share practices/ideas/resources
  - They look for things they can learn from one another
  - It connects to the teaching and learning in actual school sites

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Conclusions and Implications

- A cautionary note – self-fulfilling navel gazing!
- Focussing on the hot site – the classroom
- Site-based development
  - The particularities of school communities, classrooms, learners and teachers
- Middle leading is not simple, and it involves a range of roles including administrator, manager, and teacher, but the critical one is curriculum leader.
- As a curriculum leader the middle leader is focused on improving the learning outcomes of the students, and this primarily is done through staff and pedagogical development
- While the curriculum may be standardised across Australia, the way that curriculum is taken-up and presented in the classroom can and should vary through a diverse range of teaching approaches appropriate for the learners in that site. In this way education may become more rational, sustainable and just.

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