The role of middle leaders in New Zealand secondary schools: Expectations and challenges

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Abstract

The role of middle leaders in New Zealand secondary schools is a complex one, fraught with many challenges. Educational reforms that began in the 1980s have increased pressure on top-level educational leaders, resulting in the delegation of responsibilities to other levels in the school hierarchy, with a considerable intensification of management work for middle leaders. As a result, the scope and volume of tasks they are now expected to carry out has led to an increasingly challenging role for these practitioners. This study set out to examine middle leadership development practices in New Zealand secondary schools. A qualitative questionnaire was administered to boards of trustees, senior leaders and middle leaders in five large urban secondary schools. Findings reveal strong agreement between Boards of Trustees, senior leaders and middle leaders regarding the expectations of the role of middle leaders and the challenges they face. Middle leaders have responsibility for a variety of leadership functions which significantly impact on student learning outcomes. However, the complexity of middle leaders' role is overwhelming for many practitioners, they feel unprepared to cope with their increasing workload and associated challenges. It is concluded that middle leaders undertake a pivotal role in the centre of the school hierarchy, mediating between senior leaders and the staff within their departments. However, if middle leaders are to effectively fulfil their role as pedagogical leaders, it is imperative they are provided with the essential training and support to build their leadership capabilities.

Keywords

Middle leadership; leadership development; challenges; secondary schools; New Zealand

Introduction

Middle leaders in New Zealand secondary schools perform a role that is both complex and varied, including responsibility for leading teaching and learning; liaising with a wide range of stakeholders; developing collegial relationships and managing faculties or departments (Ministry of Education, 2012). In New Zealand, middle leaders in the secondary sector are referred to by a variety of terms such as faculty leader, subject head, head of department and learning area leader. Middle leaders are positioned in the centre of the school hierarchy beneath senior leaders such as principals, deputy principals and associate principals, and have responsibility for leading teachers (Fitzgerald, 2009). Their role is a pivotal one, involving working with and through others (Bennett, Woods, Wise, &

Newton, 2007; Brundrett, 2006; Fitzgerald & Gunter, 2006), to translate the policies of senior management into practice and to act as a liaison between management and staff, a function Busher & Harris (1999) describe as 'bridging and brokering'. In this context, middle leaders are conduits of all that passes between senior management and teaching staff (Brown, Rutherford, & Boyle, 2000; Cardno, 1995; Fitzgerald, 2009). Robson (2012) emphasised the multi faceted and demanding role of middle leaders in her study of three secondary schools. One middle leader described the middle leadership role as, "overseeing the goings on in the department which include: behaviour management, performance management of staff, appraisal, regular observations, monitoring and checking units align with requirements, and moderation" (p. 38).

The role of senior educational leaders significantly expanded with the introduction of educational reforms that began in the late 1980s (Cardno, 2005; Wylie, 2012). Evidence from the New Zealand Council for Educational Research (NZCER) national survey of secondary schools, confirms this situation has not improved (Wylie, 2013). Data showed that only 45 percent of principals regarded their workload as manageable, and only 28 percent felt they could allocate enough time for undertaking educational leadership. As a result, responsibilities and leadership tasks once considered the domain of senior leaders are now distributed or delegated to those at other levels of the school hierarchy such as middle leaders (Adey, 2000; Fitzgerald & Gunter, 2006; Youngs, 2009). Consequently, the workload of middle leaders has become more complex, intensive and challenging (Dinham, 2007). Middle leaders are often expected to balance departmental concerns with the wider needs of the school such as building collegial departmental relationships, yet having responsibility for monitoring and evaluating colleagues' performance (Bennett et al., 2007; Fitzgerald, 2009, Ministry of Education, 2012). Wright (2002) identified that the work of middle leaders was situated "within intense, complex and time-poor contexts in which relationships with others are central" (p. 120). More than a decade later, evidence suggests the situation remains the same. It is significant that the Post Primary Teachers Association (PPTA) taskforce findings report that the role of middle leadership "has expanded well beyond what is manageable" (2015). The tension of the dual role of being both a leader and manager highlights the dichotomy of roles in which middle leaders find themselves. Many middle leaders perceive they do not have the skills to deal with these increased challenges (Adey, 2000; Dinham, 2007), and require specific professional development to enable them to effectively carry out their roles as leaders. This research examined literature under two headings: expectations of middle leaders and challenges of middle leaders.

Expectations of middle leaders

A synthesis of literature identifying leadership functions most frequently undertaken by middle leaders (Adey, 2000; Brown, Boyle, & Boyle, 2002; Bush, 2008; Busher, 2005; Dinham, 2007; Glover, Miller, Gambling, Gough, & Johnson, 1999; Poultney, 2007) confirms that their role includes: instructional leadership; budgeting; interpersonal interactions; administration; strategic planning; monitoring and evaluation of staff performance; developing staff and developing a department vision. These functions demonstrate the way in which middle leaders are now expected to exert influence horizontally as well as vertically (Dinham, 2007; Ministry of Education, 2012). In particular, three functions emerge as integral to middle leaders. Firstly, the use of instructional leadership as a means of influencing teaching and learning (Poultney, 2007). Secondly, the degree to which the majority of middle leaders' tasks are interrelational (Bennett et al., 2007; Glover et al., 1999; Poultney, 2007). Thirdly, the importance of administrative tasks to underpin educational aims (Bush, 2008). Whilst this list of leadership functions is not exhaustive, it illustrates the complexities and demands placed on middle leaders.

Instructional leadership

Leading the improvement of teacher practice that influences student learning outcomes is a key function of middle leadership (Cardno, 1995; Fitzgerald & Gunter, 2006). Leadership that focuses on a school's core activity of teaching and learning is referred to in the literature as academic leadership, professional leadership, curriculum leadership, pedagogical leadership, learning-centred leadership and instructional leadership (Bush, 2008; Hallinger, 2003; Poultney, 2007; Robinson, Hohepa, &

Lloyd, 2009). The purpose of instructional leadership, according to Bush (2008) is to influence the "motivation, commitment and capability of teachers" (p. 39). Wylie (2012) asserts leadership focusing on teaching and learning is essential not only for schools but for the continued development of New Zealand's education system. Traditionally, principals were the instructional leaders of schools, however, increased role demands have made this more difficult. In secondary schools instructional leadership is often distributed to middle leaders (Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008; Wylie, 2013). Due to their influential position with teachers, many view middle leaders as ideally located within the school hierarchy to take on the instructional leader role (Bush, 2008; Fitzgerald & Gunter, 2006; Robinson et al., 2008). For instance, the Education Review Office (2015) in their School Evaluation Indicators trial document, describe that leaders in high performing schools are "involved in planning, coordinating and evaluating the curriculum and teaching" (p. 24). Given the increasing workload of secondary school principals, it seems highly likely that this instructional leadership role would be delegated to middle leaders.

Developing staff

Developing staff is an important aspect of leadership. Robinson, Hohepa and Lloyd (2009) identify 'promoting, and participating in' professional learning as the leadership function that has the greatest impact on student outcomes. Middle leaders are often charged with the responsibility for facilitating department based professional development and encouraging staff to engage in school wide professional development initiatives (Dinham, 2007; Ministry of Education, 2012). Kemp and Nathan (1995) assert developing staff is a key function of middle leaders, they contend that staff development at department level is critical to the effectiveness of the whole school. Likewise, Dimmock, Kwek and Toh (2013) assert that distributing leadership to middle leaders is an essential aspect of building a learning-centred school culture which they see as a requirement of building 21st century learning environments. Distributing staff development to middle leaders, at department level, creates opportunities for it to occur on an informal basis through the daily interactions of middle leaders and their staff (Blanford, 2006). Findings from the NZCER national secondary school survey (Wylie, 2013) highlight that a third of teachers rely solely on feedback from their managers as a means of development. It is essential that middle leaders are developed themselves if they are to be utilised to develop the capacity of their staff to improve teaching and learning (Cardno, 2012).

Administration

Administration is critical to providing the context in which teaching and learning may take place (Bush, 2008). Middle leaders carry out a considerable array of administrative tasks from conducting department meetings to developing centralised management systems (Busher, 2005; Dinham, 2007). The Ministry of Education (2012) states that middle leaders' responsibilities may include managing systems and administrative practices that support an ordered and safe school environment. Bush (2008) describes administration as a function which supports educational purposes of the school. If one takes the view that effective management or administrative tasks provide the context in which student learning occurs, it seems logical, if not critical, for middle leaders to be enabled to undertake this task effectively.

The role of middle leaders has evolved from an advocate of departmental interests (Bennett et al., 2007) to leading pedagogical change, managing and appraising teachers, implementing the wider school vision, and providing leadership that is culturally responsive (Ministry of Education, 2012). Changes to middle leaders' role have created uncertainty and a number of challenges (Bennett et al., 2007, Robson, 2012).

Challenges for middle leaders

The role of middle leaders has become more complex, however, effective leadership development to equip them to undertake their role has remained stagnant (Chetty, 2007, Robson, 2012; Fitzgerald, 2000). Although it is often assumed middle leaders are appointed because they possess the requisite leadership skills to carry out their role effectively, this is not always the case (Brown et al., 2002).

Research found middle leaders were under prepared for key aspects of the role, with only half reporting their learning needs were being met (Adey, 2000; Dinham, 2007). Fitzgerald (2009) also highlighted the uncertainty felt by many middle leaders when first moving into middle level leadership roles. The lack of preparation for middle leaders exacerbates what is already a challenging role. From the literature, three main challenges confronting middle leaders emerged: developing interpersonal relationships; tensions between collegiality and accountability; and a lack of allocated time.

Developing interpersonal relationships

Middle leaders require a high level of skill in developing interpersonal relationships. Busher (2005) contends that negotiating and relating with colleagues is at the core of middle leadership. 'Leading from the Middle' (Ministry of Education, 2012), which provides guidance for middle leaders in New Zealand schools, describes a broad range of activities in which they are expected to engage in order to build relationships from; providing a supportive teaching and learning environment to developing a sense of collective ownership of decision making. The range of relationships middle leaders are expected to forge is equally broad including: other leaders, teachers, support staff, whānau, parents, community groups, and students. Unfortunately, many middle leaders perceive they lack the interpersonal skills required for the role (Dinham, 2007) and find working through others in a mediated approach difficult (Busher, 2005). Cardno (2012) asserts one of the most significant tasks a school leader can perform is to solve problems involving people. Argyris (1977) explains that organisations are comprised of people who hold a diverse range of worldviews which are deeply ingrained. Similarly, Wright (2002) points out that relationships in secondary schools are situated within complex micro-political climates which are seldom taken into account within the organisational structure. Thus the challenge for middle leaders, is to bring together diverse, often conflicting views to achieve educational aims. Consequently, interrelational skills are of the utmost importance for middle leaders in order to influence others to achieve educational goals (Bush, 2008; Busher, 2005; Dinham, 2007; Glover et al., 1999; Poultney, 2007).

Tensions between collegiality and accountability

A further challenge for middle leaders is carrying out functions which seemingly undermine collegial relationships (Bennett et al., 2007). Middle leaders are expected to build relationships, motivate staff, and support their department, whilst also acting as line managers to monitor colleagues' performance (Fitzgerald, Youngs, & Grootenboer, 2003). This tension is evident in 'Leading from the Middle' (Ministry of Education, 2012), which states, middle leaders are expected to build trusting relationships yet manage and appraise teachers. Cardno (2012) asserts that one of the aims of appraisal is "making teachers accountable for their performance" (p. 90). Forrester (2011) highlights the perception that performance management erodes professional relationships between appraiser and appraisee. This confirms an early study by Adey (2000) who argues if middle leaders are charged with evaluating staff yet are not given responsibility for developing them, collegial relationships may be damaged. As a result, middle leaders find themselves in an invidious position of evaluating the performance of their colleagues. Furthermore, Brown and Rutherford (1999) found that middle leaders prefer to view themselves as "managers of the curriculum and not as managers of their colleagues" (p. 238). This view is echoed by Busher (2005) who contends, middle leaders prefer to identify themselves as teachers rather than locate themselves in the echelon of management. In fact, he questions whether collegiality can even be achieved in a hierarchical organisation given these competing tensions.

Lack of allocated time

In New Zealand secondary schools additional salary payments, known as Units, are allocated for undertaking additional responsibilities, such as leadership (Secondary Teachers Collective Agreement, 2015). Those allocated units are entitled to additional non-contact time which equates to approximately one hour per week for each unit allocated. Despite the allocation of extra non-contact time to undertake leadership functions, some claim it is not sufficient for middle leaders to perform their role effectively (Wise and Bennett, 2003; Wright, 2002). Fitzgerald (2009) asserts that middle

leaders are overburdened with compliance tasks to such an extent, it dominates their time. Similarly, research in Australia and the United Kingdom focusing on the role of middle leadership also highlighted a lack of allocated time to undertake the role effectively as a major challenge (Brown et al., 2000; Dinham, 2007). Consequently, functions such as monitoring and evaluation of staff; classroom planning; assessment and reporting are either neglected, completed during class time or completed after hours (Brown et al., 2000; Busher, 2005; Fitzgerald, 2009). This tension is summarised by the PPTA taskforce (2015) who state, middle leaders are left "without enough time and energy to do an excellent job as both a leader and classroom teacher".

The challenges associated with middle leadership, whilst rewarding, make the role a difficult one (Fitzgerald, 2009). It is suggested, "The term middle level leader may simply be a means of seducing teachers to take on extra tasks and responsibilities without the commensurate increase in pay or time" (Fitzgerald & Gunter, 2006, p. 334). Although it may not be possible to eliminate the challenges of the role, middle leaders can be better equipped to deal with them through the provision of specific, contextualised leadership development.

Methodology

To research middle leadership in New Zealand secondary schools, an interpretive epistemological position was adopted. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007) suggest that due to the "immense complexity of human nature and the elusive and intangible quality of social phenomena" (p. 11), an interpretive approach is appropriate in an educational context. This study aimed to seek the perspectives of board of trustees, senior leaders and middle leaders regarding middle leadership development. For the purpose of this study, middle leaders were defined as subject leaders, heads of departments and heads of faculties. Although pastoral leaders are considered to hold a position of middle level leadership within the school hierarchy, this study focused on those in positions of curriculum leadership. As only one research instrument was used, a sample was required which was large enough to provide valid data. A qualitative questionnaire was sent to 145 school leaders in five secondary schools. 60 questionnaires were returned (8 board of trustees, 15 senior leaders and 37 middle leaders), an overall response rate of 41 percent.

The questionnaire

The online questionnaire comprising of four sections was administered. Section one contained demographic information. Respondents were asked to identify their position within the school; their experience of their current role; their leadership experience within an educational context and their gender.

In section two, respondents were presented with a list of eight areas of leadership development (which were derived from the literature) instructional leadership (leading the improvement of teaching and learning); budgeting skills; interpersonal skills; administrative skills; strategic planning; monitoring and evaluation of staff performance; developing staff and developing a vision. From this list respondents identified in which areas they were currently offered leadership development; in which of the areas they had received leadership development and which areas they perceived would be beneficial. In addition, respondents could include areas of leadership development not provided in the list. These questions were used to gather data on what leadership development was currently offered, as well as what leadership development might be of benefit to middle leaders.

Section three contained continuums with three statements which respondents were asked to rate on a six point Likert scale, one represented strongly disagree through to six representing strongly agree. The three statements were:

- leadership development of middle leaders is considered important in my school;
- leadership development should be a priority in my school; and
- middle leaders in my school are trained to carry out their role effectively.

The purpose of this section was to gain respondents' current perspectives of leadership development of middle leaders.

The final section gave respondents the opportunity to answer five open-ended questions: What are the main expectations of middle level leaders in your school? What are the challenges experienced by middle leaders in your school? What is your understanding of leadership development? How is leadership development for middle leaders reflected in your school's policy documentation? What leadership development opportunities could better equip middle leaders in your school to meet the challenges they may face? These questions were designed to gain respondents' perspectives of middle leaders' role, challenges stemming from the role and their understanding of leadership development of middle leaders.

Data analysis

The qualitative data generated from the research was aggregated and sorted into the categories: Board of Trustee members, senior leaders and middle leaders. This data was organised into broad themes, drawn from the literature. The themes were: expectations, challenges, further development of middle leaders, understanding of leadership development, and leadership development of middle leaders within policy documentation. A more selective coding process was applied in which more specific themes, which Bryman (2008) terms 'phenomenon of interest', were identified. The data generated from the closed questions were sorted and analysed. Closed questions that were of a demographic nature did not require coding. To ensure the questionnaire provided consistent data, it was piloted by four middle level leaders from two different schools plus a Board of Trustee member. The pilot group data was analysed to ensure the research instrument was able to reproduce similar data.

Findings

Expectations of middle leaders

Respondents were asked to describe what they perceived to be the expectations of middle leaders in their school. The findings reveal congruence between Boards of Trustees', senior leaders' and middle leaders' perceptions that leading the curriculum was the main expectation. Four of the board of trustees (50%) identified leading the curriculum as the main expectation of middle leaders in their school which included; developing learning programmes, leading teaching and learning, and evaluating teaching programmes. Furthermore, four of the board of trustees (50%) linked leading the curriculum with a focus on student achievement and results. Similarly, seven senior leaders (47%) identified the same expectation that middle leaders' primary role was to lead the curriculum. Senior leaders used similar terminology to board of trustees such as, curriculum leadership, academic programme design, and developing initiatives to improve student learning outcomes. Two thirds of middle leaders (66%) also agreed curriculum leadership was their primary responsibility. Middle leaders were more specific than board of trustees or senior leaders, they described their curriculum leadership responsibilities as, leading and developing the curriculum; planning learning programmes; meeting NZQA requirements; and managing moderating procedures. Twelve middle leaders (34%) also felt responsible for the results achieved by students in their departments. In particular, that students were achieving the same levels of attainment as students in schools of similar size and context. This was emphasised by four middle leaders who stated their curriculum leadership role was to:

- drive curriculum and ensure that students are achieving at the highest level;
- make educational changes that will lead to improved student outcomes;
- review and reflect on student achievement and strategise on how to improve learning outcomes for students; and
- keep an eye on curriculum, appraisal and success rates.

These comments highlight the extent that middle leaders' role as curriculum leader is linked with student attainment. Whilst middle leaders in this study were expected to lead the curriculum and the improvement of teaching and learning, much of their curriculum leadership role is focused on the management of assessment.

Developing staff

Evidence from this study emphasises the expectation that middle leaders are responsible for developing the staff in their departments. Four board of trustees (50%) considered middle leaders' engagement with professional development, whether their own or that of their staff, to be an important aspect of their role. Seven senior leaders (47%) identified the development of staff as a key expectation of middle leaders. Only one senior leader explicitly identified the means by which middle leaders were to develop their staff suggesting they "assist with staff development through professional inquiries".

Some middle leaders (57%) also identified developing staff as an expectation of their role. Middle leaders did not acknowledge participating in professional development themselves but spoke only of developing others. They described a collegial approach to staff development including: mentoring beginning teachers and new staff; supervising report writing; providing professional guidance; developing teacher practice; and leading professional development sessions. Implicit in the comments of middle leaders was that staff development was of an individual, informal nature. Some middle leaders even expressed a sense of responsibility for the development of their staff personally as well as professionally. This was expressed in the following comments:

> Provide guidance to staff in their department both personal and professional.

> Support the professional development needs and pastoral care needs of our department's teachers.

This study further reveals that whilst middle leaders are charged with responsibility for developing their staff, they perceive they are not personally developed themselves. Some middle leaders expressed a sense of injustice that they were expected to support others in their teams without commensurate support from their respective senior leaders. Middle leaders hold the view that they have inadequate professional development opportunities.

Administrative tasks

Evident from this research is the fundamental aspect of administrative tasks in the role of middle leadership. Four board of trustees (50%) and, surprisingly, only four out of 15 senior leaders (27%) identified the administrative role played by middle leaders. They described middle leaders' administrative duties only in very broad terms such as meeting administrative tasks, day-to-day management of learning areas. One trustee stated middle leaders were expected to "balance their management role with their teaching role".

In comparison, half of the middle leaders identified specific administrative functions including: administering moderation systems; tracking and recording student achievement; maintaining budgets; producing department manuals; and reporting to the board of trustees. One middle leader stated middle leaders at their school were expected to "maintain and implement managerial and administrative systems such as moderation, budgets, reporting, and tracking student progress". This comment highlights many of the administrative tasks performed by the middle leaders in this study were compliance orientated, revolving around matters of assessment. Middle leaders in this study used the terms leader and manager interchangeably and articulated the purpose of administrative tasks was to manage systems and resources in order to develop an effective department.

The expectations placed upon the middle leaders are varied, complex and demanding. Some middle leaders felt they were expected to tackle any task that may arise, as expressed in this comment: "There is just an expectation that you know how to do it all and are able to cope regardless of training. You have been employed to do a job and the expectation is that you will do it". Middle leaders are expected to lead the curriculum within their departments, develop their staff and undertake a

significant amount of administrative duties. This research identifies the role of middle leadership is fraught with challenges which many middle leaders do not feel equipped to face.

Challenges for middle leaders

Respondents were asked to describe what they perceived to be the challenges faced by middle leaders in their school. Three main challenges were identified: lack of allocated time; lack of leadership development; and a tension of leading a department within the wider school context.

Lack of allocated time

Findings from this study indicate one of the most difficult challenges facing middle leaders is a lack of time to undertake their role effectively. Four Board of Trustee members (50%), nine (60%) senior leaders and 22 middle leaders (63%) identified a lack of allocated non-contact time as an issue hindering the role of middle leaders. None of the trustees or senior leaders specified how time was an issue but rather spoke of a lack of time in broad terms. Middle leaders, in comparison, were very specific in describing how a lack of allocated time impacted on their role. In particular, they found it difficult balancing the time demands of their leadership function with their teaching role. One middle leader stated, "The challenges I face are time management and setting boundaries within non-contact time to actually be able to do work without being interrupted".

The consequence of a lack of allocated time was that eight of the middle leaders (23%) perceived that they were not performing either their leadership role or their teaching role to a satisfactory level. Several middle leaders expressed frustration that despite barely coping to maintain their current workload within the time allocated, more tasks were being added to their role. This middle leader felt that, "Workload is an issue because we are forever being given new opportunities to develop new aspects of our departments. We are expected to keep up with these developments". It is unclear whether board of trustees and senior leaders were aware of middle leaders' heavy workload.

Lack of leadership development

Evidence from this research identifies that 33 percent of middle leaders consider they are not adequately trained to perform their role as departmental leader or feel equipped with the requisite skills. Two board of trustees members (25%) and five senior leaders (33%) identified professional development for middle leaders was a challenge in their school. The responses of senior leaders were varied, one felt the challenge for middle leaders was supporting and developing each other; another implied professional development opportunities for middle leaders to improve their practice existed but middle leaders were not making use of them. Middle leaders felt that they learnt their role through trial and error, rather than through formal planned leadership development. This is summarised in these middle leaders' comments:

> Lack of leadership expertise; lack of theoretical knowledge and up to date research; lack of pedagogical knowledge; lack of experience in appraisal and challenging conversations.

> I was thrown in the deep end a bit and did, in many ways, learn on the job.

Although these comments highlight the perception held by some middle leaders in this study who felt they did not receive leadership development to undertake their role effectively, findings show the majority of middle leaders do actually receive some type of leadership development. Only seven out of 37 middle leaders had not undertaken any leadership development in their current school. All other middle leaders had participated in at least one form of leadership development including: instructional leadership; monitoring and evaluating staff; developing staff; strategic planning; developing a vision; administrative skills; interpersonal skills; and budgeting. Therefore, findings from this study indicate the majority of middle leaders do receive a measure of leadership development to carry out their role effectively, despite their perception to the contrary.

Tensions of leading a department within the wider school context

This study found evidence of tensions between leading a department and working within the context of the wider school. Two trustees (25%) perceived a challenge for middle leaders working within a wider school context, with one questioning middle leaders' ability to "see the bigger picture outside of the classroom". This view was supported by a third of the senior leaders with some claiming middle leaders had a narrow focus which did not take into account the wider school aims. One senior leader stated the middle leaders' role was to, "bridge the gap between faculty and school wide focus".

Eight middle leaders (23%) experienced tension leading their departments within the wider school context. They offered two explanations for this tension. Firstly, they felt tension was created as a consequence of trying to implement school wide goals which they perceived to be divergent from the aims of their departments. Secondly, middle leaders felt caught between senior leaders and the members of their team. One middle leader summarised the frustration explaining middle leaders were, "Experiencing pressure from the team and simultaneously experiencing pressure from above. We are often caught in the middle".

Middle leaders were critical of senior leaders, claiming tension was created by school wide goals, which were contradictory or unattainable. Senior leaders were accused of driving their own portfolios, thereby placing conflicting demands on middle leaders, as expressed by the following comment, "Too many demands from senior leadership team each driven by their own portfolio". This finding identifies a contrast of perspectives between middle and senior leaders with each pointing the finger at the other as the cause of tension. Some middle leaders feel disenfranchised by senior leaders making decisions in which they have no voice but are expected to implement.

Discussion and conclusion

A strength of this research is that it gained different perspectives from Boards of Trustees, senior leaders and middle leaders in five New Zealand secondary schools. This study concludes that middle leaders undertake a pivotal role in New Zealand secondary schools, mediating between senior leaders and the staff within their departments. Moreover, middle leaders perform key functions, which significantly impact on student learning outcomes. It is clear that the middle leader's role is challenging and requires adequate preparation in the form of professional development and training.

Curriculum leadership was identified as the main expectation of middle leaders in this study including tasks such as: developing and leading the curriculum within departments; planning learning programmes; maintaining moderation procedures; and meeting NZQA compliance requirements. The role of curriculum leader undertaken by middle leaders is comparative to that of instructional leader identified in the literature (Bush, 2008; Cardno, 2012; Hallinger, 2003; Poultney, 2007). What is also evident is that a large proportion of the curriculum responsibilities of middle leaders involves performing compliance focused assessment tasks. In addition to leading the curriculum, middle leaders are responsible for the development of staff in their departments. These middle leaders implement an informal model of staff development through daily interactions with their staff and underpinned by strong collegial relationships. Although middle leaders assume responsibility for developing their staff, they perceive that they are not developed themselves, by their respective senior leaders. This creates a sense of frustration for some middle leaders and the fact that senior leaders do not share this perception, compounds their frustration even more.

Many of the middle leaders surveyed perform a significant administrative function including maintaining budgets; tracking and recording student achievement; administering moderation systems; and reporting to Boards of Trustees. These tasks help create ordered learning environments (Ministry of Education, 2012) and underpin the activities of teaching and learning (Bush, 2008). Middle leaders perceive their administrative demands encroach upon their teaching role. Subsequently, there is a degree of ambiguity around whether middle leaders' role is primarily that of a leader or a manager. Whilst most middle leaders in this research emphasised the leadership aspect of their role, in practice their time was dominated with managerial compliance tasks. Findings from this research conclude that a middle leader's role is demanding, complex, yet an integral one. The complexities of their role have

created significant challenges including: a lack of allocated time; a lack of adequate leadership development; and the tension of leading departments within the wider school context. The implications for middle leaders is that they do not feel prepared to undertake such a broad leadership role, they feel overwhelmed by the increasing workload, and do not feel supported by their senior leaders.

A recommendation of this research is that the Ministry of Education implement a national programme of leadership development for middle leaders. The complexity of a middle leader's role demands a set of leadership and management skills which requires specialised knowledge and training. There is currently no national provision to equip middle leaders with the skills they require to meet the demands of a leadership role which significantly impacts on student learning. Furthermore, this study urges educational leaders to develop a clear understanding of the role of middle leadership and its place within secondary schools. However, a limitation of this study is its relatively small sample size. Further research is required to conceptualise middle leadership in secondary schools on a national level. What this research does make clear is that it is essential for senior and middle leaders prioritise the tasks allocated to middle leaders in order to make the role manageable. Moreover, in the absence of a national middle leadership development programme, it is essential for senior school leaders to support middle leaders through planned and deliberate leadership development programmes. It is clear, from this study, that qualification for the role of classroom teacher is no longer adequate for the complex and demanding role of middle leadership.

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