

Multiple perspectives of leadership development for middle-level pedagogical leaders in New Zealand secondary schools

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Abstract

A growing recognition of the important role of pedagogical middle-level educational leaders in relation to their direct impact on the learning outcomes of students is evident in both recent research and policy. In spite of considerable attention being drawn to the significance of leadership at this mid-level of the school, there is a notable lack of leadership development that specifically targets middle-level leadership. In fact, there is evidence that middle-level leaders are currently experiencing role expansion that has been bequeathed to them from leaders in the tier above without recognition of the associated challenges. This study set out to examine the views of secondary school leaders responsible for the development of middle-level leaders and the views of the middle-level leaders themselves regarding their experiences of leadership development. The findings reveal strong differences in the perceptions held by those in executive level positions (school governors and school principals and deputy principals) and those in middle-level positions (curriculum leaders and heads of department). It is concluded that in the absence of national initiatives for middle leadership development, institutions need to make this a priority and need to clarify expectations, merge understandings and include the needs of the organisation and the individual to develop and leverage the critical role that these middle-level leaders play as instructional leaders who can impact the quality of teaching and learning.

Keywords: *Leadership development; middle-level leaders; secondary schools; New Zealand*

Introduction

New Zealand's primary and secondary schools tend to have a similar hierarchy and nomenclature in conveying the structural distribution of leadership. Although primary schools are generally smaller than their secondary counterparts in urban settings, both primary and secondary schools are led by a Principal appointed by a governing body: the Board of Trustees comprising elected parent representatives in the main. They also have one or more deputies (variously called Deputy, Assistant or Associate Principals) who, together with the principal make up a Senior Management Team. Normally, staff in these designated positions are called senior leaders whilst middle leaders "work with and support classroom teachers and students, providing pedagogical and pastoral leadership and fulfilling various administrative functions" (Ministry of Education, 2012, p. 7). Bassett (2012) states that the term middle leader is one of many, such as middle manager, mid-level manager and mid-level leader, that appears in the literature. Glover, Miller, Gambling, Gough and Johnson (1999) suggest the choice of term may be more than just semantics. The use of 'middle manager' or 'middle leader' may actually emphasise the school's perception of the role: the former stressing the operational aspect, the latter the strategic aspect. This may also be an historical matter as whilst the term middle manager was commonly used in the 1980s, the popularity of 'leadership' evident from the 1990s has resulted in recent use of the notion of leadership in the middle of the organisation. One could say that a level of middle leadership has become ubiquitous in educational organisations in terms of the structural distribution of both leadership and management roles (Cardno, 2012).

For the purpose of this study, the focus was on middle-level leaders with pedagogical responsibility, called Head of Faculty, Head of Department or Teacher in Charge of (subject) in New Zealand secondary schools. Because of the emphasis on the leadership of teaching and learning, these leaders are performing functions of pedagogical

leadership or instructional or educational or curriculum leadership as it is variously referred to in the literature (Bassett, 2012; Cardno, 2012; Seashore Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom & Anderson, 2010).

The role of middle-level leaders

In secondary schools middle-level leaders are the key pedagogical leaders because they perform a dual role: they teach and they manage. This dichotomous role is highlighted by Fitzgerald (2009) as an inherent challenge and she notes it is often overlooked in the expectations held of middle-level leaders. In New Zealand schools there are two distinct levels of organisational management – the senior level concerned with school-wide operations – and the middle level with a focus on teachers and students. At the senior level the principals are generally only indirectly responsible for what teachers actually do. Cardno (1995) asserts that “responsibility for direct professional (instructional or curriculum) leadership is usually delegated to middle managers” (p. 16). So while senior leaders contribute to improving student learning outcomes indirectly through what Seashore Louis et al. (2010) refer to as creating conditions for a conducive instructional *climate*, middle-level leaders carry out the instructional face-to-face *actions* that have a direct impact on student learning. It is this critical role, close to the classroom, that carries the greatest challenge for a pedagogical leader: the management of teachers who even more directly influence student learning. New Zealand principals are currently being encouraged to give the leadership of learning or their role as instructional leaders much higher priority than they feel is possible. Research in North America confirms that secondary school principals are not able to prioritise this role to the extent recommended. Both Seashore Louis et al. (2010) and Bendikson, Robinson and Hattie (2012) note that secondary principals’ inability or unwillingness to act as direct instructional leaders means that the middle leaders shoulder this mantle and become the direct instructional leaders for their department. It is the principal’s role to develop these leaders in order to facilitate their work. If the principal does not perform this role it is assumed to be delegated to senior leaders such as deputy principals who would then have an oversight of the work of middle-level leaders.

In over twenty years of operation as self-managed schools, New Zealand secondary school principals have experienced ongoing expansion of an already diverse and demanding role that involves responsibility to manage human resources, property and finances in addition to the key task of being a pedagogical or instructional leader with a focus on constantly improving learning and teaching (Wylie, 2012). It is not surprising, therefore, that through structural distribution of leadership to the level below (Cardno, 2012), the constantly expanding responsibility for pedagogical leadership has been transferred to the middle-leadership level. Significantly, responsibilities and leadership tasks were distributed or delegated to those at the other levels of the school hierarchy such as middle-level leaders (Adey, 2000; Fitzgerald & Gunter, 2006). In these conditions it is essential to provide these leaders with management oversight and the sort of development and support that will sustain them in performing the role of direct instructional leaders.

A synthesis of the literature that contains many lists of the tasks and functions of middle management/leadership confirms that the following are the core tasks. Their work involves (1) planning and organising delivery of a subject curriculum; (2) managing staff and students; (3) monitoring student achievement; (4) developing staff; and (5) reviewing and developing programmes (Busher, 2005; Ministry of Education, 2012; Peak, 2010; Poultney, 2007). And then, they also teach and in doing so model effective pedagogical practice and consequently need to be concerned about their on-going professional development as teachers as well as their development as leaders. In short, the work of middle-level pedagogical leaders is first and foremost teaching and then the added responsibility of managing the teaching of a team delivering a subject curriculum (Fitzgerald, 2009). The Ministry of Education (2012) refers to middle leaders as being “positioned between principal and teachers” (p. 9). In a view of middle management and/or leadership occurring at the interface between classroom teaching and school management, the middle leader has a crucial responsibility to translate school-wide goals into subject or department goals and then plan with their teaching team how to achieve these goals. This implies a close relationship between the

senior leadership level and the middle leadership level. In most cases middle-level leaders report to a senior leader who would be responsible for their appraisal and professional development. They rely on senior leaders for their support and, in turn, provide support and development for the staff they manage in their teaching teams (Cardno, 1995; Blandford, 2006; Kemp and Nathan, 1994). To be effective, middle-level leaders need to be provided with opportunities to develop their pedagogical knowledge and skills. At the same time they need to be supported to develop an additional set of knowledge and skills pertinent to leading and managing teaching and teachers. In other words, they need senior leaders to be concerned about their leadership development (Bassett, 2012; Cardno, 2012).

Leadership development – the concept

Leadership and or management development has historically been portrayed as a special form of professional development associated with a specialised body of knowledge and skills that emerges from the generic discipline of management and has been adapted over several decades to be relevant for the field of educational administration, management and leadership. Leadership development takes many forms such as training in preparation for responsibility, education involving study of a programme leading to a qualification, on-the-job support through mentoring and coaching, and ways of keeping practice current. It can be provided for individuals and in groups and basically there is no single way in which leadership and management can be offered as it needs to be designed by the organisation, in liaison with the individual, so that a negotiated approach leads to an agreed programme of development that is tailored to specific needs (Bush, 2010; Cardno, 2012). According to Cardno (2012) it is related to the three major demands placed on managers which are (1) the management of people for whom they are responsible; (2) the management of systems (which invariably involve people in their operation; and (3) the management of self (because so much of the work depends on interpersonal skill and inter-relationships with others that require reflect one's own behaviour).

A well understood model for leadership development is proposed by Van Velsor and McCauley (2004) in which they demonstrate three features of an iterative process of development. These are assessment, challenge and support. In the assessment stage evidence is used to identify gaps between capacity and performance. In the next stage the manager is offered a range of experiences that stretch or challenge their learning and concurrently offered support. A number of authors confirm that a starting point for embarking on any form of leadership development is the act of reflecting on performance. Whether this is personal reflection (Bush, 2012) or based on reflective evaluation in an appraisal process (Cardno, 2005), or reflection on development needs by a group of senior leaders (Rhodes & Brundrett, 2009), the intent of reflection is to assess current capability and identify development needs. Challenges can be provided in a variety of ways as formal learning events or individual learning by studying for a qualification in educational leadership and management or through shadowing an experienced manager. Support can be provided on and off the job through mentoring, coaching, networking and professional conferencing (Bush, 2010, Cardno, 2005; Rhodes and Brundrett, 2009)

Leadership development for middle-level leaders

In New Zealand, leadership development for principals has been largely informed by the results of the Best Evidence Synthesis on School leadership and student outcomes (Robinson, Hohepa & Lloyd, 2009) or the BES as it is commonly known. This research (which is a synthesis of other significant research studies) points to firstly, understanding that pedagogical leadership is spread or distributed throughout the organisation; and secondly, the importance of management work such as performance appraisal as a means for teachers to work together on matters related to student learning. The role played by curriculum leaders in secondary schools is key to realising the potential of the messages of the BES.

According to the New Zealand Ministry of Education, strong middle leadership is a key to achieving education priorities (Ministry of Education, 2012). In 2009 the national plan to provide comprehensive

leadership development at the senior leadership level was at a zenith of importance. The Ministry of Education was providing support for programmes for the induction of first time principals, the development of aspiring principals and a leadership refresher course for experienced principals. Part of their vision was an extension of this kind of leadership development to all middle leaders in the country. But this plan did not come to fruition (Wildy, Clarke & Cardno, 2009; Wylie, 2012). No national initiative has been launched to provide leadership development for middle-level leaders and there is not likely to be one in the future. It remains for schools to take the initiative themselves and make provision for developing the leadership knowledge and skills that are essential for effective pedagogical leadership at the middle of the organisation.

Methodology

In this study middle-level pedagogical leaders (heads of subject departments), senior leaders (principals and deputy principals) and governors (Board of Trustee members) from five large Auckland secondary schools were invited to participate in a study about the leadership development of staff in middle leadership positions. Finding schools to participate in the research was difficult as schools are deluged by requests to participate in surveys, according to anecdotal comments from the schools that declined. Initially 15 schools were approached and all five schools that agreed to be involved were included in the study. It was assumed that in most schools the average approximate number of the sample in each group would be as follows: 8 Board of Trustee members, 4 senior leaders and 18 middle-level pedagogical leaders. Hence a purposive sample of 30 participants per school was estimated. In actuality, 146 surveys were emailed to addresses that the schools made available to the researcher and 60 questionnaires were completed online using a Google Form (a 41% return rate). This provided a sample group of eight Board of Trustee members, 15 senior leaders and 37 middle-level leaders.

As well as the difficulty of recruiting schools who would be prepared to participate in this study, there was also difficulty associated with using an electronic questionnaire. The researcher was challenged with the need to make the survey interesting, easy and short to get a good response. Yet there was also a need to probe deeper and capture participants' understandings of concepts and accounts of experience which required some open-ended questions as well as the more structured ones. Consequently, the questionnaire contains a range of ways in which the researcher has posed the questions in both structured and open forms. Data were collated by Google Forms and were analysed using Google Sheets. In this paper, the findings are reported from two (rather than three) perspectives because the views of the participants at the governance and senior leadership level have been combined to provide a joint senior/executive leader perspective that is confirmed as appropriate because of the strong similarities in the responses of the Board of Trustee members and the principals and deputy principals.

Findings

Broad and narrow understandings of leadership development

It was important to know how the participants in this study understood the concept of 'Leadership Development' in order to interpret related findings accurately, hence each group was asked in an open-ended question to describe their understanding of leadership development.

A senior leader perspective on how leadership development is understood can be captured by the statement that "leadership development is about acquiring skills to improve leadership capabilities". Another respondent states that, "leadership development is about providing opportunities for people in leadership roles to develop and improve their practice". Yet another commented that leadership development was about "giving leaders the skills to ensure that they are successful in their roles". There were also several comments about the purpose of leadership development being about middle-level leaders learning how to lead, support, grow and

develop others. How leadership development occurred was also mentioned by several respondents exemplified by comments such as:

Leaders are developed through a blend of mentoring and formal professional learning.

Leadership development can take place both within and beyond the school.

Leadership is the process of growing other leaders around you.

Supporting leaders to develop a toolbox of skills to successfully develop and build themselves and their teams.

Overwhelmingly, senior leaders in this study had a broad view of leadership development being necessary to build capacity, develop skills and improve practice and considered it to be a process supported by a senior leader.

Middle-level leaders described leadership development more narrowly with an emphasis on support rather than skills. It was described by 22 out of the 30 respondents to this question as an on-going process with support by senior leaders in order to develop leadership capabilities. They made suggestions about how this would happen:

Recognising leadership potential and developing and nurturing these strengths.

Distributing leadership to others so that individuals are allowed to develop their leadership ability while at the same time ensuring that individuals are adequately supported throughout the process.

Leadership development involves providing guidance and support on how to do this effectively.

Overall, there was a strong overlap of thinking demonstrated in these findings around the features of leadership development that were highlighted: namely its ongoing nature and the need for support to be provided to middle-level leaders by those who were responsible for their performance, that is the senior-level leaders. The emphasis on support indicates that these participants may not be aware of a wider connotation of leadership development that embraced management training and management education to build the skills and knowledge in a new specialist area of practice.

The importance of leadership development

In order to gain an understanding of the priority accorded to middle-level leadership development, a question was asked about how important it was considered to be by the senior leadership in the school. From the perspective of senior leaders, those in a position to assess the capability of and provide development for middle-level leaders, their development was viewed as a high priority. Senior leaders strongly indicated it as being important and strongly agreed that it was well catered for. However, nearly half of the middle-level leaders did not have a similar perspective. They believe that their managers (senior leaders) and the policy-makers (the Board of Trustees) do not accord sufficient importance to the need for their support and development as leaders.

Adequate development for middle-level pedagogical leaders

To find out whether there were views about training adequacy to do the job of middle-level pedagogical leaders a question was asked about this. There was a high level of disagreement between senior and middle leaders about middle-level leaders being adequately trained: middle-level leaders did not perceive themselves to be adequately trained to do the job whilst the senior leaders felt strongly that they were. Nearly half of the middle-level leaders did not agree with a view that they were adequately trained to carry out their leadership tasks. In contrast three quarters of the senior leaders felt that they were adequately trained.

This is a somewhat surprising finding because middle-level leaders were also asked to identify recent experiences of leadership development and training at their current school using a list which could be added to. Overall, 30 out of 37 respondents claimed to have had some leadership development yet many middle-level leaders claimed that they did not feel adequately trained for their role. The three most frequently identified forms

of leadership development focused on leading the improvement of teaching and learning; monitoring and evaluating staff performance, and developing staff.

Role expectations and concerns

There was broad agreement across both the executive and middle leaders about the expectations held of middle-level leaders being related to leading learning (curriculum), developing staff, administration and implementing school-wide goals; however, the priority accorded to tasks was seen differently by each group. All participants acknowledged the importance of middle-level leaders being focused on student achievement and a connected notable expectation voiced by half of the senior leaders was that middle-level leaders should be engaged closely in the development of staff in their teaching teams. Some of their comments were:

To lead their department and thus ensure that effective teaching and learning is happening.

All faculty are focused on raising student achievement.

Create a supportive environment where young, less experienced teachers can grow and develop in a healthy work environment and to continue to improve results in student achievement.

Middle-level leaders' views meshed well with senior leaders regarding the core focus on student achievement and the emphasis on developing their staff. From the senior leadership perspective, a key expectation was that middle-level leaders make a connection between school aspirations and the work of their departments. Almost all the senior leaders identified the implementation of school-wide goals into departments or learning areas as an expectation. These senior leaders stated the expectation was that middle-level leaders:

Lead their team to achieve the vision of the school.

Work within their area of responsibility on achieving the overall vision and goals of the school.

Translate collective vision into their area.

Less than a quarter of the middle-level leaders surveyed identified the management interface role expectation of aligning school and department goals. One participant mentioned the need to implement annual or strategic plans into their department and another commented on the need for the middle-level manager to act as a liaison between their department and the wider school.

Discussion and conclusion

As the role of the school principal has expanded (and continues to do so as a result of enhanced accountability requirements) so also has the role of leaders of learning in the middle of school organisations. These middle-level leaders who directly manage teaching and learning in their subject departments in secondary schools are not adequately recognised as pivotal to the practice of pedagogic leadership and their development as leaders is accorded insufficient attention. This study has isolated some key issues that contribute to concerns about the quality and quantity of leadership development available to middle-level leaders in New Zealand secondary schools.

One issue is the variety of understandings that exist about the nature and purpose of leadership development as a concept. This study highlights how senior/executive leaders perceive leadership development as a necessary aspect of enhancing performance and building management skills through offering a variety of experiences. They also emphasise that the management tasks require support from senior leaders. So, at the senior level of the organisation the provision of leadership development is viewed broadly to encompass many forms. This holistic understanding is reflected in the literature that shows leadership development taking many forms from training, to education to support (Bush, 2010; Cardno, 2005). This broader view also assumes that senior leaders will know enough about the performance of middle-

level leaders to plan appropriate leadership development within systems such as performance appraisal (Cardno, 2012). The middle-level leaders in the study perceived leadership development as predominantly comprising support and guidance from senior leaders. Paradoxically, when asked to identify recent experiences that could be related to leadership development they indicated that they had engaged in learning about several management practices such as instructional leadership tasks associated with monitoring and evaluating staff performance. Yet – they did not equate these with the overall notion of leadership development. This leads us to conclude that there is a contradiction of perceptions regarding what middle leaders perceive to be leadership development and how this is perceived by those to whom middle leaders report. It may be that “the development received by middle leaders in this study does not fit their definition of leadership development and as a result they feel that they are not developed” (Bassett, 2012, p. 69).

A second issue relates to the substance of leadership development. Programmes and activities related to leadership development need to focus both on the needs of the organisation and the needs of the individual (Bush, 2010). On the one hand, the organisation holds expectations of middle-level leaders and then there are the views of middle leaders themselves that need to be taken into account. Where these views are disparate the situation is compounded when there are also very different understandings of the concept of leadership development. In the case of this study, there was some agreement across both the executive and middle leaders about the expectations held of middle-level managers being related to leading curriculum, developing staff, administration and implementing school-wide goals; however, the priority accorded to tasks was seen differently by each group. There was, however considerable disparity in the understandings of what comprised leadership development from senior and middle leadership perspectives. In the absence of any national intervention to define middle-leader roles in terms of pedagogical or instructional leadership, a key implication of this finding is the need for absolute clarity about the scope, functions and expectations of middle leadership within each institutional context. Senior leadership needs to communicate clearly what it expects and then confirm leadership development needs in consultation with the middle-leaders themselves. On the other hand, leadership development involves a considerable focus on the individual: on the personal aspects of development and in particular the development of interpersonal skills (Cardno, 2012, Bush, 2010). Leadership development for middle-level leaders thus needs to achieve a balance between building knowledge, skills and dispositions that serve both the organisation and the individual (Robinson, et al., 2009) and it needs to be arranged so that it meets relevant and useful purposes. If the focus of leadership development is not negotiated it may fall on barren ground. Franken, Penney and Branson (2015) writing about a higher education study provide guidance that is transferable to a secondary school setting. These authors say:

If knowledge is transmitted to middle leaders when others deem it to be needed, and in a form determined by others, it risks the possibility of being rejected, regarded as nonimportant, as it is not contextualised or tuned to personal need. (p.196)

A third issue is related to a high level of disagreement between senior and middle leaders about middle-level leaders being adequately trained: middle-level leaders did not perceive themselves to be adequately trained to do the job whilst the senior leaders felt strongly that they were. This resonates with findings from research undertaken in English schools by Adey (2000) where middle managers perceived that they were ill-equipped for tasks they had to carry out and that their managers had different perceptions. These perceptions may also link to disparate views about the priority and importance accorded to leadership development. Whilst the senior level leaders and trustees in this study espoused a need for and affirmed the importance of leadership development, the middle leaders who participated in the study felt that such espousals were not enacted. Consequently they believed that their leadership development was not viewed as a priority. The literature consistently refers to the importance of senior leaders driving development programmes for middle leaders (Brown, Boyle and Boyle,

2002; Bush, 2010). Making leadership development a priority is essential in providing a holistic approach to professional development at both a national and an institutional level (Cardno, 1995, 2012) and recognition of the particular needs of middle-level managers in the system is critical to achieving effective instructional leadership, which in turn impacts student learning outcomes (Seashore Louis et al, 2010). There was evidence that trustees felt confident that adequate development was being provided, and senior leaders felt the same, leading us to conclude that there was a general attitude of complaisance based on the belief that all was well catered for in this area. In view of the leverage that leadership development can provide by motivating and enhancing the commitment and performance of middle-level leaders (Van Velsor & McCauley, 2004), schools may be missing a great opportunity to capitalise on improving the instructional leadership of middle leaders and the positive impact that this level of leadership can have on student learning outcomes.

The Government's investment in Professional Learning and Development (PLD) for schools was 70 million dollars in 2013 (Parata, 2013). Some of this funding is clearly directed to leadership development for principals but specific initiatives are not yet evident in relation to the leadership development of middle-level leaders in secondary schools (Wylie, 2011). A way needs to be found to raise concerns and make middle-level leadership development a priority and a policy issue in the near future because of the recognition that these leaders in the middle of secondary school structures are carrying out the core work of educational leadership: the improvement of teaching and learning.

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