Supporting First-Time Middle Leaders in New Zealand Primary Schools

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Educational Leadership and Management

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DECLARATION

Name of candidate: Nicholas Shaw

This Thesis entitled: **Supporting First-Time Middle Leaders in New Zealand Primary Schools,** is submitted in partial fulfilment for the requirements for the Unitec degree of Master of Educational Leadership and Management.

Candidate's Declaration

I confirm that:

- This Thesis represents my own work;
- The contribution of supervisors and others to this work was consistent with the Unitec Regulations and Policies.
- Research for this work has been conducted in accordance with the Unitec Research Ethics Committee Policy and Procedures, and has fulfilled any requirements set for this project by the Unitec Research Ethics Committee.

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ABSTRACT

Middle leaders in New Zealand primary schools play a substantial part in the teaching of students and leadership of staff yet there is little understanding of how they are developed and supported when first taking on such a role. My research sought to identify the expectations of first-time middle leaders, the challenges they face, and the support and leadership development they received.

As the information I was seeking existed in the minds and experiences of primary school middle leaders I adopted an interpretive approach as my epistemology. This approach provided substantial descriptive and subjective data, analysed using a qualitative methodology. A focus group of four primary school principals was employed to gather their expectations of first-time middle leaders as well as the challenges and development middle leaders have from a senior leadership perspective. I conducted semi-structured interviews with six first-time middle leaders to gather their experiences. A documentary analysis was also used to help confirm the data from the interviews and focus group.

My research found that first-time middle leaders were expected to carry out a wide range of responsibilities and they were not always best prepared to carry out their often ambiguous roles. Several first-time middle leaders were also found to have self-doubt regarding their leadership performance and felt the need to prove themselves. This was apparent even though the support the first-time middle leaders received from their principals and deputy principals was sizeable and appreciated. The limited understanding of leadership development by both organisations and individuals was also evident and this was reflected in the leadership development practices.

Middle leaders play an important role in the operations of a school and the learning of students. It is essential then that they are prepared, supported and developed for the role both prior to taking it on and ongoing throughout their practice. A mentoring programme similar to that of a Beginning Teacher or the First-time Principals Programme would go a long way towards providing first-time middle leaders with the preparation, skills and understanding of leadership required for such a role.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

DP	Deputy Principal
AP	Associate / Assistant Principal
STJC	Senior Teacher of the Junior Classes
SMT	Senior Management Team
SLT	Senior Leadership Team
PD	Professional Development
PLG	Professional Learning Group
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Introduction

The notion of middle leadership within New Zealand primary schools is relatively new. It was not until the mid 1990s that financial recognition was given to primary school middle leaders to reward the additional work that they do (Cardno, 2006). As middle leadership roles are developed in response to the needs of the different schools, they are often unique from school to school (Ministry of Education, 2012). This requires middle leaders to undertake a variety of different leadership responsibilities, including leading pedagogy and curriculum, leading staff and students, and carrying out a number of administrative tasks. The leadership role, however, is secondary to their substantial classroom teaching responsibilities (Grootenboer, Edwards-Groves & Rönnerman, 2015).

As school accountability has increased, so has the complexity of the role of middle leaders, with many of them feeling that they lack the required leadership skills to adequately do the job (Dinham, 2007; Fitzgerald, 2009). The successful development of leadership is essential for school development (Bush, 2009; Cardno, 2012); therefore, as middle leaders play an increasing role in the leadership of schools, it is important that they are developed accordingly.

The lack of support and development that I personally received as a first-time middle leader helped identify this to me as a problem worthy of greater study. Three years after I began teaching, I was asked to become the syndicate leader of seven classrooms and nine teachers. Being an aspiring leader, I keenly accepted without consideration of the skills required, work involved or the challenges that I would face. I received no job description and was merely following the pattern of leadership from my predecessor. I had one appraisal meeting with my direct senior leader at the end of the year to discuss the teaching component of my role and two discussions with my principal regarding my leadership. The first time was to decide on a survey to go out to the team to gain feedback, and the second meeting was to look at the

feedback together. The feedback was positive, yet there were no goals nor critical feedback given, and I was unsure about how I was progressing. This led me to query the situation of others in my school and of professional colleagues who were also middle leaders, and it became apparent that the vast majority were in a similar position to me. There appeared to be a lack of professional leadership support and development being given to middle leaders.

The New Zealand Context

From 1877 until 1989 New Zealand ran a centralised education system which was run by the Department of Education (Openshaw, 2009). In the 1980s the fourth Labour government's early neoliberal reforms had focussed primarily on financial reform. Later in the decade they began following similar worldwide trends and started to look at reforming the education system (Court & O'Neill, 2011). A report led by businessman Brian Picot was commissioned and focussed mainly on administrative issues (Codd, 2005; Court & O'Neill, 2011; Openshaw, 2009). The resulting follow-up report, *Tomorrow's Schools* (Lange, 1988), led to the introduction of self-managed, decentralised schools. The system was designed to improve efficiency, provide effective governance, and meet economic challenges. Decentralisation also served to encourage school or community-based development and innovation (Fitzgerald & Gunter, 2008; Heng & Marsh, 2009). This was seen as delegating responsibilities and increasing community control (Court & O'Neill, 2011; Openshaw, 2009). Ultimately this led to a more accountable education system (Codd 2005; Fitzgerald & Gunter, 2008; Openshaw, 2009).

Despite the view that schools were decentralised, they were still accountable for national policy implementation (Codd 2005; Court & O'Neill, 2011; Openshaw, 2009). The Ministry of Education maintained strong political control over things such as the curriculum, assessment and the teaching profession. New reporting systems were put in place, as schools now needed to produce strategic plans and charters (Cardno, 2012; Fitzgerald, 2009). Principals also became accountable for the performance of the teachers (Codd, 2005; Court & O'Neill, 2011; Fitzgerald & Gunter, 2008; Fitzgerald, Youngs & Grootenboer, 2003). Other complex new tasks

were also created, such as marketing and financial management (Fitzgerald, 2009). All these new responsibilities meant that the role of the principal became far more complex and demanding of their time. Ultimately the reforms made it difficult for principals to take sole responsibility for the successful management of all aspects of the school (Heng & Marsh, 2009). This led to the development of a hierarchy in schools, which generally has deputy and assistant principals and a tier of middle leaders (Cardno, 2006). School hierarchies are viewed as rational ways of organising teachers and can differ from school to school (Fitzgerald & Gunter, 2008). What eventuated was devolved responsibility from the Ministry of Education to the schools and then down the management hierarchy (Fitzgerald et al., 2003).

Cardno (2006) and Turner (2007) both suggest that middle management positions in primary schools are often not clearly defined or recognised. The term 'middle leader' appeared much later in primary schools (Fleming & Amesbury, 2001). Burton and Brundrett (2005) and Hammersley-Fletcher and Kirkham (2007) argue that this is because, for over a century, teachers in primary schools have always taken on additional curriculum responsibilities without financial remuneration or recognition. It has only been since the mid-1990s that primary schools have been able to offer management units to financially reward those teachers who take on additional responsibilities (Cardno, 2006). A management unit is valued at $4000, and the school is issued a number of them based on the size of the school roll. These units are used to provide the additional pay of all leaders except for the principal (Ministry of Education, 2015).

Middle leaders are often teachers leading syndicates or managing a specific curriculum area across the school (Cardno, 2006, Hammersley-Fletcher & Kirkham, 2007; OECD, 2008). New Zealand primary schools have traditionally been structured by student year levels. Depending on the size of the school, the leadership of these year-level syndicates are led by middle level leaders (Busher, Hammersley-Fletcher & Turner, 2007; Cardno, 2006; Hammersley-Fletcher & Kirkham, 2007). The year-level syndicates are quite different to how secondary schools are structured, which are usually organised by curriculum departments. Middle leadership also differs across schools, because they are created and defined in response to each school's unique context and needs (Ministry of Education, 2012).

Setting for this Research

The setting for the research was in middle-sized to large primary schools. The decision to conduct the research in middle-sized to large primary schools is based on the roles that middle leaders have in these schools. Southworth's (2004) research demonstrated that leadership is different between larger and smaller schools, as there is greater distribution and delegation of responsibility by the principal. In middle-sized to large primary schools (300 to 800 students, and 10 to 30 teachers) the sharing of leadership with others is a mode of structuring that is generally prevalent in New Zealand (Cardno, 2006). Cardno (2012) also adds that in larger primary schools the interactions of middle leaders are key. The decision to conduct my research in middle-sized to large primary schools was also influenced by Southworth's (2004) finding that larger primary schools tended to have more middle leaders involved in leadership development. This was an important consideration when taking into account my rationale and research questions. Southworth's (2004) research also showed that in some cases all teaching staff in a school could be allocated a middle leadership role. My research did not look at these leaders but those middle leaders in formal, appointed positions.

Rationale

Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris and Hopkins (2006) make the bold statement that school leadership is second only to classroom teaching as an influence on student learning. Middle level leaders are key players in leading teaching and learning in ways that positively impact student learning (Cardno, 2012; Fleming & Amesbury, 2001; Ministry of Education, 2012; Robinson, Hohepa & Lloyd, 2009). It is therefore essential that leadership is researched appropriately to ensure greater outcomes for students. So if, as it appears, the role of middle leadership is important to the success of students, then my research may contribute to a greater understanding of the connection between middle leadership and student success. Much of the current literature also laments the lack of research regarding middle leadership (Busher et al., 2007; Cardno, 2012; Robinson et al., 2009). Hammersley-Fletcher and Kirkham (2007) add that middle leadership in primary schools is one area that has not been

subject to a great deal of specific research. The issue is perhaps best expressed by Grootenboer et al. (2015), who state:

> If those in education are serious about understanding the practices of leadership in schools, then more research into the work of middle leaders is needed; not simply because it appears to have been somewhat neglected, but because middle leaders play a pivotal role as teachers, curriculum leaders and 'professional developers'. (p. 525)

Turner (2007) and Hammersley-Fletcher and Kirkham (2007) both suggest that middle leaders are not a clearly defined cohort but have increasingly complex and demanding roles, while Grootenboer et al.'s (2015) research found that there appears to be a limited understanding and research that centres on the leading practices of middle leaders. There is also a paucity of literature on the quality of support that middle leaders, first-time or experienced, in New Zealand primary schools receive. This potentially indicates that there is a lack of knowledge regarding the problem. New Zealand has made gains recognising the importance of middle leadership through the development of the '*Leading from the Middle'* (Ministry of Education, 2012) document. This document looks to identify generic expectations and dispositions of middle and senior leaders and is interspersed with case studies from leaders currently working in schools. Interestingly though, those primary school educators who are part of the case studies are all in what would be typically defined as senior leadership positions. There appears to be very little research to indicate what is currently happening in New Zealand primary school middle leadership.

The broader literature indicates that middle leaders are major players in primary schools and that their roles are key to the leadership of staff and the achievement of students; however, it also confirms that these leadership roles have not been carefully examined. The research project presented here has picked up the challenge and asked a series of questions to help improve the understanding of these complex roles.

The first and second research questions sought to develop an understanding of the expectations and challenges that first-time middle leaders have, while the third

research question attempted to identify the nature of the support given to first-time middle leaders with a view on how it could be improved. These research questions were intended to help fill a gap in the literature.

Research Aims

The aims of this research were:

1. To identify the expectations of middle leaders in New Zealand primary schools.
2. To understand the challenges of first-time middle leaders in New Zealand primary schools.
3. To identify leadership development and support provided to first-time middle leaders in New Zealand primary schools.

Research Questions

The research questions were:

1. What are the expectations held of primary school middle leaders in the perceptions of principals and middle leaders themselves?
2. What challenges do first-time middle leaders face?
3. What is the nature of the support given to first-time middle leaders in New Zealand primary schools?

Thesis Organisation

Chapter One

This chapter introduces the research topic of first-time middle leaders in New Zealand primary schools. A rationale for the study, and the historical context and setting, are presented along with the research aims and questions.

Chapter Two

This chapter presents a review of the relevant literature. The expectations of middle leaders, the challenges of first-time middle leaders, and the support and development of middle leaders are examined.

Chapter Three

This chapter provides the outline of the research methodology and the rationale for the adopted interpretive approach. Rationales for the three methods of data collection and participant selection are provided. The process for data analysis and its reliability and validity are discussed. The ethical issues are also considered and discussed.

Chapter Four

This chapter presents the analysed findings of the research. The data are laid out by the research method, with the focus group findings first, followed by the semi-structured interview findings and then the documentary analysis. The findings are presented within the focus group, and interview findings by the key themes of expectations of middle leaders, challenges of first-time middle leaders, and support and development of middle leaders.

Chapter Five

This chapter analyses the findings presented in Chapter Four in relation to the themes from the literature in Chapter Two. The discussions are presented under the headings: the role of the primary school middle leader; and middle leadership support and development. The conclusions of the findings along with some recommendations are also presented in this chapter. The strengths and limitations of this study are discussed, as are potential areas of further research.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

In this chapter the literature focusing on middle leaders in schools is critically examined and discussed. The review of the literature is presented under the following headings: the expectations of middle leaders; the challenges of first-time middle leaders; and middle leadership development and support. Due to the paucity of literature around primary school middle leadership in New Zealand (Cardno, 2012; Smith, 2005), the literature used in this review comes from countries that share similar education settings to New Zealand. Therefore, aside from New Zealand, the literature predominantly originates from Australia, Britain, Western Europe and Singapore. Also, as the vast majority of school middle leadership literature focuses on middle leadership in secondary schools, much of the literature presented here has a secondary school focus. Smith (2005) found that the work of middle leaders in primary schools is much like that of secondary middle leaders, albeit with potentially fewer complexities due to fewer teachers and students in their departments.

The Expectations of Middle Leaders

Teacher Leader

The role of middle leaders in primary schools is difficult to define. This is particularly the case in New Zealand schools, where middle leadership roles can differ across schools because they are created and defined in response to each school's unique context and needs (Ministry of Education, 2012). Middle leaders in primary schools take on various forms, which can include the leadership of teams of people, such as a syndicate or subject team, as well as the leadership of a programme, such as the special needs coordinator (Cardno, 2006; Smith, 2005; Struyve, Meredith & Gielen, 2014). Southworth (2004) and Hammersley-Fletcher and Strain (2011) attest that in small primary schools it is possible that everyone could have additional responsibilities, as there could be more tasks than teachers. This could lead to them

all being classified as middle leaders. Busher et al. (2007) describe middle leaders as those who sit in the middle of the school hierarchy, below the senior leaders, the principal and deputies, and above the teachers and support staff. Middle leaders have also been described as “those who have an acknowledged position of leadership in their educational institution but also have a significant teaching role” (Grootenboer et al., 2015, p. 509) and are there to bridge the educational work of the classrooms with the management practices of the school leaders. Both Busher (2005) and Fletcher-Campbell’s (2003) research showed that middle leaders identify themselves mainly as teachers and not as a part of the management echelon of the school. Teachers also perceived middle leaders as fellow teachers and not part of management hierarchy. This differs from the research of Struvye et al. (2014), who found that although middle leaders saw themselves as teachers first and foremost, their teacher colleagues did not.

It is argued that middle leaders need to be good teachers because they are the drivers of the implementation of good practices within their teams, or school (Blanford, 2006). The research of Fletcher-Campbell (2003) revealed that middle leaders felt they needed to be competent teachers, while the principals held the expectation that anyone in middle leadership would be an excellent teacher. Busher (2005) stated “central to middle leaders’ professional identities was continuing to be experienced and effective classroom practitioners who could give advice and guidance to their colleagues” (p. 148). This is somewhat supported by Bennett, Woods, Wise and Newton (2007), who suggest that although middle leaders did not necessarily have to be the best teachers, they did need to be able to model good practice. They further add that teaching expertise in itself is not sufficient in establishing authority over a department. Busher (2005), however, would argue that being considered a good teacher was essential to being respected and regarded as effective by their colleagues. Essentially, the role as teacher is significant to the identity of a middle leader, and their ability to model best practice is an important part of their role to both improve teacher practice and earn the respect of their colleagues.

The literature does provide some consensus, however, on the main purpose of middle leaders, which is to improve outcomes for students (Fitzgerald & Gunter,

2006; Ministry of Education, 2012; OECD, 2008; Robinson et al., 2009). Middle leaders also have the responsibility to bring about change in their schools yet maintain close connections to the classroom as sites where student learning occurs (Burton & Brundrett, 2005; Grootenboer et al., 2015).

Developing Teams

Middle leaders in primary schools usually lead year-level syndicate teams (Burton & Brundrett, 2005; Busher et al., 2007; Cardno, 2006; Fitzgerald & Gunter, 2008; Hammersley-Fletcher & Kirkham, 2007). Middle leaders are often positioned within multiple teams (Cardno, 2012); these include the teams they lead, and those such as the Senior Management Team, that they are members of. They are not 'between' the senior management and teaching, sitting in their own group, but rather they are practising members of both (Busher et al., 2007; Cardno, 2012; Grootenboer et al., 2015). Heng and Marsh (2009) contend that because they sit in multiple teams, they are ideally situated to play a role in cross-team development. They see teams as powerful subcultures that play a pivotal role in the implementation of school goals. Middle leaders are often responsible for the teaching and learning of the teachers in their teams (Bennett et al, 2007; Grootenboer et al., 2015; Gurr & Drysdale, 2012; Robinson et al. 2009). The research of Bennett et al. (2007) found that middle leaders saw themselves as not the leaders of their colleagues but leaders of the curriculum. The middle leaders worked with their colleagues as a team to improve practice.

The culture of the teams, just as the culture of the school, is important (Busher et al., 2007). If the culture of the school is not one of collaboration and openness, then the effectiveness of teams is likely to be limited (Cardno, 2012; Fleming & Amesbury, 2001; Southworth, 2002). Hammersley-Fletcher and Kirkham (2007) further suggest that a collaborative school culture is necessary for the leader to feel supported and valued by colleagues and is important to whether the leader 'fits in'. Middle leaders play a key role in helping to develop teams and build collaborative culture (Burton & Brundrett, 2005; Cardno, 2012; Heng & Marsh, 2009). Bush and Middlewood (2005) add that successful teamwork depends on the skills and attitudes of individual

leaders. Busher's (2005) research revealed that the culture of shared norms and values of the team were important to successful leaders.

Maintaining Relationships

Developing effective relationships is essential in the work of any educational leader, and middle leaders are no exception (Bennett et al., 2007; Busher, 2005; Cardno, 2012; Grootenboer et al., 2015; Ministry of Education, 2012; Poultney, 2007). Busher (2005) states that "negotiating and interacting with colleagues lay at the core of middle leaders' work with staff" (p. 144). Middle leaders play a substantial role in helping their colleagues resolve problems (Busher, 2005), working with teachers who are resistant to change (Heng & Marsh, 2009), and protecting and advocating for their teams (Bennett et al., 2007). Due to their position in the 'middle', the nature of middle leadership relationships is important, as middle leaders have complex relationships with both their staff and the senior leaders (Struyve et al., 2014).

Poultney's (2007) research found that interpersonal relationships are vital to sustain collaborative teams, and although middle leaders do not have to be popular or charismatic, they do need to understand what values their team consider important when working through issues such as delegation, consultation and accountability. It is suggested by Fitzgerald and Gunter (2006) that leading learning at any level in a school involves influencing and working with others in a highly collaborative, collegial and supportive environment that encourages risk and innovation; and that building staff expertise and encouraging collaboration strengthened the work of middle leaders. Grootenboer et al. (2015) assert that middle leaders practise their leading from alongside their peers in a very collaborative way. Building relationships and professional learning communities of course requires time, resources, trust and support from senior management (Fitzgerald & Gunter, 2006; Grootenboer et al., 2015; Robinson et al., 2009; Struyve et al., 2014).

Pedagogical Leadership

A key role of the middle leader identified in the literature is that of pedagogical leadership. This is leading the improvement of teaching practices, which ultimately

influences student outcomes. This leadership, which focuses on the school's core purpose of teaching and learning, is referred to by a number of different terms in the literature, such as instructional leadership, academic leadership, curriculum leadership, learning-centred leadership and pedagogical leadership (Adey, 2000, Bassett, 2016, Bush, 2008; Grootenboer et al., 2015; Hallinger, 2003; Poultney, 2007; Robinson et al., 2009). The Ministry of Education (2012) suggests the role of middle leadership is to focus on pedagogy and on the systems needed to support teachers and students. Grootenboer et al. (2015) state "middle leaders have a major impact on teacher learning through ongoing responsibilities for the practice development of colleagues". (p. 509). The view that middle leaders are there to help teachers to develop their practice is widely supported as a core role (Bassett, 2016; Blanford, 2006; Cardno, 2012; Heng & Marsh, 2009; Ministry of Education, 2012; Robinson et al., 2009). It has also been raised that an important task for student learning is to ensure that the quality of teaching and learning is constantly monitored (Adey, 2000; Bennett et al., 2007; Blanford, 2006; Burton & Brundrett, 2005; Gurr & Drysdale, 2012). The research of Gurr and Drysdale (2012) found that the most effective middle leaders were the ones who were expected to influence teaching and learning. However, the research of Bennett et al. (2007) and Glover, Gleeson, Gough and Johnson (1998) revealed that middle leaders were prone to avoiding this work and focusing more on their administrative tasks, as they were less challenging. In Adey's research (2000), middle leaders saw themselves as leaders of the curriculum and not of teaching and learning; however, he did find an increasing acceptance from middle leaders that they had responsibility and accountability for the quality of teaching and learning within their teams, although it is was a responsibility that they felt ill-equipped to handle effectively.

Middle leaders are the key players in leading teaching and learning due to their close proximity to the teaching role and their own pedagogical practice (Blanford, 2006; Busher et al., 2007; Fleming & Amesbury, 2001; Grootenboer et al., 2015). As middle leaders are teachers as well, they tend to lead alongside their peers (Grootenboer et al., 2015). Robinson et al. (2009) found that the closer the leaders are to teaching and learning, the more impact they had on students. Due to the role the middle leaders play as teachers as well as leaders, they are ideally placed to work alongside colleagues and help improve teaching practice. However, much of

this pedagogical leadership literature is prescriptive and does not describe how pedagogical leadership is actually performed by middle leaders.

Administration Tasks

Much of the initial need for middle leaders came from the increasing workloads regarding school accountability (Cardno, 2006; Fitzgerald et al., 2003). Along with running teams, subject leadership and pedagogical leadership, the literature also identifies the large administrative role that middle leaders play (Bennett et al., 2007; Busher, 2005; Fitzgerald & Gunter, 2008; Gurr & Drysdale, 2012; Heng & Marsh, 2009; Ministry of Education, 2012; Robinson et al., 2009; Struyve et al., 2014). These administrative tasks range from the complexities of managing budgets, assessments, reporting and appraisal (Bennett et al., 2007; Fitzgerald & Gunter, 2008; Heng & Marsh, 2009), to the relatively low level task of buying books and filing (Busher, 2005). Busher (2005) found that much of a middle leader's classroom release time was used to support their colleagues by undertaking a variety of administrative tasks, such as disciplining students, contacting parents and setting work for relief teachers. These administrative tasks tend to support teaching and learning either directly or indirectly; however, there is consensus in the literature that these tasks are not the core work of a middle leader, yet they are still important and need to be done.

Middle leadership is a relatively broad term in that there are many roles that could be determined as 'middle leadership'. The research of Struyve et al. (2014) revealed that the administrative tasks were more prevalent based on the specific middle leadership role. Effectively there are some middle leadership roles which require more administrative work than others. For example, a Special Needs Coordinator may have to make a number of funding applications, while the leader of a syndicate team does not.

The literature clearly articulates the idea of pedagogical leadership and improving student outcomes as being the core role of middle leadership, with the idea of management and administration fitting in alongside this. While Gurr and Drysdale

(2012) suggest less effective middle leaders focus almost exclusively on administrative tasks, Bassett (2016) found that it was the demands of the administrative tasks that encroached on the middle leader's teaching role. Robinson et al. (2009) contend that there is a real tension between the leadership and management aspects of middle leaders.

Skills, Experience, and Dispositions

Much of the literature discusses a range of skills, experiences and dispositions that middle leaders require in order to be effective leaders. These range from good communication skills to high levels of professionalism (Burton & Brundrett, 2005; Busher, 2005; Fitzgerald & Gunter, 2006; Heng & Marsh, 2009; Southworth, 2002). Heng and Marsh (2009) and Poultney (2007) suggest that it is important for middle leaders to have good interpersonal skills, as quality relationships are essential for the role. Bennett et al.'s (2007) research supports this notion, although they suggest that good interpersonal skills are not enough for middle leaders to enact their authority and that they need to be a quality teacher too. Being knowledgeable of the curriculum and subject development, as well as 'staying ahead of the game' was identified as being important for the middle leader's role, particularly as leaders of learning, as they need to be viewed as credible by their colleagues (Adey, 2000; Bennett et al., 2007; Burton & Brundrett, 2005; Gurr & Drysdale, 2012; Heng & Marsh, 2009). Busher's (2005) research found that it was important for middle leaders to be seen as experienced and effective classroom teachers, as some younger middle leaders were criticized by their older colleagues for lacking experience, even though the older colleagues acknowledged that they were successful teachers.

It is advocated that middle leaders need a range of other skills, such as coaching, active listening, providing feedback, and developing a trusting culture (Burton & Brundrett, 2005; Gurr & Drysdale, 2012). Middle leaders also need a range of expertise, from classroom observation and data gathering, to awareness of a teacher's developmental needs (Adey, 2000; Southworth, 2002). It is also important

that middle leaders learn how to address any potential conflict, as conflict can provide substantial challenges (Adey, 2000, Cardno, 2012).

The plethora of skills and attributes that are recommended in the literature highlight the complexity of middle leadership, especially for those starting out in the role. These skills were not discussed as being important necessarily when entering the role but were espoused as important to be effective in the role. Due to the complexity of middle leadership, Heng and Marsh (2009) claim that it is impossible to reduce middle leadership and learning to a required set of skills or competencies.

The Challenges of First-Time Middle Leadership

Positional Tension

The literature identifies several major challenges that middle leaders face. The first of these challenges is the positional tension they have while sitting in the 'middle' between the senior management and their teams or departments (Busher, 2005; Fleming & Amesbury, 2001; Fitzgerald, 2009; Heng & Marsh, 2009; Struyve et al., 2014). Fitzgerald (2009) sees middle leaders as the conduit between teachers and senior management, while Heng and Marsh (2009) suggest that middle leaders play an important role in bonding and communicating with staff across the school due to their unique position in the school hierarchy. It has been put forward by Struyve et al. (2014) that the challenge exists because the middle leaders are often responsible for introducing the mandated work from the senior leaders. This is conflicted by the research of Bennett et al. (2007), which found that middle leaders played a key role in protecting their colleagues from potential initiatives. Busher's (2005) research of middle leaders in English schools uncovered that "all the middle leaders felt obligated to act as advocates for their departmental colleagues and policies to the senior management team in their schools while also acting as agents for senior management in representing school policies in their departmental colleagues" (p. 13). This puts middle leaders in a very difficult position where they have divided responsibilities and loyalties, as they are in a position of being advocates and members of both their team and the senior management team (Grootenboer et al., 2015). Struyve et al. (2014) argue that middle leaders acquire an affinity to both the senior leadership team and their own team yet at the same time develop a sense of

not belonging anywhere in particular and that this can cause a sense of loneliness for the middle leader. Heng and Marsh (2009) found that middle leaders were in a 'vulnerable' position, as their team members questioned where their true interests lay — with the team, or were they agents for the senior leaders? This follows similar research of Bennett et al. (2007), which revealed that middle leaders felt they had divided loyalties between their own teams and that of senior leadership. This contributed additional challenges as their role of building collegiality within their teams was challenged by their responsibility to monitor performance. This monitoring was seen as a breach of trust from their teams, as their colleagues saw the middle leaders as providing 'surveillance' to the senior leaders (Bennett et al., 2007). It is clear from the literature that middle leaders find their unique position in the school hierarchy challenging. Their role as members of two often conflicting teams is also challenged by the fact that in their own team they have some authority, while in the senior leadership team they do not (Fitzgerald, 2009; Glover et al., 1998; Marshall, 2012).

Power and Autonomy

The power and autonomy with which middle leaders are able to lead and operate is another challenge. Busher et al. (2007) proposes that middle leaders are less influential than other leaders due to power imbalances. Essentially, although they are leaders, the real power is in the hands of the senior leaders, who can direct and overrule middle leadership direction. Fitzgerald and Gunter (2008) say that being a middle leader often means being 'on message'. This is supported by Hammersley-Fletcher and Kirkham (2007), who say that middle leaders are often seen as only existing to impose external initiatives and they question how much scope exists for middle leaders to develop their own agenda for change and development. Poultney's (2007) work supports this notion by suggesting that middle leaders lack any real transformational role and are mainly part of the senior management team only as a way of effectively communicating down the hierarchy. This could be viewed as acceptable, though, because of where the final accountability sits. As the principal is ultimately responsible and accountable for the school's performance, they are well within their rights to limit the authority given to middle leaders (Burton & Brundrett, 2005; Bush & Middlewood, 2005; Hammersley-Fletcher & Kirkham, 2007; Heng &

Marsh, 2009). This limitation of power could be because, as Cardno (2006) attests, there is a lack of status attached to middle leaders.

Grootenboer et al. (2015) observed that the practices and outcomes of middle leaders were more successful when they were given autonomy; however, in their research, Gurr and Drysdale (2012) found that middle leaders actually had few expectations and opportunities to exercise their leadership. Possibly due to the lack of training, autonomy or opportunity, the middle leaders in Heng and Marsh's (2009) research were not confident decision makers, and herein lies the challenge for middle leaders. They need opportunities to lead and make decisions; however, those who hold the power in the schools appear reluctant to provide them.

Time

The issue of time appears often in the literature as a major challenge for middle leaders (Bassett, 2016; Busher, 2005; Fletcher-Campbell, 2003; Grootenboer et al., 2015; Struyve et al., 2014). Middle leaders are leaders with large teaching roles. The middle leaders in Busher's (2005) research spent at least two-thirds of their time teaching, and the leaders complained that they did not have sufficient time to carry out the required supervisory work with colleagues. Teaching in itself is a large full-time role, and with additional leadership responsibilities it is difficult to find the time to do both effectively (Burton & Brundrett, 2005; Cardno, 2012; Fitzgerald, 2009; Robinson et al., 2009; Struyve et al., 2014). Grootenboer et al. (2015) found that time either enabled or constrained what was possible in middle leaders' own leadership practices. Essentially, the more time they had, the better they were able to lead. This is a struggle for primary school middle leaders, as Fletcher-Campbell (2003) observed that they disliked being called away from their class. This is a key difference in the middle leadership of primary and secondary schools. Where the secondary school middle leader is simply not allocated a class to teach for a certain time of the day, a primary school middle leader has the same students all day, every day. So when they are given classroom release time, they need to have someone else come in and teach their students. The research of Busher (2005) revealed that the classroom release time that was provided to middle leaders was predominantly spent dealing with misbehaving students and contacting parents.

Fleming and Amesbury (2001) attest that “middle managers need time to do their job and it is not reasonable to assume that this can be done after a busy day in the classroom” (p. 8), while the research of Fletcher-Campbell (2003) found that in primary schools there was very much the expectation that middle leaders had to do much of the leadership work in their own time. Busher (2005) identified that the time spent leading gave middle leaders less time to prepare detailed work for their students. Struyve et al. (2014) arrived at similar results showing the increased workloads of middle leaders interfered with their teaching. It is clear then that the lack of time has an effect on both the leadership and teaching dimensions of the middle leader. When more time might be required, the additional challenge for the primary school middle leader is that it means more time away from their students.

Challenging Relationships

There is an expectation that middle leaders are key players in establishing effective relationships. However, relationships offer a range of challenges for middle leaders (Busher, 2005). Blanford (2006) suggests that it could be in part due to the conflict between leading learning and leading people. The core purpose of a school is teaching and learning, and, as a leader, to achieve this you need to lead people. Cardno (2012) claims that in primary schools this is particularly important, as leaders have many more interactions with teachers. It is proposed by Heng and Marsh (2009) that middle leaders need to understand people, as they play a substantial role in working with teachers who are resistant to change. Busher’s (2005) research uncovered that middle leaders found persuading colleagues to follow policy and practice, especially with diverse people, was very difficult. However, a middle leader with responsibility for leading people will always have problems and dilemmas and how middle leaders approach difficult people often reflects their own personal integrity (Blanford, 2006). Cardno (2012) suggests that although such issues are challenging, it is the role of a leader to engage in conversations which are difficult, because if they are left unresolved, there are potential impacts on student learning. Cardno (2012) also suggests that leaders who have built trusting relationships with colleagues are more likely to be productive in working through these situations. This,

therefore, provides a challenge for first-time middle leaders who may not have developed those relationships.

Ambiguity of Role

Middle leadership roles in New Zealand are unique because they are developed in response to the needs and context of the students and school community (Ministry of Education, 2012). This can lead to role ambiguity, as there is not necessarily a blueprint to follow and there may be only one person in the school who does that particular role (Fleming & Amesbury, 2001; Struyve et al., 2014). Turner (2007) suggests that middle leaders are not a clearly defined cohort; they are a diverse group who have been given some form of delegated responsibility for which they are directly accountable. This is made worse by what Hammersley-Fletcher and Kirkham (2007) say is a lack of understanding on the part of some schools regarding what middle leadership involves and the scope of activities that could be undertaken as a result.

What potentially makes middle leadership even more confusing is that the role is often made up of "divergent tasks that have nothing to do with each other" (Struyve et al., 2014, p. 217). Essentially, middle leadership tasks can be as contrasting as monitoring classroom teaching and organising a trip to the zoo. Fleming and Amesbury (2001) attest that it is important for middle leaders to have identified roles in terms of tasks, responsibilities and relationships. However, in his research of first-time subject leaders, Bennet (2008) found that many middle leaders did not have clarity of the role they were expected to do and that the "generic nature of the job descriptions suggests that the schools in this research have not thought about unpacking the detail of the role." (p. 52). As the role of a middle leader is potentially unique from role to role, it is essential that there is clarity around what is expected. However, the literature indicates that although it is important for middle leaders to know their role, the reality appears to be the opposite.

Confidence

One of the more interesting challenges that first-time middle leaders face is the lack or loss of confidence. Eraut (2007), in his research on mid-career learning, found

that there was an overwhelming importance on confidence. He suggests for those going through mid-career learning, such as a first-time middle leader, that confidence appears in two parts. Firstly they need the confidence to do the role and more importantly being confident in having the support and trust of their colleagues. This view supports the research of Struyve et al. (2014), who reported that middle leaders struggled to obtain recognition for their expertise and work by their teacher colleagues and this had an impact on their self-image, self-esteem and motivation. Gronn (1999) offers the notion that there are two sides to self-belief; firstly a sense of "self-efficacy, or the acceptance of one's potency, competence, and capacity to make a difference to organisational outcomes, and [secondly] self esteem, or positive feelings of ones worth and value" (p. 36). This self-belief, or confidence, plays a large role for those learning how to do a job. Gronn (1999), citing the research of Zalezik (1967) and Kaplan (1990), states that "the strong motivation to achieve and be successful displayed by many leaders and would-be leaders often masks a profound sense of inadequacy and failure" (p. 36). This potentially provides additional challenges to first-time leaders as they set out to prove themselves.

The research of Eraut (2007) revealed that because much of the learning needed for a new role requires the individual to seek out learning opportunities, the individual's confidence played a huge role in how likely they were to do this. Bennet (2008), in his research of first-time subject leaders in secondary schools, found that they lacked confidence, which came from not really knowing what to do. Isopahkala-Bouret (2008) suggests to learn how to perform a new role, a person needs information of what is expected of them and how to do the tasks they are expected to do. Additionally, if the person is an external appointment, they need to understand how the organisation functions. Interestingly, a study by Harris and Muijs (as cited in Struyve et al, 2014) showed that teachers who engaged in leadership activities could be associated with having stronger feelings of empowerment and job satisfaction. Robinson et al (2009) also found that middle leaders had high job satisfaction despite the high workloads, stress levels and other challenges of the role.

Accountability

The demands of accountability came through strongly in the literature (Burton & Brundrett, 2005; Cardno, 2012; Fitzgerald, 2009; Fitzgerald & Gunter, 2008; Hammersley-Fletcher & Strain, 2011). There is the expectation that middle leaders are responsible for both pedagogical leadership and administrative tasks. Hammersley-Fletcher and Strain's (2011) research found that those who were deemed to be successful middle leaders were those who demonstrated compliance in respect to implementing government policy and the principal's agenda rather than using their role to develop initiatives in learning and teaching practices. Fitzgerald (2009) uses the word 'bureaucracy' to describe the increasing demands of accountability and suggests that this leaves little time for leadership. This increasing level of accountability indicates that leaders are needing to prioritise their time to complete work that takes away from their core role of teaching and learning. What is perhaps more concerning from Hammersley-Fletcher and Strain's (2011) research is that this is perhaps becoming what is expected and rewarded.

Middle Leadership Support and Development

Concept of Leadership Development

The development of leaders is the third theme occurring in the literature. Leadership development is a type of professional development through which leaders develop the skills and competencies to lead effectively (Cardno, 2012; Robinson et al., 2009). Bolam (2002) states that "professional development is widely accepted as fundamental to the improvement of organisational performance" (p. 103), while Fullan and Mascall (2000) go even further than that and say that professional development is, in fact, perhaps the most effective tool for making substantial change in schools. In the case of leadership development, Van Velsor and McCauley (2004) define leader development as "the expansion of a person's capacity to be effective in leadership roles and processes" (p. 2), while Bush (2010) sees the purpose of leadership or management development being to simply "produce more effective leaders" (p. 123). Leadership development particularly focuses on the individual and the personal aspects of development (Bush, 2010; Cardno, 2012). However, Bush (2008) states that development of leaders should focus on the

activities that they are expected to carry out. Bush (2010) also suggests that leadership development has a dual focus to meet the needs of both the organisation and the individual. Therefore, it is important that there is a balance between building the skills, knowledge and dispositions that serve both the organisation and the individual (Bush, 2010).

Middle Leadership Development

Bush (2009) says, “the case for specific preparation for school leaders is linked to the evidence that high-quality leadership is vital for school improvement and student outcomes” (p. 375). Struyve et al. (2014) support the notion and take it a step further by suggesting that making development of middle leaders a priority in education will result in school improvement, better student outcomes, enhanced teacher learning and increased staff retention. In their research, Cardno and Bassett (2015) found that there was a variety of understandings that exist about the nature and purpose of leadership development as a concept within New Zealand secondary schools. They also found considerable disparity in the understandings of what comprised leadership development from the different middle and senior leadership perspectives.

Gurr and Drysdale’s (2012) found in over three studies that there was a paucity of training and leadership development for middle leaders. This was made worse by the fact that the middle leaders failed to see the necessity of prior development. Ebbers, Conover and Samuels (2010) propose that as professionals, middle leaders must accept responsibility for their own development. This reflects Blanford’s (2006) notion that middle leaders need to be proactive in their own development and reflective of their own leadership needs. Gurr and Drysdale (2012) assert that there needs to be clear expectations that middle leaders develop their own individual development and career plans and not rely on the school. Making this more challenging for middle leaders is the fact that they are both teachers and leaders. Heng and Marsh (2009) highlight the fact that “middle leaders need to focus not just on the development of knowledge and skills in pedagogy and content knowledge, but also on aspects specific to their leadership role” (p. 532). Essentially, middle leaders have twice the developmental needs of a teacher.

Van Velsor and McCauley (2004) attest that “to enhance the development of leaders, we need to help them find, create, and shape a wide range of learning experiences, each of which provide assessment, challenge, and support.” (p. 5). Essentially they are suggesting that to develop their leadership, leaders need to be given the opportunities to lead. Bush’s (2010) research also showed that development through action is more relevant than just being ‘taught content’. He adds that there needs to be a balance between content-based packages and contextual learning, but says that both are required. Van Velsor and McCauley (2004) reiterate that we all learn through experiences, and that is no different to leadership. In her research Fletcher-Campbell (2003) found that learning from others was more effective than courses, although some were effective when offered as a complementary form of development. Piggot-Irvine (2006) would add, though, that one-off learning experiences, such as ‘training days’, lead to very little or no retention in learning or change, which Glover et al. (1998) found was the most common experience of leadership development for middle leaders. Timperley, Wilson, Barrar and Fung (2007) highlight the need for multiple opportunities to learn, and that effective change happens when a variety of activities are used. Adey (2000) observed that middle leaders often had to rely on watching others as a form of training. Gurr and Drysdale (2012) found similar results where middle leaders had to rely on ‘on-the-job’ training. According to Ebbers et al. (2010), watching and learning from successful experienced leaders is important leadership development. Cardno (2005) and Bush (2010) suggest that leadership development takes many forms, from training, to education and to support. The key point that Van Velsor and McCauley (2004) make about leadership development is that it is an on-going process “It is grounded in personal development, which is never complete. It is embedded in experience: leaders learn as they expand their experiences over time” (p. 22).

One of the key ways in which leaders know what they need to develop is through feedback. Cardno (2012) asserts that effective performance appraisal is based on open and honest feedback which is based on evidence. The dialogue from this then leads to effective planning for professional development. Appraisal dialogue that allows for the individual to give and receive feedback is critical for both improvement and development (Middlewood & Cardno, 2001). Eraut (2007) found that mid-career learners need feedback, particularly early on, and that feedback is critically important

for learning, retention and commitment. He suggests that a mixture of on the spot and formal feedback is needed. Middlewood and Cardno (2001) state: “the giving and receiving of feedback is fundamental and the purpose is to focus on performance with the aim of achieving stretch or challenge” (p. 11). In theory, then, first-time middle leaders in particular should be receiving considerable feedback on how they are doing and what they need to work on.

Leadership in New Zealand

Since the 1990s, schools in New Zealand have been required to have in place performance management systems and personnel policies to promote and sustain high levels of staff performance (Cardno, 2006; Fitzgerald et al., 2003; Hammersley-Fletcher & Kirkham, 2007; Hammersley-Fletcher & Strain, 2011). There are formal performance standards for principals but not for middle leaders. In 2012 the Ministry of Education released the document ‘*Leading from the Middle*’, which outlines the functions and attributes required to implement the strategic visions of schools into classrooms. However, the document does not suggest any specific development necessary for middle leaders. Yet it is a start, as it is seen as important that schools and government work together to ensure they are developing middle leaders (Burton & Brundrett, 2005). Fitzgerald (2009) argues this by saying that performance management and regulatory systems, such as the Education Review Office and Teacher Registration, have determined what is important in education and therefore leadership.

Challenges of Leadership Development

Fleming and Amesbury (2001) suggest that most middle leaders are unlikely to have been developed to their full potential. This is supported somewhat by Southworth (2002), who says that most school leaders learn to lead by simply being asked to take on responsibility. This is exacerbated by the fact that most primary teachers are, at some point in their careers, likely to hold a position that could be described as that of a middle leader (Hammersley-Fletcher & Kirkham, 2007). This makes the development of middle leaders both essential and complex. Bush (2009) says that as professionals move from teaching to school leadership, there is a moral obligation

that they be appropriately developed. The need to keep up to date with subject and pedagogical developments is essential to middle leaders' teaching, but they also need a good understanding of leadership and management theory (Burton & Brundrett, 2005; Fleming & Amesbury, 2001). The research of Cardno and Bassett (2015) found that middle leaders did not consider themselves to be adequately trained, while Adey (2000) suggests that aspiring middle leaders are likely to receive no training to prepare them for the role. This is made further challenging for first-time middle leaders, as "the development of the knowledge and understanding, skills and abilities required to lead others takes time" (Blanford, 2006, p. 19), indicating that if they are not prepared suitably, they are forced to learn everything 'on the job'.

Succession and Recruitment

The concept of succession appears frequently in the literature. To achieve sustained school excellence there is a need to develop leaders at many levels and to plan for succession to ensure continuity within the organisation (Bush, 2009; Fullan, 2002). In most circumstances succession is discussed when looking at principal succession. However, this is important, particularly in New Zealand, because principals have almost always worked their way through from being a teacher, through middle leadership and into a principalship (Bush, 2009; Heng & Marsh, 2009). One of the findings in the research of Rhodes and Brundrett (2009) was that principals need to be more proactive in the identification, development and succession of leadership talent within their own schools. An English study in 2006 by the National College for Teaching and Learning (as cited in Rhodes and Brundrett, 2009) showed that this is made more difficult by the fact that up to 70% of middle leaders do not want to be principals, while Heng and Marsh (2009) cited a Singaporean report which highlighted the importance of getting the right people with the right skills to be leaders. Gurr and Drysdale (2012) suggest, however, that the individual is, in fact, largely responsible for their own preparation.

Bassett (2016), from his research into middle leaders in New Zealand secondary schools, found that middle leaders need to be better prepared and proposes a national development programme focused on their leadership development needs. Bush (2008) discusses the success of the Singaporeans, who not only identify

potential leaders and nurture them, but also offer a middle management qualification which looks to enhance the capabilities of the middle leaders. Fletcher-Campbell (2003) revealed that it was the senior leaders who played a significant role in the identification of potential middle leaders and provided them with opportunities to develop their skills prior to promotion. The research of Rhodes and Brundrett (2009) also found that the limitations of leadership development and succession had a negative effect on both the middle leaders' and potential middle leaders' understanding of how to progress in their careers. It appears that senior leaders need to be actively looking for potential leaders and preparing them appropriately, yet at the same time, those who aspire to be leaders need to be proactive in their own development if they are to be successful.

Leadership Support

The support of the principal is crucial to the development of a middle leader, but a collaborative school culture is also necessary for the leader to feel supported and valued by colleagues (Gurr & Drysdale, 2012; Hammersley-Fletcher & Kirkham, 2007). Southworth (2002) supports this notion, claiming that effective organisations include a culture of collaboration and include multiple opportunities for school-based professional development. Eraut (2007) suggests that a leader's role is to develop the culture of leading and support and that although they play a part, it is not necessarily their role to provide support themselves. Gurr and Drysdale (2012) would, however, suggest otherwise, as their research found that middle leaders can make a positive difference in schools but they need the support of the school leadership and, in particular, the support of the principal. Poultney's (2007) work supports this and takes it a little further by suggesting that principals need to be approachable.

Bennet (2008) found in his research of first-time subject leaders in New Zealand secondary schools that middle leaders did in fact have access to the support if they needed it. However, they did not necessarily know what support or development they needed. In their research, Grootenboer et al. (2015) observed that without exception the support of the school principal, or the direct line manager, enabled or constrained the practices of the middle leaders. If middle leaders were to be successful, then the

support they were given could not be just nominal encouragement but needed to be demonstrated in material and structural backing. Grootenboer et al. (2015) suggest that principals need to develop 'hospitable conditions' for middle leaders to try new things and enact change. Perhaps troubling, Gurr and Drysdale (2012) indicate that, "the consistent findings over a decade from three studies are somewhat concerning. Too many people in leadership roles are not leaders, do not have an expectation of being a leader, and do not have the organisational support to be leaders" (p. 62). This provides many challenges, particularly as the literature has shown that middle leaders are expected play a large role in teaching and staff development but it appears they are not being adequately supported to do so.

A poorly functioning hierarchy is also seen as a major impediment to the development of middle leaders (Heng & Marsh, 2009). Hammersley-Fletcher and Strain (2011) counter that by suggesting that the development of middle leaders, particularly in primary schools, is a way of breaking down the hierarchical relations. This is due to the evidence that collaboration and informal collegial interactions are more commonplace in primary schools.

Summary

This chapter had provided substantial review and critique of the relevant literature around middle leadership. Three key themes around the expectations and challenges of middle leaders, along with their support and development have been critiqued, and these themes reinforce this study. The next chapter will present the research methodology along with the process for data analysis and ethical considerations.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to outline and discuss the selected methodology and the historical context within which it is located. The three methods used for data collection — semi structured interviews, a focus group, and documentary analysis — are described and the process undertaken is discussed. Finally, how the data were analysed, considerations of reliability and validity, and the ethical implications of my research are also presented.

Research Methodology

As my research focused on middle leaders in a primary school setting, it is important to understand the background of educational research along with its associated paradigms and methodologies. Mutch (2005) suggests that "educational research falls under the broad category of social science research because it focuses on people, organisations, and interactions" (p. 18). It is distinguishable from other social science areas due to its relationship to teaching and learning and its potential benefits to society (Keeves, 1997; Mutch, 2005).

Ontology deals with the questions about what can or does exist in the world (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011; Davidson & Tolich, 2003). The ontological assumptions within social research are "assumptions which concern the very true or essence of the social phenomena being investigated" (Cohen et al. 2011, p. 5). The existence of first-time middle leaders in New Zealand primary schools and the support and development they receive are indeed real, as are those of school principals, and this therefore provides me with the ontological basis for my research.

The second set of assumptions are those of an epistemological kind. Davidson and Tolich (2003) describe epistemology as, "the theory of knowledge. The branch of

philosophy that deals with how we know what we know" (p. 25). The creation of knowledge in my research was dependent on the participants sharing their experiences and perceptions with me. My ontological and epistemological assumptions had implications on the way in which the research was conducted, the methodology (Bryman, 2012; Cohen et al., 2011).

In my research, the knowledge I was seeking was within the minds, beliefs and experiences of primary school middle leaders and principals. What middle leaders do and face in their day-to-day role was not necessarily observable. The participants were interpreting their world through their experiences and beliefs, which were "personal, subjective and unique" (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 6). This led me to adopt an interpretive epistemology for my research. An interpretive approach enabled me, as the researcher, to interact with middle leaders to uncover their lived reality (Bryman, 2012; Mutch, 2005). Because the work of middle leaders was not observable, it required me to collect open-ended data based on their experiences (Creswell, 2002; Guba & Lincoln, 2005). This aligned well to the interpretive epistemological approach because the research aimed to understand the meaning of the social phenomenon and interactions of middle leaders in New Zealand primary schools (Cohen et al., 2011; Davidson & Tolich, 2003).

Interpretivism is a contrasting epistemology to positivism (Bryman, 2012). It focuses on the more subjective and is about developing meaning (Bryman, 2012; Cohen et al., 2011; Guba & Lincoln, 2005). It is suggested that the social sciences generally favour interpretivism due to its ability to recognise the unique humanistic nature of people (Bryman, 2012; Cohen et al., 2011; Davidson & Tolich, 2003; de Landsheere, 1997; Gunn & Lincoln, 2005). This is not to say that positivism is not employed by educational researchers. In fact, de Landsheere (1997) states that "no one research paradigm can answer all the questions which arise in educational research". (p. 14). Choosing between a positivist or interpretive paradigm largely depends on the ontological and epistemological assumptions of the researcher (Cohen et. al, 2011; Davidson & Tolich, 2003; Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Mutch, 2005).

A qualitative methodology is seen to fit well with interpretivism, while a quantitative methodology is generally aligned with the positivist paradigm. Although they are

often seen as being polar opposites, they are perhaps better viewed on a continuum (Bryman, 2012; Creswell, 2002; de Landsheere, 1997; Keeves, 1997). The difference between the two methodologies is well defined by Denzin and Lincoln (2005), who say:

> Qualitative researchers stress the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied and the situational constraints that shape inquiry. Such researchers emphasize the value-laden nature of inquiry. They seek answers to questions that stress how social experience is created and given meaning. (p. 10).

The participants in this study shared their personal leadership stories, their challenges, and the leadership development and support that they received. This provided me with substantial descriptive and highly subjective data (Creswell, 2002; Guba & Lincoln, 2005). It was important to access these personal data in order to provide me with the information I need to address my research questions. These data were better analysed qualitatively and therefore led me to adopt a qualitative methodology.

Bryman (2012) suggests that researchers must ensure appropriate instruments are used when conducting research. The three methods of data collection that were used in the research were semi-structured interviews, a focus group and documentary analysis.

Method 1: Semi-Structured Interviews

Description

According to Bryman (2012), the term 'semi-structured interviews' is fairly broad but typically refers to "a context in which the interviewer has a series of questions that are in the general form of an interview schedule but is able to vary the sequence and questions" (p. 212). An interview schedule is a collection of questions to be asked by the interviewer (Bryman, 2012). Mutch (2005) has a very similar description but uses the words "open to changes along the way" (p. 225) to describe the flexibility the

semi-structured interview allows; while Fontana and Frey (2005) describe them as an “individual, face-to-face interchange” (p. 698).

Semi-structured interviews, as a form of data collection, align well to my epistemological view that the data can exist in the minds of middle leaders. Vogt, Gardner and Haeffele (2012) suggest that interviews are effective when the research seeks knowledge that is internal to the people interviewed and for when in-depth answers from participants are required: both were the case in my research. This is reinforced by Bryman (2012), who contends that interviewing has become the most common form of data collection for gathering in-depth information. Interviews have the ability to develop detailed accounts of the experiences and opinions of the participants and provide rich qualitative data (Bell, 2010; Bryman, 2012; Fontana & Frey, 2005; Hinds, 2000).

Process

To ensure the data being collected were as accurate as possible I sought middle leaders who were within the first three years of their first middle leadership role. This purposeful sampling was decided to provide me with participants who should have clear and current experiences to share (Bryman, 2012). The sample size (N=6) selected was an appropriate sampling size because it provided me with enough data to help answer my research questions (Bryman, 2012). To ensure the participants fit the best description of a middle leader I set certain criteria for their involvement. All the participants had to have a middle leadership role for which they were remunerated, have classroom teaching responsibilities and have a formal title. To help identify potential participants I used past editions of the *New Zealand Education Gazette* dated from January 2013 to December 2014 to identify the advertised middle leadership roles over this timeframe. Identifying 52 advertised jobs, I emailed the principals of those schools, requesting permission to approach the successful applicants to see if they would be willing to participate in an interview. I adopted a first-in approach to selection and took the first six participants to respond. I did need to reject two participants, as they did not fit the criteria, having been in middle leadership for well over three years. The participants who were selected had a

variety of titles; Team Leader, Learning Leader, Director of Religious Studies and Curriculum Leader.

An interview schedule (Appendix A) that linked to the research aims and questions was developed using Kvale's (1996, as cited in Bryman, 2012) nine question types as a guide. I began with an introductory question, which also served to help 'break the ice' (Fontana & Frey, 2005), that invited participants to discuss what interested them about entering leadership. A series of structuring questions helped to focus participants on directly providing information key to answering my research questions. As is the nature of semi-structured interviews a range of specifying, interpreting, probing and follow-up questions were employed throughout the interview to draw out richer and more detailed responses from the participants.

As suggested by Hinds (2000) and Bryman (2012), I conducted two pilot interviews with middle leaders I knew personally. One of the issues that can occur with interviews is that of question interpretation: the assumption that all participants interpret questions the same way (Vogt et al, 2012). Confusion can arise when longer questions are asked, although the benefit of a semi-structured interview was that it allowed for clarification (Creswell, 2002; Fontana & Frey, 2005; Hinds, 2000; Vogt et al, 2012). I was able to get feedback during the pilot interviews regarding whether or not the questions were easily understood as well as how I asked the questions. I was able to refine the interview schedule to reflect their feedback along with the data that came from the pilot interviews. I ensured that once I had completed the interview schedule, I knew it inside and out, as this is essential to successful interviewing (Bryman, 2012). None of the data collected from these pilot interviews were used in the findings.

After making email contact with the potential participants, I invited them to take part in a semi-structured interview which would take no longer than one hour. Hinds (2000) suggests that the setting of the interview is important, so the time and location was negotiated, and all interviews eventually took place at participants' schools. This provided the participants with a safe and comfortable environment as well as enabling me to secure signed organisational permission (Appendix B) on the same day as conducting the interview (Hinds, 2000; Mutch, 2005; Vogt et al., 2012). It was

important to develop a positive rapport between myself and the participants (Bryman, 2012; Mutch, 2005). However, I was careful not to take this too far, as Bryman (2012) warns that if it did go too far, then the validity of the data would have been potentially compromised, as the participant could have been inclined to give answers he/she thought that I wanted. Using the interview schedule, I set out to obtain a "rich, in-depth experiential account" (Fontana & Frey, 2005, p. 698) of each of the middle leaders' unique roles. I used two audio recording devices to record the interviews and then had the recordings transcribed. Having the interviews in a written format allowed me to thoroughly examine and analyse what the participants had to say (Bryman, 2012).

Throughout the entire process, from the initial email contact until the completion and presentation of results, I ensured that I listened carefully, was flexible and empathetic, and developed trust and a positive rapport with all the participants (Bryman, 2012; Fontana & Frey, 2005; Mutch, 2005).

Method 2: Focus Group

Description

A focus group is described simply by Mutch (2005) as "an interview technique that brings together participants to respond to questions in a group situation" (p. 219). Bryman (2012) takes this a bit further by suggesting that focus groups focus on a specific topic and that the "emphasis is upon the interaction within the group and the joint construction of meaning" (p. 712). Focus groups are a form of a group interview, but not in the same way as a traditional interview where there is a backwards and forwards between the interviewer and the participants; a focus group relies on the interaction within the group (Bryman, 2012; Cohen et al., 2011). Cohen et al (2011) attest that it is the interaction of the group that exposes the data. Focus groups provide some advantages over individual interviews. Fontana and Frey (2005) attest that they can "often produce rich data that are cumulative and elaborative" and that they can "be stimulating for respondents and so aid in recall" (p. 705).

In my study a single focus group was conducted with four primary school principals. They were principals of schools with a minimum of 300 students, as schools any smaller may not have the middle leadership roles that my research was looking to explore. The sample size (N=4) was deemed appropriate as it was not too small and it provided me with enough data, but it was also not so large that it was potentially difficult to manage and lacking in quality group interaction (Bryman, 2012; Cohen et al., 2011; Hinds, 2000). Morgan (as cited in Bryman, 2012) recommends smaller groups when participants are likely to have a lot to say on the research topic, which was the case in this instance. Mutch (2005) suggests that "a focus group is a useful tool for busy practitioners because they combine the best of surveys and interviews (an in-depth response)" (p. 128), which was essential when attempting to involve primary school principals.

Process

The principals were approached and selected from a local principals' association. This was done to guarantee availability, which can often be an issue when setting up a focus group (Cohen et al., 2011). Focus groups are useful because they are time efficient and can gather information about people's experiences, thoughts, feelings and ideas about a particular topic (Bryman, 2012; Cohen et al 2011; Hinds, 2000; Kitzinger, 1995; Mutch, 2005). In this case my research was looking at middle leaders, what is expected of them, their challenges, and their development. The focus group in this instance was employed to provide triangulation of data gathered from the semi-structured interviews (Cohen et al., 2011). The principals were able to provide a different perspective particularly around what they expect from their middle leaders and what support and development they provide to first-time leaders. The principals were invited to participate in the focus group, given an oral explanation, as well as provided with an information sheet outlining the study. Participants were also given the opportunity to ask any questions regarding the research.

Prior to conducting the focus group, it was important that I developed quality questions that helped in providing the data needed to answer my research questions. Krueger (1994) asserts that "forethought must be given to developing questions for a focus group. They may appear to be spontaneous, but they have

been carefully selected and phrased in advance to elicit the maximum amount of information" (p. 54). I carefully developed a series of questions (Appendix C) that worked to elicit responses that provided quality dialogue and discussion amongst the participants and at the same time provided rich data pertinent to answering my research questions (Krueger, 1994). The questions were designed to provide flexibility so that as participants answered the questions, their responses were able to make connections or trigger ideas for other participants to then add to. The selected questions were particularly useful for exploring the principals' knowledge and experiences and elicit not only what they thought but also why they thought a particular way (Kitzinger, 1995; Krueger, 1994).

During the focus group interview I was aware of potential challenges that may have arisen. Fontana and Frey (2005) identify three key ideas that a researcher needs to be aware of and manage if a focus group is to be successful. I was careful not to allow any one of the participants to dominate the group or the discussion; to encourage uncooperative participants to share their ideas; and to obtain responses from the entire group (Cohen et al., 2011; Fontana & Frey, 2005). One issue that I had to manage was where one participant would veer the topic off course. It was a difficult balancing act of keeping the meeting open yet at the same time keeping it to the point (Cohen et al., 2011). Kitzinger (1995) also suggests that focus groups are not an easy option, as the data they generate "can be as cumbersome as they are complex." (p. 302). However, I did not find this to be an issue as the interview process went well and the group dynamic provided concise and clear data.

Method 3: Documentary Analysis

Description

The study of documents in conjunction with interviews is a common form of educational research (Wellington, 2002). McCulloch (2011) defines a document as "a record of an event or process" (p. 249). A document used for educational research can be fairly wide reaching and take many forms, such as charters, curriculum documents, and schemes of work (Bryman, 2012; McCulloch, 2011; Wellington, 2000). Documents can be private, such as journals and diaries; and public, such as

annual reports and policies (Bryman, 2012; Fitzgerald, 2012; McCulloch, 2011; Wellington, 2000). The term ‘document’ also encompasses a variety of print, photographic, online, digital, and multimedia artefacts (Bryman, 2012; Fitzgerald, 2012; McCulloch, 2011; Wellington, 2000).

Documentary analysis aligns well to the epistemology of my research project. This is because as the data I was searching for can be found in the minds of middle leaders, it is suggested by Creswell (2002) that documents are texts that represent the thoughts of the individuals in the phenomenon being studied. Scott (1990, as cited in Fitzgerald, 2012) strongly attests that documents cannot be seen as objective, which again aligns to the subjective approach of the research project. McCulloch (2011) adds that when taking an interpretive outlook, documents are seen as being socially constructed. Documentary analysis is intended to provide access to and facilitate insights into human social activity (McCulloch, 2011). Bryman (2012) further supports this by saying that documents can be seen as windows into social and organisation realities. Wellington (2000) offers a similar view, proposing that documents add meaning to the data gathered from the interviews and can “enrich a study throughout the research process” (p. 114).

Process

I collected a range of job descriptions and leadership appraisal documents from the middle leader participants as well as generic middle leadership job descriptions from the principals who took part in the focus group. These were all private, official, school documents, which Bryman (2012) suggests are more likely to be “authentic and meaningful” (p. 551) than public school documents. These documents provided me with data for two of the research questions, namely the expectations of middle leaders and the support and development they receive. The documents also helped in triangulation by providing an additional method of data collection that I could use to help confirm results (Bryman, 2012; Fitzgerald, 2012; Wellington, 2000). As the documents being requested were private documents, there were some challenges obtaining them (Bryman, 2012; Fitzgerald, 2012). Despite several requests prior to and following the interviews, I was only able to obtain middle leader job descriptions from three of the four participating focus group principals; while three of the six

interview participants provided me with their job descriptions and appraisal information. One of the research participants admitted that they did not have a job description or any leadership appraisal documentation.

Before the documents were selected for analysis, it was important that they passed the four criteria for assessing the quality of documents as suggested by Scott (1990; as cited in Bryman, 2012; Wellington, 2000; Fitzgerald, 2012). The documents were checked for their authenticity, credibility, representativeness, and their meaning. All documents that were included in my findings passed the criteria.

Data Analysis

Description & Process

Data analysis in a qualitative research project is to analyse and interpret a vast array of data (Bryman, 2012; Lofland, Snow, Anderson & Lofland, 2006). This is made difficult due to qualitative data, such as interviews and documents, being "not straightforward to analyse." (Bryman, 2012, p. 565). Lofland et al., (2006) describe data analysis as a "transformative process" (p.195). Essentially the process involves taking raw data and turning it into findings or results (Lofland et al., 2006).

Bryman (2012) states, "coding is the starting point for most forms of qualitative data analysis" (p. 575). It requires the researcher to sort and manage data into categories that help to make the data meaningful (Bryman, 2012). Lofland et al. (2006) describe coding as "the process of sorting your data into various categories that organise it and render it meaningful" (p. 200). When looking at my research methods of semi-structured interviews, a focus group and documentary analysis, thematic coding was a suitable approach to analyse the data (Bryman, 2012; Lichtman, 2013). Hinds (2000) proposes developing a code to be applied over the range of different materials being analysed.

When analysing documents, Mutch (2005) suggests approaching them with an open mind and to have it "speak for itself" (p. 130). It is about finding the key messages in the text. It is stated by Fitzgerald (2012) that analysing documents involves "locating

underlying themes in materials, analysing these themes and providing an interpretation that augments a theoretical argument" (p. 287). Mutch (2005) also states that "coding in qualitative research involves looking for patterns and themes" (p. 177). While analysing the transcripts and documents, it was important that I constructed an index of themes and subthemes. The themes came from recurring ideas in the text and are the product of reading and rereading the transcripts and documents (Bryman, 2012, Lichtman, 2013). The research questions also helped to identify the key themes (Bryman, 2012). Using a framework, I methodically worked through the transcripts and coded the findings based on which theme or sub theme they fit best.

There are some problems perceived with thematic coding, such as the disappearance of the social setting, as the themes can be plucked from the texts out of context (Bryman, 2012; Lichtman, 2013; Vogt et al., 2012). However, this did not appear to present itself to be an issue as I made sure that I took care to analyse the context of the response prior to coding it. It is also suggested that the process can be incredibly time-consuming when coding interview transcripts and documents (Bryman, 2012; Hinds, 2000; Lofland et al., 2006). Lofland et al. (2006) maintain, however, that by being disciplined and methodical it is achievable in a timely fashion, and this proved to be the case.

Validity and Reliability

Cohen et al. (2011) define validity as "the meaning that subjects give to data and inferences drawn from the data that are important" (p. 181) and that "validity is the touchstone of all types of educational research" (p. 180). Bryman (2012) argues that the term 'validity' is broad, so in this context uses 'measurement validity' and describes it as "the degree to which a measure of concept truly reflects that concept" (p. 713). Mutch (2005) describes it simply as "ensuring that a study actually measures what it sets out to measure" (p. 226).

When conducting interviews, Bryman (2012) and Cohen, et al., (2011) say that the interview questions should be consistent. It is also important to test the questions prior to conducting the interview, as, "the best way to ensure validity is through

pretesting the concepts and questions," (Davidson & Tolich, 2003, p. 32) which I did prior to conducting my interviews. During the focus groups and the interviews the use of a digital recorder was used to ensure for an easy production of a transcript. This was an important part of the process as it helps to eliminate researcher bias (Creswell, 2002, Hinds, 2000). After conducting the interviews, a transcript was produced and the participants given a copy. All participants were given the opportunity to confirm what they said was true. This helped to remove the perception of any interview bias which could compromise the validity (Bryman, 2012; Cohen, et al., 2011; Hinds, 2000).

To ensure the validity of documentary analysis, it was essential that the documents were authentic and credible (Fitzgerald, 2012; McCulloch, 2011; Wellington, 2000). This was relatively straightforward as they came directly from the participants and were on either the participants' school network or school branded paperwork.

Validity is seen to be strengthened and demonstrated by triangulation (Cohen et al., 2011; Davidson & Tolich, 2003). Triangulation is described by Bryman (2012) as, "the use of more than one method or source of data in the study of a social phenomenon so that findings may be cross-checked" (p. 717). Fetterman (1989, as cited in Davidson & Tolich, 2003) suggests that triangulation "is the heart of qualitative research's validity" (p. 34). This research project's selection of semi-structured interviews, a focus group and documents provided an excellent form of triangulation as it allowed for data to be cross-checked from multiple sources (Fitzgerald, 2012; McCulloch, 2011; Wellington, 2000). What the middle leaders said was able to be analysed alongside what a principal said and what was in the documents.

Reliability in qualitative research is seen as having a somewhat different interpretation than in quantitative research (Bryman, 2012; Cohen et al., 2011). Cohen et al. (2011) state that "in qualitative research reliability can be regarded as the fit between what researchers record as data and what actually occurs in the natural setting being researched" (p. 200). The accurate recording of data in an interview and the pursuit of document authorship would be examples of ensuring reliability (Bryman, 2012; Cohen et al., 2011).

Ethical Issues

Description

Ethics in social research are an essential consideration as they seek to protect participants from harm (Bryman, 2012; Wilkinson, 2001). The term 'ethics' usually refers to the moral principles and guiding conduct people hold (Wellington, 2000). Simply put, Mutch (2005) states that "if you treat your participants with consideration, fairness, and respect you'll end up acting ethically" (p. 78). Wilkinson (2001) states that "the key topic in ethics is how we should treat others" (p. 13), while Fontana and Frey (2005) add that when people are objects of inquiry, "extreme care must be taken to avoid any harm to them" (p. 715). Diener and Crandall (1978, as cited in Bryman, 2012) suggest that harm can manifest itself in a number of different ways, such as physical harm, harm to participants' development, loss of self-esteem, and stress. Bryman (2012) also suggests that "ethical issues cannot be ignored, as they relate directly to the integrity of a piece of research" (p. 130). As my research involved interviewing people and viewing their private documents, it was essential that ethical practices were employed throughout the study. I made sure to document and monitor participants' physical behaviours during interviews to ensure that they were not showing signs of discomfort (Bryman, 2012).

Informed Consent

The research methods used as part of the study were semi-structured interviews, a focus group and the analysis of documents. Prior to conducting the interviews and collecting participants' private documents, it was essential that their informed consent was given (Bryman, 2012; Fontana & Frey, 2005; Wilkinson, 2001). Mutch (2005) suggests that informed consent is the idea that "participants in your research should be fully informed about the purposes, conduct, and possible dissemination of your research and give their consent to be involved." (p. 78). Put simply, "the basic idea behind informed consent is that, if you want to do research on people, you should ask their permission first" (Wilkinson, 2001, p. 16). Right from the initial invitation to participate, I made sure to inform potential participants of the scope of the study and that their participation was completely voluntary. During all email contact an information sheet (Appendix D & E) and a consent from (Appendix F & G)

was highlighted and explained; while prior to the interviews I had the participants again read and sign the consent form, which was a comprehensive way of giving them the "opportunity to be fully informed of the nature of the research and the implications of their participation from the outset" (Bryman, 2012, p. 140). The consent form also provided me with documentation that could be used to prove consent later on if there were any concerns raised (Bryman, 2012; Wilkinson, 2001). It was essential that participants were not coerced or deceived in any way into taking part in the research or what the research was about (Bryman, 2012; Mutch, 2005; Wilkinson, 2001). Once the interview and focus group transcriptions were completed, there was an obligation to check the data and share the results with participants (Bryman, 2012; Wilkinson, 2001). I provided all participants with a copy of their interview transcript and allowed them time to review and confirm the results, as this is an ethical practice and also helps to avoid deception (Bryman, 2012).

McCulloch (2011) suggests there is a temptation to ignore ethical issues when working with documents because they are not 'people'. However, he adds that documents created by people make ethical considerations important, especially if the documents could affect the reputation of a person or school (McCulloch, 2011). I was respectful of the documents that I was given access to. Since the documents were coming directly from the interview participants, informed consent was given at the time of the interview and the handing over of the documents.

Anonymity & Confidentiality

Another key focus of the study was to ensure the anonymity and confidentiality of all the participants and their schools (Fontana & Frey, 2005). This notion is supported by Hinds (2000), who states that participants "should be advised of the potential audience of the research, and given assurances about anonymity and confidentiality" (p. 48). To ensure all the documents and interviews provide this anonymity, it was important that the names of the participants, their schools, and any identifying features were removed or replaced with pseudonyms (Bryman, 2012; Cohen et al., 2011). All participants and their schools were assured that any data they provided remained confidential to me and were stored securely (Mutch, 2005).

Ethics Proposal

An ethics proposal was developed and presented to the Unitec Research Ethics Committee. This was essential so as to gain 'ethical clearance' before starting the research (Mutch, 2005). It sought to make sure the participants and researcher were given some protection, whilst also ensuring the academic institution itself avoids any potential issues (Bryman, 2012).

Summary

This chapter presented my adopted methodology and the historical context in which it lies. The three methods of data collection were described, and the process I took was outlined. The way in which the data were analysed, along with considerations for reliability and validity, was discussed. Finally, the ethical implications of my research were presented. The following chapter will present the findings of my research.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Introduction

This chapter reports the findings from the data that were collected using the three methods of a focus group, semi-structured interviews and documentary analysis. The data have been presented individually based on the three different methods. Within these, the data have again been organised by the major themes that come from the literature, the research questions, and the data itself. Initially the data from the focus group of principals will be presented, followed by the middle leaders' semi-structured interview data and then finally the documentary analysis. All names of participants have been replaced with pseudonyms, and all other identifying names, programmes, and locations have been removed or replaced with descriptors. The pseudonyms used are presented in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1: Roles and pseudonyms of participants

Principals	**Middle Leaders**
Barbara	Harry
Damian	Jane
Monica	Lois
Olivia	Oscar
	Rachel
	Selina

Principal Focus Group Findings

The focus group comprised of four primary school principals: one male and three females (n=4). Their experiences as principals ranged from three years to over 25 years, and all their schools had a roll of over 300 students. The schools they led all had middle leaders; those leaders had a classroom teaching role along with sizeable leadership responsibilities. At each of the schools, the middle leaders that were

discussed were part of the Senior Leadership Team along with leading their own smaller teaching team.

Expectations of Middle Leaders

Skills, Dispositions, and Experience

When asked what expectations principals had of first-time middle leaders, it was suggested that the *"expectation starts right back when they're* (middle leaders) *interviewed for the position" (Damian)*. The principals discussed the fact that middle leadership positions should be won on merit but that the successful candidate needs to *"fit" (Barbara)* and provide *"synergy" (Damian)* within the school, the leadership team, and the middle leader's team. Olivia also suggested that the middle leaders needed to be *"temperamentally almost suited"* for the role.

There were specific skills that the principals were looking for when appointing a potential middle leader. These skills included *"strong curriculum knowledge" (Damian)*, good communicative skills, and being a good classroom teacher. Along with the skills required for the role, the principals said that a middle leader should be "*reflective … enthusiastic about their own learning … "really interested in people" (Barbara), "people that can bring new things, think for themselves, show initiative" (Monica),* and *"somebody who's prepared to put in the extra time" (Olivia).* Along with the ability to foster positive relationships and the ability to negotiate difficult situations with parents and colleagues, principals also said that middle leaders needed to be passionate about their work.

It was discussed that prior to becoming a middle leader, applicants would have led in some way before. The principals agreed that experience having led something, even if it was just a meeting, was important in the selection of leaders. Barbara pointed out *"There's a reason why they've got to here* (middle leadership). *It's because you have seen something big there".* This was best summarised by Olivia, who added *"I don't think people go straight into a big leadership role. They've had a little practice on the way. Most teachers going through have led something".*

The principals agreed that the core role of the middle leader was to be a classroom teacher first, and that leadership came second.

> *Most of their time is in their classroom, because they are full-time classroom teachers, so that's where most of their time is. And it's after hours when they do their collective reflection or thinking through. (Olivia)*

The effective leadership of teams was seen as important to the principals. They saw it as the middle leader's role to *"work alongside people and to be able to support their team members" (Damian).* Middle leaders need to demonstrate *"passion"* and *"professional capability" (Olivia)* to develop their teams.

> *If you can't inspire people to keep moving, then you are really not a leader, and I think it's that collective trust and loyalty in wanting to do the best as a team that you want your leader to promote. (Olivia)*

The discussion around time management indicated that there is an expectation that much of the work of leaders comes outside of school hours. As their primary role is that of a classroom teacher, they needed to spend time at school working within their own classrooms.

> *And it's after hours when they do their collective reflection or thinking through, 'What's our next step? What do we need to change here?' (Olivia)*

However, as middle leaders have other responsibilities, principals do provide classroom release time, but the expectation is that this time is used to work with the teachers in their teams to improve teaching practice.

> *You've got to allow them the time and the release to do their job, because otherwise, how can they know what their team is doing? (Olivia)*

However, it was highlighted that there did need to be a balance, as *"you don't want people* (middle leaders) *sitting there all night" (Olivia).*

Responsibilities

Damian spoke of the importance for middle leaders to *"promote what the school is and who we are"*. He further explained the need for middle leaders to have *"a firm eye on the strategic goals of the school",* as this leads to *"people all leading into whatever the common cause is for your school".* There was the notion presented that the middle leaders played a key role in the mechanics of the school and that it was important that they played their part in working towards achieving the school's goals.

> *There has to be consistency within the school, and it has to be relentless. What one team leader says, the other team leaders say as well. So it's communicating amongst team leaders as well as to what the system is so that everyone is on the same page. (Damian)*

Managing and fostering relationships were seen as a key role for middle leaders. The principals saw the need for middle leaders to *"work alongside people and children" (Damian)*, which includes parents, students, teachers and their principals, as well as to support their team members.

> Middle leaders are expected to*: work together as a whole group and as part of a management team supporting their teachers, supporting me as a principal and also the students that are under their care. (Damian)*

However, there was an expectation that the middle leaders also challenge the principals if they see things are not working or *"to ask questions as to why things are being done the way they are" (Monica).*

Ensuring student achievement was suggested by the principals as being the most important aspect of the role of the middle leader. Two of the principals agreed that it was the role of the middle leaders to monitor student achievement and see if the students are making progress. All of the principals confirmed that at their schools all middle leaders had student achievement targets. One principal suggested that it was the middle leaders' responsibility to get into other teachers' classrooms and model best practice, along with observing and giving feedback to support teachers' practice.

> Middle leaders are expected*: to be able to go into classrooms and model good practice. That's one thing that I expect my leaders to do based around the actual focus of learning that we're looking at. I'll give you an example. If, for example, one of the teachers was experiencing a little bit of difficulty, say, with clarity in their classroom, they would go in and teach clarity and model it for the teacher and give them good practice and then go back and do some observations and feedback. (Damian)*

If the middle leader lacked the skills to do this, there was the expectation that they used the deputy principals for support to up-skill themselves.

The principals reported that middle leaders are also expected to undertake a variety of roles outside of leadership of teaching and learning. These include organising big school events and activities, running syndicate meetings, arranging school trips, writing newsletters to parents about the happenings of their teams, along with working towards school-wide goals within the strategic plan.

Challenges of Middle Leaders

The principals provided their perceptions of the challenges of middle leaders, along with examples of some of the challenges that middle leaders have had in their schools.

Relationships

The principals suggested that the biggest perceived challenge that middle leaders faced was managing relationships with difficult staff. Two of the principals reported that from their experience it was often the older teachers who offered the most resistance to new leaders. Barbara shared an example of a middle leader from her school where the *"challenge for her was leading a team with older teachers. Probably getting them to see her as a leader"*. Olivia added that this could be because *"I think if they're older teachers, they may have come through a system*

where leaders were unheard of. You had the principal, you may have had a DP, you may have had STJCs, they used to call them. But these little clusters of classes, that's unknown. Teachers were solitary — the solitariness of a classroom teacher — and nobody oversaw them or looked at them. This now is quite new how we are doing all this mentoring and monitoring."

Personality clashes along with *"people wanting to do things their own way"* (Damian) have also provided middle leaders with challenges.

Tensions

It was suggested that if middle leaders did not have a robust job description prior to starting the role, it could lead to them not knowing what to do. As the notion of middle leadership differs not only across schools but also within schools, it was discussed that without a job description middle leaders can focus on the wrong areas. Monica suggested that it is important to *"get their job descriptions quite nailed at the beginning and then be clear about what their jobs are."*

Bureaucratic accountability was identified as a challenge for middle leaders. Olivia suggested that *schools "are so high bound in bureaucracy"* that it sometimes makes it difficult for those middle leaders having to deal with pressures put on them by the principals. She added that these pressures come because *"everybody's pushing to raise achievement".*

There was agreement within the group that middle leaders are in a difficult position within the school structure. Middle leaders were required to follow the school's direction yet at the same time work closely with their fellow teachers and team members.

> *It's a tricky position in lots of ways, because they run the fine line of working alongside the colleagues but being a leader. (Monica)*

There was agreement amongst the principals that there was a lack of school community awareness of who the middle leaders were. Barbara suggested that

middle leaders can *"get lost in the system"*. This was not isolated to the community, though, as there was also the consensus that staff within their schools did not fully understand the work that leaders do. There was the perception at Monica's school that leadership was about *"writing the news, the letters home, running a meeting, organising a trip"*. This appeared to be a common perception across all schools.

Leadership Support and Development for First-Time Middle Leaders

With regard to leadership support and development for first-time middle leaders the principals described what each of their schools offered as support.

Leadership Development

When asked what 'Leadership Development' was to them, the principals suggested that it was working in the leadership team, going on professional development courses, taking a staff meeting, participating in the leadership of different initiatives, and having opportunities.

> *I think it's opportunities for professional development. If there is something that you think would be helpful, then you're in. (Olivia)*
>
> *I like to take them with me on the leadership days so that I'm actually listening to what they're doing. As well as them going away doing something, coming back and sharing, that we actually do it as a team. (Monica)*
>
> *I guess it's working in the leadership team. Part of that is their development. I also, in terms of leadership development, as a group, send them away to do things, because I think if they're doing it together, they seem to come back and have a lot more to share. (Barbara)*

The general consensus of the group was that there was a clear expectation that middle leaders need to learn from each other. Monica shared that at her school this

was a formal process where middle leaders met with each other to discuss both the needs of the individuals but also the needs of the school.

> *I want to see them chatting amongst themselves and learning from each other. (Monica)*

The level of leadership between the principal and the middle leaders, that of deputy or associate principals, is largely responsible for the leadership development of middle leaders within all four schools. This person is their leadership mentor and provides them with feedback and are also their appraisers.

> *DPs do their appraisals and their observations and their feedback each term or whenever throughout the term to the end of the year (Monica)*

Damian suggested that much of the learning that middle leaders gain is from *"experience on the job".* These experiences can come from their day-to-day work or ones that are deliberately provided to middle leaders.

> *My role as a principal is to be able to offer challenges to my middle leaders and let them go ahead and do it and make sure that the support systems are around them so if they do fail, then there are the people around them that can pick them up so that you do get that collective autonomy working. (Damian)*

After Barbara discussed an example of a middle leader dealing with an angry parent, Olivia suggested this was an example of *"professional development for them (middle leader) — dealing with angry parents. I mean, it is. You're learning everything, aren't you?"*

At Barbara's school, the middle leaders get feedback and feed-forward from their teams: *"So their team is saying what's going well or what they may need to work on or something like that."* She described this feedback as not being a *"witch hunt"* but providing both the team members with an opportunity to support and help with the development of the team leader, as well as providing the middle leader with

feedback to help continue what is working well and areas in which their leadership needs more development.

As part of their appraisal work, all middle leaders have specific goals around student achievement for students in their own classes. This was taken further at Monica's school: *"Ours (goals) were around our target kids and what our school needs, so it was around getting our senior leaders on board or monitoring those target kids within their teams."* In addition to having school-based achievement targets, leaders at each school were required to have a leadership inquiry. A leadership inquiry is a process of ongoing action, reflection and learning when working through leadership challenges. These inquiries into their own leadership practice differed between each middle leader and were based on a mixture of the needs of the school and the individual middle leaders.

Leadership Support

When beginning in the role of middle leadership, there needs to be time given for the new middle leader to find their feet and grow into the role. Middle leaders are afforded time to develop and are not expected to be complete leaders straight away.

> *I think just wrapping them up a bit so that they feel like they're being trusted and that if they make a mistake, it's okay. I think it's around just building their relationships with the team that they're in. (Monica)*

Having and demonstrating confidence in new middle leaders was seen as an important role that principals play in providing support. *"If you've promoted them to leadership, then you've got to have confidence" (Olivia).* This confidence is demonstrated by giving them autonomy and the *"freedom to make choices" (Olivia).*

Having open communication with the principal was espoused to being key to the development and support of middle leaders. This communication provided to middle leaders is a mixture of formal and informal communication from their principals or

deputy/associate principals. Being available to middle leaders was seen as important support provided by the principals.

> *Open conversations are really important … you always keep the conversation lines open" (Damian)*

> *It's maybe having that what appears a casual conversation, a chat with them, say, at morning tea or something, and you'll pick up things then. (Barbara)*

There was an overall agreement that principals needed to provide middle leaders with autonomy, leadership modelling, time and opportunities to demonstrate their leadership. They suggest that the successful development of middle leaders was largely dependent on the skills of the principals that the middle leaders were working for.

> *I do think their development depends on what the principal's giving them. (Barbara)*

> *You've got to give opportunities to lead and to do things that are different and allow it to go, because otherwise there is no trust. (Olivia)*

The principals stressed that part of their role was to develop middle leaders and build leadership capacity within their schools.

> *I think our job is to grow leaders — part of our job is to grow leaders. (Barbara)*

> *And to build capacity within your school so that if I go, someone else can move in and so on. A school should be able to function without us being there. (Damian)*

The principals see themselves as key to supporting middle leaders. Having hired them, they see it as their responsibility to support the middle leaders. The principals suggested that their roles were not to find fault with the middle leaders but to support

and grow them. *“We're not into guilt. We're not into failure. We're into support.” (Olivia).* This is not to say that leadership practice is not questioned, but it is done in a supportive way, as Monica describes:

> *If I see them* [middle leaders] *behaving in a way that I don't like, I will say to them, 'Can you tell me why... how that happened today? I see you're feeling a bit upset. Can you tell me why?' So that I'm actually telling them what I saw and I didn't really like it without saying it.*

Focus Group Summary

The focus group findings set out the expectations that the principals had of first-time middle leaders, the challenges that they perceived they had, and the support and development that they provide. These expectations included modelling good teaching, fostering relationships, and undertaking administrative tasks. Managing difficult relationships, accountability, and positional tensions were identified as challenges first-time middle leaders face. The principals suggested that middle leaders are supported and developed by senior leaders but are also expected to learn from their colleagues and other middle leaders. The fact that principals had confidence in the new middle leaders was also identified as a way of supporting them. This data will provide quality triangulation to the semi-structured interview data from the middle leaders themselves.

Middle Leader Semi-Structured Interview Findings

This section reports on the findings drawn from the six semi-structured interviews that were conducted with the first-time middle leaders. The data are presented under the key themes of expectations of first-time middle leaders, challenges of first-time middle leaders and support and development of first-time middle leaders. The findings are then broken down into a range of sub themes, which emerged from the data during analysis. Due to the free-flowing nature of semi-structured interviews, the

themes did not necessarily appear during a direct line of questions and came from the connections that the participant was making while they shared their experiences.

Expectations of First-Time Middle Leaders

Teaching and Learning

When asked about their key roles, five of the six participants discussed the importance of their roles as classroom teachers. They saw their role as a teacher as their primary responsibility, with the leadership responsibilities as secondary. This was best articulated by Harry, who said:

> *The first and the most important part is the kids in the classroom; it's not the extra stuff I'm doing at the same time.*

While discussing their classroom teaching responsibilities, three of the respondents also said that the expectation of them to be quality practitioners was also important. They saw it as their responsibility to be up-to-date with current pedagogies and model best teacher practice. This was to ensure that they could model good teaching to others while having the standing to provide advice and feedback.

> *At the end of the day, because I'm in the classroom, they are my first priority, and I guess my teaching practice needs to be up to standard that if someone wanted to come in and observe, then that's what I'm there for. (Lois)*

All six middle leaders discussed that there was an expectation that they led some type of pedagogical aspect within their team or the school. This varied markedly across the different schools, although they all suggested it was their responsibility to work with teachers to support their teaching practice. Four of the leaders added that their role also included working with teachers to improve student achievement outcomes.

It's definitely expected that we're checking in and working alongside teachers in terms of their practice. (Rachel)

My role this year — is to watch that data and monitor progress, be really familiar with the target students of Maori, Pasifika, lower students, really high achieving students and know exactly what we're doing for them all the time. (Selina)

However, there were differences in the lengths at which some of the leaders went when working with teachers. The four middle leaders who lead teams suggested that they work during team meetings to support teaching development. Three of those leaders also spoke of observing and giving feedback to teachers about their practice. This was a mixture of informal and formal processes.

I'll either be wandering through my teachers' classroom and having a chat with their kids and talking pretty informally. I don't tend to write notes. It's just sort of an observation. I just say to the teachers, 'I'm just popping in, having a look round.' (Rachel)

I will get into my teachers' classes during that time, probably once a fortnight, I try. Not a professional observation, just a quick squizzy and talk to the kids and see what's going on. Sometimes it will be more formal. (Oscar)

All middle leaders were asked who decides what development the teachers need. All six of the middle leaders said this came from the Senior Management Team, although five of the middle leaders were part of those teams as well.

We're doing writing PD, so I need to know about that writing PD so I can be able to put it into the team practice. Or if we're doing maths, as we have been doing this year, understanding that PD and why it's important because the others might not get the same type of discussion or view around it, because not everyone can go to the meetings and courses. (Oscar)

> *This year we've got [outside facilitators] providing us with professional development, which I'm leading as literacy leader, but then the team leaders are helping me to implement it. (Selina)*

These quotes also demonstrate that the middle leaders were expected to lead the implementation of school initiatives and work towards achieving school goals.

Relationships

The middle leaders in this study cover a range of different roles and responsibilities however, not all of the participants led specific teams. Two of the middle leaders had responsibilities that ran across the entire school, while the other four had direct leadership responsibilities for year-level syndicate teams. The expectations of how teams were run varied slightly, but all included the notion that they, the middle leaders, were there to provide their teams with both moral and practical advice around teaching and learning. Middle leaders are also seen as leaders of the students within their teams.

> *I'm there to give advice to any of my team if they need to, and we're very open about communication in my team. (Lois)*

> *Just looking after my team and the kids in my syndicate. I go in and chat with them [the teachers] and we do some [unique programme] conversations on their practice. So it's developing the relationship to make sure that they feel comfortable. I try and get in their classes once every couple of weeks — not for a [unique programme] analysis, just to wander in and say hello, get to know them and the kids and see what's happening. (Oscar)*

All the participants saw the management of relationships as a key part of their role. There was general agreement that working effectively with their team members, students, other staff, parents and senior managers was an essential part of their role. Providing a positive and successful working environment was important to the middle

leaders and something that they saw as both part of their job and a way in which to make their job easier.

> *Something that I value above, I think, nearly everything else — is building that team relationship. Because if you don't have that open relationship between your team or even between your support people in senior management, I think that's when your team falls down and doesn't work. (Lois)*

> *I think for me the biggest one is probably the pastoral care, making sure that your teachers and your team are happy that you're cohesively working together but that they're looked after and that they feel supported and that they feel that they can come to you with concerns and problems. (Jane)*

Three of the middle leaders spoke of their role in providing a voice of support to their team members, especially when approaching the Senior Management Team. They suggested that their teams expected them to be their voice to the senior leaders and advocate on their behalf.

> *If there's anything that we're unhappy with or I've got team members that are unhappy, I see my role as sharing that in our senior management meetings so that we can come to some sort of consensus. (Lois)*

> *I had a situation the other day where a teacher was unhappy, so I just volunteered to go up and see the deputy principal and just said, 'I want to have a discussion with you about what people think.' (Oscar)*

When asked to identify any other tasks that they are expected to undertake, four of the six middle leaders discussed their role in supporting students outside of their teaching and learning responsibilities. One of the middle leaders was in charge of monitoring student attendance. Two of the leaders discussed dealing with problem behaviour, while two others discussed how they worked with the parents to help support students' learning and behaviour.

I'm there for my teachers if there are any quite difficult parents or kids. I'm there as a buffer or as the first port of call after the classroom teacher to deal with those kids as well. (Lois)

It's expected that children are the priority and their well-being. (Rachel)

Four of the middle leaders saw themselves as the conduit between the Senior Management Team and their own team. There was the expectation that as members of both teams, middle leaders play a key communicative and instructive role in helping both their team and the Senior Management Team better understand what each team are doing.

I guess, filter down messages from our senior management meetings and our senior management team and filter up, so if there's anything that we're unhappy with or I've got team members that are unhappy, I see my role as sharing that in our senior management meetings so that we can come to some sort of consensus. (Lois)

We're there to share their [the Senior Management Team's] vision and make sure that the school is going the same direction that they want to go and we're sharing that with our team, and we're sort of that bridging gap between the teachers and the management so we're all on the same page, going the same way. (Selina)

Administration

Four of the six middle leaders discussed other responsibilities that they were expected to carry out. These responsibilities were more managerial and administrative in nature but were seen as important parts of their roles. Two of the leaders highlighted organising syndicate trips and camp, while four identified developing an agenda and running a meeting as a core responsibility. Other administrative tasks that were identified included *'ordering resources' (Lois)* and *'sorting out newsletters' (Rachel).*

It's ensuring the teachers within the teams know exactly what they're doing — so running meetings and keeping minutes, there's things like just checking reports. (Selina)

I guess if someone looked at it, they'd see me more as an adminy type person. So if there's anything that needs to be fully organised, like camp or anything like that, I guess that's my role. (Lois)

The middle leaders were asked if as part of their role they were given any classroom release time. Five of the six participants said they did. The time they were provided with varied substantially between the five middle leaders, ranging from a day per week to two days every ten weeks. They were also asked about what they did during this time. Three of the middle leaders used part of their time to observe teaching and learning. Four of the middle leaders suggested they used their time to complete administrative tasks.

When asked what she had been using her release time for, Selina suggested: *Doing walkthroughs and observations and things like that.*

A lot of my time I'm dealing with children who are being quite difficult for their teachers … I guess all that admin stuff. Ordering resources today. When we're finished, I'm going to finish our curriculum map for our team so that I'm ready for our planning meeting on Monday (Lois)

Catching up on the adminy bits — sorting out newsletters or letters or things that we might be organising. Near the end of the term, it's usually looking at the planning and tweaking that to make it a bit easier for the teachers. (Rachel)

Challenges of First-Time Middle Leaders

Tensions

The participants were asked what had been some of the challenges that they faced as first-time time middle leaders and how or if these challenges had been addressed. The four middle leaders who led teams all discussed the challenge of working as part of the Senior Management Team and their own syndicate team. The team leaders see themselves as advocates for both teams; having to deliver messages and ideas from one team to another while being full members of both teams.

> *Sometimes there's conflicts of interest. You know, what [the principal] says might be different to what one of my team members say, because they're at different ends of the schools. I see my job as almost like sitting on the fence in terms of saying, 'Actually, here are the ideas here. I'll take your ideas back.' Just sharing, communicating those ideas. (Oscar)*

> *Making sure that we're that voice for higher up in the school and also the voice for our teachers, making sure that their concerns and their things and thing that are top in their head are being shared back so that workloads and all of that are spread and even. (Rachel)*

All six participants responded that time was an issue when fulfilling all their leadership tasks. As all of the participants had fulltime classroom teaching responsibilities, they needed to complete all their leadership-related tasks during their own time outside of school hours or during their classroom release time.

> *One thing I find quite tricky is balancing time and always having too much to do within the time given. (Selina)*

> *The other challenge is having enough time to do everything. (Harry)*

Three of the middle leaders suggested however that release time was a bit of a balancing act, as they did not like having too much time away from the students in their classrooms.

> *Like, in a way, you want a little bit of release time, because you want to be able to get everything done, but I am finding I'm having a lot of time out of my class, and it's too much (Selina)*

Three of the participants also discussed that although more time would be beneficial, they also had the responsibility to get better at managing their time better and developing time-management skills. They highlighted that some of the important tasks do not get done to a satisfactory level or are not done at all, or they find that things build up and they are then left with a lot of extra work, resulting in increasingly busy periods.

> *I think that's always an ongoing challenge is having the time and the skills to manage your time and organise yourself so that you're actually doing a great job in both areas and not just in one. (Jane)*

> *So it's about having that time management and being able to balance it all. (Harry)*

> *I guess the one thing I don't get time to do is to actually go in and sit in the classrooms and watch what's happening. And I would like to do that more often, but that is something that I often don't have time for. That usually comes last. (Lois)*

While discussing what they found challenging about starting their middle leadership roles, five of the participants discussed some notion of role ambiguity, not fully understanding what the role entailed and what they were supposed to be doing. The middle leaders suggested that they spent much of their first months in the role watching what others did and learning as they went along. Rachel said that *"I think some of it is just that common sense stuff that you go through and you do day to day."*

Right early on, I wasn't sure what the role really looked like, if that's the best word to use for it. (Lois)

I think I always saw leadership as that next step, but didn't really know how you were supposed to... what it really entailed or what it really meant or what the role encompassed. (Rachel)

I think the first challenge was being a team leader was not overly exactly what I thought it was going to be. (Oscar)

When participants were asked if they had a job description, five said they had one; however, how well they were adhered to or understood was not articulated.

Yes, the principal did give me a job description. Just trying to remember. That was six months ago. No, they are documented in what I've got and what bits I have to look after. (Harry)

I'm sure there will be [When asked about a job description]. It's a pretty broad description, though, so I think a lot of things you could kind of slot in even though they're not traditionally our jobs. (Selina)

I don't remember being given, like, a set piece of paper or anywhere on our website that I can think of or our staff site that has an actual written description of what my role is. (Lois)

While discussing the challenges they faced when starting their role, three of the middle leaders suggested that their understanding of leadership and what a leader is was very different to what the role actually was. They suggested that there was the need to then learn and develop a better understanding of leadership if they were to do the job that they were expected to do.

I think the first challenge was being a team leader was not overly exactly what I thought it was going to be. From my previous team leaders that I'd had, I

thought it was more of an adminy kind of role. So when I got into it, I realised, actually, wow, it's not at all; it's much more about leadership. So my mindset had to change on what was a good leader. I think that was quite challenging because you're changing your whole perspective of what the job was. (Oscar)

When I first thought about approaching the role, I thought a bit more of you had to be that person who organised and did everything for the teachers and that if children were being naughty, they were sent to you and all of that sort of stuff. Whereas the actual role is very, very different. So the development has been around my understanding and the expectations around what leadership really looks like. (Selina)

Relationships

A prominent challenge that was brought up by five of the six participants was dealing with people. The relationship challenges that the individual middle leaders had to deal with differed slightly, but all said that dealing with people was a sizeable challenge when starting the role. The prominent issues appeared to be dealing with people who are divisive or not following correct school procedures. Participants spoke of a level of frustration that this provides, while also a level of personal angst for them.

I do have a difficult member of my team. Sometimes it can be quite challenging. Having those open to learning conversations, I think, is a challenge for me. Just working out how to frame the right conversation without losing their respect but still getting the point across. (Oscar)

Challenges would be getting the staff on board, especially with the PB4L. Not everyone's on board in the same capacity. Like, some do it really well, some don't, some choose not to do it at all. And it's just making sure that it's set at a level where everyone's capable of doing it. But that's been a huge challenge. (Harry)

We had some tricky personalities and new teachers into our syndicate, and I found that quite a difficult thing to deal with (Lois)

Three of the middle leaders identified the challenging relationships that they had with members of their teams who were either vastly more experienced than them or had applied for the same position and were then overlooked in favour of the participant. These challenges appear to be internal to the middle leader, as the experienced and overlooked staff members did not necessarily make life difficult, but their mere presence provided a challenging situation for the new middle leaders.

I also had the incumbents that had applied were also then in my team, so it was a very tricky balancing act between proving yourself but also being enough to... having to say, 'I don't know. Let me go find that out,' because I didn't know. They'd been here a long time, and working with those was quite different. (Rachel)

Knowing that there were a few teachers that I had to talk to in my team about certain issues, but I had less experience than them, so I kind of had to overcome that. (Selina)

I was offered the job over the other teacher who had led the year fives, and I didn't want him to feel like I had just started at [the school] and then come in and really wanted to take that job. So I was really aware that I didn't want to step on his toes or anything because he'd been there longer than me. That was a real challenge. (Lois)

Four of the six middle leaders discussed some form of questioning their own ability to lead, to do the job properly. These doubts do not appear to be put on them by the senior leaders but are driven internally by the middle leaders themselves.

'How am I going to lead seven classes?' That was probably my number one challenge. 'Am I really ready to do this?' I'm thinking me personally here. I guess another challenge for me was, 'How am I going to meet what [the Deputy Principal] or [the Principal] is expecting of me? (Lois)

I think self-doubt. A lot of self-doubt in my own abilities and thinking, 'What have I done?' Because you want to do a good job, and I think it came down to me balancing realistic expectations with your own personal wanting of success and things like that. (Rachel)

I always feel like, 'Oh, I should be doing more,' or, 'Am I doing enough?' Some day someone's going to work out that perhaps I don't know what I'm doing and I'm just running around pretending. (Rachel)

For two of the participants, the self-doubt and their perception of whether they could do the job properly almost drove them to give up their leadership responsibilities. The challenges that they faced, particularly around relationship management, made them question their own abilities as leaders and if they still wanted to do the job. Both got through this trying time with support and development, which will be discussed in the next section.

I was pretty honest in that first year, because it was hard. It was really hard. They talk about that pit of despair, and I was in that pit. (Rachel)

There were a few things which I felt like [team member] had undermined me as a senior teacher, and I got my back up and automatic reaction is defence and attack. And then after talking to [the Deputy Principal] many, many times and then ending last year thinking, 'This person's staying. This cannot go on like this.' There was a point last year for a term, the second term, and I thought, 'Actually, I don't want to do this senior teacher role any more,' and I gave myself a term to really think about whether I wanted to continue in this role or not. (Lois)

During discussions about the challenges they faced as first-time middle leaders, four participants felt they needed to prove themselves. Two were new to their particular schools and felt that they needed to prove to the unfamiliar staff that they were worthy of the role. One who was promoted over another candidate from within the school felt the need to prove that she deserved the role. The participant felt that

because she was younger, she needed to prove to her more experienced team that she was up to the task.

> *I guess one of the challenges is because I was new to the school as well, so coming in and then kind of stepping up and getting this role when there's teachers that have been there for a long time. (Jane)*

> *I'm quite young, I haven't been teaching that long, and I think I found that quite tricky just to kind of feel like I really belonged in that leadership team, who are so experienced. (Selina)*

Support and Development of First-Time Middle Leaders

The responses in this section came from questions which asked the middle leader participants to identify what leadership development was to them, what support and development they had received, particularly when starting in the role, and how this support and development has impacted on in their leadership.

Leadership Development

All six participants were asked what their understanding of leadership development was. The responses provided a wide variety of ideas and concepts, ranging in complexity and depth. Three of the middle leaders saw leadership development as learning from an experienced leader and following their advice and guidance.

> *I guess leadership development to me is a combination of having someone who is your support person, who is obviously like a deputy principal or principal who is there to help, as well as a combination of, I guess, formalised professional development where you go and listen to someone speak about what is expected. (Lois)*

Lois mentioned above the notion of external professional development, and this was also prevalent in the ideas of two of the other leaders. Oscar mentioned that *'going*

to a course' was part of leadership development, while Rachel suggested that she saw the external professional development she received as benefiting her leadership, therefore it was an example of leadership development.

Being given the opportunity to lead and learn from the experienced was identified as leadership development by two of the participants. This was where the middle leaders were able to try new things and then see if they worked or not. Going through this process would then allow them to identify what they did or did not do well and therefore develop their leadership.

> *Leadership development [pause] I think it's about giving me the ability to basically run an area — so, having the confidence to run an area and change it if I need to. I see it as an ability to grow in myself the ability to change something and make it better. (Harry)*

> *And being given the opportunities as well. So for me, it's putting yourself out there and being enthusiastic and saying, 'This is who I am. This is what I've got. What can you offer me in terms of an opportunity.' (Jane)*

Two of the participants suggested that reflecting on what they can do better, what they have done and what they have learnt is leadership development. They were the only two participants who saw an internalised process of thinking about leadership and the next steps required as leadership development.

> *So the development would be, for me, the support that I've had in place as I've gone through that process and then the reflection afterwards. (Jane)*

> *When I think of development, it's being able to better what you're doing. So leadership development — looking into your own practice and looking at ways to further progress or enhance or make better, I guess, what you're doing and what's expected. (Rachel)*

The participants were asked how their leadership has been developed. Four of the participants spoke at length of the external leadership development that they had

received. For three of the middle leaders, external facilitators had been brought into the school to work with all the leaders to develop their leadership. In the fourth instance the principal directed the middle leader to participate in a middle leadership Professional Learning Group (PLG), again run by an external facilitator. All of the participants found that this was having positive impacts on their own leadership development.

> *With the leadership PD, we had a lot of work around a guy called [external] facilitator coming in, and he has worked just on developing leadership, so he's the one who's introduced all the leadership matrixes, and he's done a whole lot of Viviane's [Robinson] readings with us and Helen Timperley's and has kind of looked at us as a leadership team. He's helped develop goals where we want to go and then kind of taken us in those directions. (Oscar)*

> When discussing the PLG: *We sit there for a couple of hours and just talk about things that are going on in our schools, and it's great to see that they've got the same sort of problems. You've got your staffing issues and you've got your kids issues and things like that, and they're all roughly similar. So it's great to talk about that, and at the same time you get professional readings and things to do on how to do things. (Harry)*

External professional development courses were also identified as being one of the leadership development processes by four of the middle leaders. These ranged from a single-day course to a multi-day conference. Three of the middle leaders suggested that this was good for their development and that they learnt something from the courses which they attended.

> *Nothing in the past. However, I am going to a leadership hui in the holidays, so that's probably, I guess, my first outside of school PD. (Lois)*

> *Just recently we went to Australia for a leadership course. It was Trans-Tasman principals, I think it was. And that was really beneficial, because it had a lot of good speakers there. We just went to the one in Auckland, Sky City. And again just being able to see the direction of schools and policies and*

why they're implemented, it's really good for a leader, so then you can understand why people are doing that in your school, and then you can help build that up around your school. (Oscar)

Jane, who was in her first year in the role, had not had any leadership development at that time. When asked about her development, she responded with *'Not yet, no. But as part of our appraisal programme, we are expected to write regular reflections on our practice which is related to our goals that we've set for ourselves as well. So that's kind of a check-in system, I suppose, without the direct face-to-face.' (Jane)*

Five of the six participants said that much of their development came from conversations with their principal or deputy/assistant principals. They identified these relationships as having positive impacts on their leadership development. Using the senior leaders for guidance when dealing with new or challenging situations was common. The interaction with the senior leaders took the form of either informal meetings, where a specific topic or idea is discussed, or a more formal appraisal discussion on their leadership practice.

I've talked to [the principal] about it a couple of times, about how to deal with situations. I've talked to [the deputy principal] about it, who have quite differing views about how to deal with something difficult. (Lois)

Something [the principal's] taught me is that you've got to ask questions. As a principal, that's what you've got to do. You've got to ask those questions and go, 'Hey, why are you doing this? Why are you doing that? How come we're doing this?' just to keep it going and keep it actually at the focus. (Harry)

Our appraisal conversations are quite nice. We're released from class time for about an hour and really just sitting down, looking at practice, talking about lots of, 'How's it going? What are you finding? What do we need to work on? What are your goals?' Pretty open, pretty frank. I find them quite helpful. (Rachel)

Oscar was able to articulate the interconnectedness and impact on the variety of leadership development that he received and how it has made a difference in his leadership practice.

> *I think with all the extra support from Jill and the readings and the research and the PD, I think I've become a far better leader in terms of I've gone further than what I thought the job was. I've learnt a lot. And I think that just the focus of learning instead of admin, and leadership rather than managing is just more beneficial. And I've moved from thinking it was admin and management to leadership and learning. And I think it's beneficial for everyone. So it's made a very large impact, because it's changed the whole view of the job. (Oscar)*

Three of the middle leaders also spoke of whole leadership team development. This was where the Senior Management Team were either learning together or the senior leaders were working with the middle leaders on specific leadership development. This was suggested as a 'one-size-fits-all' approach and not targeted to the individual middle leaders' specific developmental needs; however, those needs are still catered for in other instances.

> *Senior teacher meetings. We do some adminy stuff, but it's also some learning stuff in there as well. So we read Viviane Robinson, and then we read the Mindsets book — well, part of the Mindsets book — and sometimes [the principal] or [the deputy principal] will have something else for us to read and reflect on. (Oscar)*

> *So, yeah, there's the one size fits all, where we're all doing some similar PD and then there's the individual stuff depending on what we're on and what we're doing. (Harry)*

While being asked about what leadership development they received, a theme emerged about the leadership team all learning the same things. Four of the participants talked about the leadership development taking on a 'one-size-fits-all' approach. There were often school initiatives or goals that dictated any group professional development.

I guess we're working more as a team than individuals. We're looking for common areas to work on. (Oscar)

I think we all have similar development. (Jane)

I think it's a group, one-size-fits-all approach pretty much. I mean, we've all done exactly the same. We've all either taken it on board or haven't taken it on board. And, yeah, there's not really been anything specific for me as a leader as such. (Selina)

So, yeah, there's the one-size-fits-all, where we're all doing some similar PD, and then there's the individual stuff depending on what we're on and what we're doing. (Harry)

As the responses show, the middle leaders felt that there is a common development plan that they fit into rather than one existing specifically for them. However, the four participants also suggested that they did have some sort of individual leadership development as well.

Leadership Support

When asked about the support they had when starting their role as a middle leader, all six of the participants said they felt well supported by their principals and/or their deputy principals. The participants felt that they were able to go to their senior leaders for advice and guidance and that when they did, they tended to have positive experiences. Both Rachel and Lois used the term ‘mentor’, while Harry described his principal in similar terms when discussing the relationship with their deputy principal/ principal.

[Deputy Principal] she is my support person, and I will ask her anything at any time of the day or night, and I guess she's been [pause] she's the one that is

developing me into this role. I can't really say anything more than that. I could talk her up, but she's just been amazing. (Lois)

I think we're really lucky and have a really supportive system above us, and I think having those conversations and saying if anything's going wrong, having that flexibility to be able to go and say, 'Hey, I'm having this concern,' and knowing that it's not a reflection on you but finding those solutions and things like that. (Rachel)

Our DP who left was really good at supporting again, and he would be really open to us coming in and would talk through situations, and that was really good. (Selina)

Three of the participants also spoke of the confidence that their senior leaders had in them to do the job and to try new things. The middle leaders saw the confidence the senior leaders had in them as a real positive and provided them with motivation to continue to work hard.

But it was her ability or her confidence in me to just take it and run with it. … She has that confidence in us to allow us to do our job, basically. (Harry)

I guess looking back, it was a nod from [the DP] to say actually, 'You're doing a good job. I trust you enough to lead this.' (Lois)

One of the recurring themes to come out of the participants' responses was the idea of learning from their fellow middle leader colleagues. Five of the six first-time middle leaders saw their more experienced counterparts as valuable sources of knowledge and support. These relationships were not formally established like a typical appraiser/appraisee situation. The middle leaders appeared to find a natural support in those who were in a similar role and who had been through the same things that they were going through.

But then between the three of us, we work really, really well together, and that's why we're starting the hub — is because we plan very well together, we

get on very well together. So working together, we're all quite flexible; it doesn't matter what comes up, we can cover. (Harry)

There was support from the other senior teachers. The year five senior teacher in particular has been quite good. He shares ideas, and we work quite well together, so he was always happy to help out and support where necessary. (Oscar)

I think last year I probably worked a lot more with other middle management, other senior teachers to really use their expertise and what they're doing with their teams (Rachel)

Participants were also asked if they had received feedback specifically regarding their leadership from either their principals, deputy principals or from the staff which they led. All six participants spoke of informal, anecdotal situations where the principal or deputy principal would speak to them generally in response to an activity of leadership, such as having to run a staff meeting.

A lot of it is informal when we're having a chat about stuff. So she'll go, 'That situation there, I don't know if you did that 100% correctly. Maybe you could've tried this or this.' And on other times, she'll go, 'Oh, that was a fantastic idea. Look, everyone's taken it on,' and things like that. So a lot of the feedback is informal. (Harry)

Formal appraisal feedback was identified by two of the participants. The focus of these discussions where specifically around the participants' leadership, what they are doing well and what they need to work on. Two other participants spoke of generic leadership feedback given to the middle leaders as a group, but this was not specific to their leadership.

When we have our appraisals, there's always feedback and there's always a next learning step, and we kind of use that leadership matrix to assess ourselves and kind of decide where we're going to go. To be honest, I couldn't... I'm just trying to think back to... I haven't done it since last year, but

we highlighted it and talked about our next steps. Probably due for another one, actually. (Oscar)

You know, as a whole group at, you know, our senior leadership meetings, they might've said... you know, they say things like, 'Ensure you keep clarity within teams, and are passing on the information, and staying professional,' that kind of thing, but I haven't really had anything specific to me as a leader. (Selina)

When asked if they had received feedback from the staff they lead, two middle leaders spoke about getting feedback from staff other than their direct managers. In Jane's situation there was a school-wide system where reflection was promoted through procedure and a purpose-use software programme, which she found useful. Whereas Selina felt the feedback she had received from her team to be *'somewhat surface kind of feedback'* and did not offer her any guidance around what she needed to work on. Selina was somewhat understanding, though, as she stated that *"I don't think I would've felt comfortable giving feed-forward to my superiors".*

Obviously it happens naturally in the staffroom or just in conversation. But we also have a programme which is part of our appraisal system, and there's a box at the bottom where you can get feedback from anyone who's on the system, and they can give you feedback on what you've done well or what you've actually written. (Jane)

I think what they wrote was genuine, but I think that they probably, you know, missed out anything that I could improve on. (Selina)

The other leaders said that there had been informal instances where their team had given them feedback on an activity or idea but not on their leadership. When the participants were prompted with the question about seeking feedback, there was a mixed response in that Harry thought of it as a potential positive: *"No, I haven't, [received feedback from staff] and that's probably something I could do."* Whereas Rachel had her reservation: "*I'm probably too scared to ask".*

Leadership Goals

When participants were asked if they had specific leadership goals, five of the six said that they did; however, some of them found it challenging to recall what their current goals were. The goals varied across the participants, with some goals being specific skill development, while others were far broader. The participants suggested that the goals were linked to their performance appraisal and were set annually and discussed and monitored throughout the school year.

> *My goal off hand is around communication, getting that succinct and being a bit more evidence based type stuff. (Harry)*
>
> *Just on my appraisal, yeah, and I think it was around open to learning conversations. That was what I was working on because I found it difficult. (Oscar)*
>
> *For me, it's been around probably the discussions with teachers that I've been really focusing on. Trying to get them looking into their own practice without me saying answers but getting them to drive what they want. (Rachel)*
>
> *I do have a specific leadership goal. I had one last year, which was to just understand all the different roles that a leader has and to become really confident with that. (Selina)*
>
> *But my goal last year was to develop my own leadership within the school and to be able to take on a bit more responsibility and be able to work with others, new staff, for example; I was new to the school as well. (Jane)*

Semi- Structured Interviews Summary

The findings of the semi-structured interviews showed that first-time middle leaders have a range of leadership responsibilities as well as being classroom teachers. They have a number of challenges that range from not having a full understanding of their own role, to dealing with complex relationships, which appear to have negative

effects on their confidence. They all received a range of support and leadership development, although the quality and effectiveness is questionable.

Documentary Analysis

The principal participants from the focus group and the middle leader participants from the semi-structured interviews were asked to provide job descriptions and appraisal documents that would help develop a richer picture of the experiences of middle leaders as well as providing additional triangulation. Three middle leaders provided their job descriptions and appraisal documents, with one participant saying she did not have a job description or any type of leadership appraisal. Three of the principals provided job descriptions for middle leadership positions from within their schools. To provide confidentiality to the principals the documents they provided have been named in such a way so that neither them or their schools can be identified.

Of the six different sources of documents, two combined their job descriptions with their performance appraisal requirements. This single document had the job expectations along with the practicing teacher criteria and the middle leaders goals. Examination of these documents demonstrated that the emphasis was clearly on teaching, as the leadership aspect was relatively small.

Job Descriptions

There were substantial differences in the presentation of the job descriptions across the documents. All of them had a list of tasks that were expected of middle leaders; however, there were sizeable differences in their specificity and number.

Alpha School provides a separate, single page job description. The job description is broken down into five areas of responsibility, pupil management, colleagues, programmes, administration, and monitoring. Within each of these areas, three to five key tasks were listed, such as, under administration, '*arranging meetings'*, and

under colleagues, '*support and guidance for team members*'. In total there were 17 different middle leadership tasks listed. The job description was used as a working document where tasks were ticked when they were 'achieved' or 'not achieved' and goals where written at the bottom.

Beta School combined their job description with their appraisal document. They used a mixture of the *'Leading from the Middle'* document, the Educational Leadership Model, from within the *'Leading from the Middle'* document, and their own school ideas. They also use the Registered Teacher Criteria Five, 'Shows leadership that contributes to effective teaching and learning', as an overarching guideline. The school's expectations are mainly taken from *'Leading from the Middle'* and are framed by the four key areas of leadership as defined by the Educational Leadership Model. Within the four key areas of pedagogy, culture, systems, and partnerships and networks, an overarching expectation statement was made. For example under pedagogy, the expectation was *'Has a good understanding of good pedagogy and research around catering for the learning needs of all individuals'* and under partnerships and networks *'Demonstrate effective communication skills when interacting with students, colleagues, families/whānau and wider community'*. Within each of the four expectations, there were examples of observable behaviours and space for the middle leader to provide evidence and examples of how they met the expectations.

Delta School again provided a combined document of the job description and the appraisal information. However, the middle leadership job description was a small list at the front of the document under the title 'Primary Objectives'. Included in this list were tasks such as *'Teach pupils in Room* (number)*', 'Syndicate leader of* (name of team) *syndicate', 'Overall management of the behaviour and learning of the* (name of team) *syndicate'.* These were the only leadership expectations lists, as the rest of the document was about the middle leaders' teaching practice.

Jane's job description was very clear. The tasks were under headings taken from the school's strategic plan and linked to what the school goals were. Her tasks were listed, and what she was supposed to do to achieve these tasks listed next to them. This job description provided a rationale essentially about why she was set those

tasks by linking them to the strategic direction and aims of the school. The expectations were linked to her task so that it was clear what she was supposed to do to accomplish her tasks. There were 17 key tasks under six different headings, such as, *'Participation and Engagement', 'Quality Teaching'* and *'Community and Connection'.*

Selina's job description was a separate document that was high on specific detail about what she was expected to do. Five clear leadership expectations were listed, and under each expectation there was a range of between three to eight associated tasks. For example, one of the leadership expectations was to *'Improve outcomes for all students, with a particular focus on Maori and Pasifika'*, and the associated tasks included '*Know our Maori and Pacific students and establishing a group on* [student management system]. *Analysing their achievement data and participation across the school.'.* The associated tasks ranged in complexity and were a mixture of pedagogical responsibilities such as '*Ensure PLGs are student and teacher learning focused by using progress and achievement data'*, administrative tasks, for example, *'PLG organisation - plan an agenda,'* and a variety of other tasks, such as *'Parent liaison through professional communication'.*

Rachel had a combined job description and appraisal document. She had three broad expectations alongside a series of indicators. These expectations were called 'Expected Outcomes'. Additionally, there was space for her to record evidence of her work in achieving these outcomes, as well as space for her appraiser to comment. The three expected outcomes are: '*Proactively supporting and leading school wide initiatives from the schools strategic plan.', 'Ensuring that all syndicate team members are fully involved in implementing school wide initiatives (from each year's annual plan).'* and *'Ensuring that all teachers are working towards common and consistent outcomes relating to school wide initiatives.'.* The indicators appear to be the tasks required to fulfil these expected outcomes. The indicators include, *Assist with, and proactively support, relevant staff meetings relating to initiatives, Trial and model, to team members, strategies that support the strategic initiatives,* and *Initiate professional learning conversations in syndicate, senior teacher and whole staff meetings.*

As the information presented shows, there was a wide range of job descriptions from the very detailed to the relatively vague. The information shared by the participants, therefore, highlights the notion of role ambiguity that some leaders suggested was an issue. The mix of pedagogical, staff, student, administrative task was evident across five of the six the job descriptions which again supports what was shared by both the principal focus group and the middle leaders during the interviews.

Leadership Goals

From the appraisal documents provided by three of the middle leaders, the goals were analysed to see if they were aligned to what was said during the interviews. The goals in their appraisal documents were a mixture of school goals, teaching goals and leadership goals. The leadership goals that were present in their individual appraisals suggest multifaceted learning and tasks that provide a variety of different outcomes.

> *To understand my role better as a leader so that I can promote further teacher and learning, within my team, that will make a difference to the learning of our students (and our school, also through my readings of Student-Centred Leadership by Vivianne Robinson) Through this, my confidence will develop further, alongside my knowledge and understanding of my leadership role. (Rachel's Goal)*

As Rachel's goal suggested, she wants to better understand her role, and in doing so it should lead to outcomes such as the promotion of teaching and learning, and her confidence and leadership knowledge improving.

> *Throughout the year I am using coaching skills competently and intuitively to assist the teachers within my team to develop their leadership capabilities and work towards achieving their goals to ensure we have an effective and balanced team. (Selina's Goal)*

Selina's goal is perhaps more of a task, as it suggests she will use existing skills to develop her team's leadership capabilities so that they can achieve their goals.

Despite suggesting that she had a leadership goal during the interview, Jane's appraisal document shows an array of teaching goals such as *'Aligning my (Jane's) Te Reo Maori component more closely with my weekly lesson planning'*, and there is no evidence of a leadership goal.

Leadership Development

The appraisal documents offered little insight into the development of the middle leaders. Only two of the middle leaders provided access to their complete appraisal documentation. In Rachel's she had a list of the external and internal teaching and leadership professional development that she had received. While not necessarily providing a list, Selina had a number of reflections based on the development courses and things she was trying. In both documents there was little feedback or comment from their appraiser or a senior staff member.

Documentary Analysis Summary

The analysis of the job descriptions showed that there was a broad range of expectations that middle leaders are to undertake. These expectations differ across schools and individual leaders. The range of detail varies widely; however, all the job descriptions to some degree have the expectations that middle leaders have some responsibly for leading pedagogy, staff and students, and are required to undertake a variety of administrative tasks. The appraisal documents, while providing little detail into how middle leaders are developed, did help confirm the leadership goals that the middle leaders had and provided insight into some of the professional development that occurred.

Chapter Summary

This chapter has presented the findings gained from the analysis of data which had been collected from a focus group of principals, a series of semi structured interviews of middle leaders, and an analysis of participant provided documents. The findings show that middle leaders undertake a wide variety of leadership tasks, which are done alongside a heavy classroom teaching responsibility. This work provides middle leaders with number of challenges that come from taking on such a complex role. First-time middle leaders are provided with support and development for their role, with varying effectiveness and quality. The next chapter will discuss these findings as well as provide some recommendations and conclusions.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS
CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

This chapter brings together the analysis of the findings of my research and the relevant literature presented in Chapter Two. The discussion is presented under two headings: the role of the primary school middle leader; and middle leadership support and development. This discussion looks at how the expectations of middle leaders result in a number of challenges, and the part that support and development plays in how first-time middle leaders perform their role and work through these challenges.

Following the discussion of my findings, the conclusions of my research will be presented along with my recommendations. I will also discuss the strengths and limitations of my research and propose areas for further study.

This study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the expectations held of primary school middle leaders in the perceptions of principals and middle leaders themselves?
2. What challenges do first-time middle leaders face?
3. What is the nature of the support given to first-time middle leaders in New Zealand primary schools?

The Role of the Primary School Middle Leader

Teaching and Learning

My research demonstrated almost universal agreement from both the middle leaders and the principals that the priority for middle leaders is their own individual

classrooms. More than that, however, middle leaders need to demonstrate and model current best teaching practices. Essentially, middle leaders need to be good classroom teachers in order for them to be able to work with and improve other teachers' practice. This is articulated best by one middle leader, Lois, who said:

> *At the end of the day, because I'm in the classroom, they are my first priority, and I guess my teaching practice needs to be up to standard that if someone wanted to come in and observe, then that's what I'm there for.*

This is consistent with Fletcher-Campbell (2003), who found that middle leaders felt they needed to be competent teachers and that principals held the much higher expectation that they should be excellent teachers. While the middle leaders in my study did not necessarily consider themselves to be better teachers than their teacher colleagues, they did acknowledge that it was their responsibility to be good practitioners. Struyve et al's (2014) research of Flemish primary and secondary school middle leaders found similar results where the middle leaders saw themselves as teachers first and foremost. My findings revealed that the middle leaders' saw themselves as teachers first and leaders second.

Ambiguity of Role

My findings demonstrate that one of the main challenges that first-time middle leaders faced was that they did not necessarily understand what they were expected to do in terms of both leadership tasks and what it means to be a leader. Five of the interview participants reported that they did not fully understand what the role entailed and what they were supposed to do. Similar results were found in the research of Hammersley-Fletcher and Kirkham (2007), who suggest that there is a lack of understanding in some schools regarding what middle leadership involves and the scope of their activities. Five of the participants suggested that they did not really know what to do, as illustrated by Rachel, who said *"I think I saw leadership as that next step, but didn't really know how you were supposed to [pause] what it really entailed or what it really meant or what the role encompassed".* There was also the suggestion from three of the middle leaders that they misunderstood what the role involved. They originally saw the role as being *"more of an adminy kind of role"*

(Oscar) and that you *"had to be that person who organised and did everything for the teachers" (Selina).* Those middle leaders discussed the fact that they needed development to help them to understand what leadership looks like. This suggests that there are perhaps preparation or perception issues about what middle leadership entails.

Five of the middle leaders said that they had job descriptions; however, there was ambivalence as to what they contained and it was clear that they were not used as a guiding document in their day-to-day work. The principals advocated that it was important to get the *"job descriptions quite nailed at the beginning and then be clear about what their jobs are" (Monica).* However, the job descriptions that were provided for the documentary analysis suggest that this is not necessarily the case. Many of the job descriptions used either a very broad approach that was light on detail, or the opposite where there was a substantial, perhaps an overwhelming, level of detail about what a middle leader was expected to do. The challenge of developing job descriptions for middle leaders is made more difficult due to the large number of divergent tasks that they do, a view supported by Struyve et al. (2014). Bennet's (2008) research into first-time leaders in New Zealand secondary schools found similar results in that there was a generic nature to middle leader job descriptions and that schools appeared to have given little thought into unpacking the detail of the role. Further complicating this is the fact that middle leadership roles in New Zealand schools are often uniquely developed for the needs of the individual school (Ministry of Education, 2012), and therefore generalisations will not necessarily provide middle leaders with the direction and focus that they need.

Leading Learning

My research found that there was the expectation that middle leaders had some form of pedagogical leadership within their teams or the school. The principals suggested that this was, in fact, the key leadership role of the middle leader and that they were expected "*to be able to go into classrooms and model good practice" (Damian)* along with working with teachers "*around our target kids and what our school needs, so it was around getting our senior leaders on board or monitoring those target kids within their teams." (Monica).* This is consistent in the literature, which suggests a core role

of middle leaders is to help teachers develop their practice (Bassett, 2016; Blanford, 2006; Cardno, 2012; Heng & Marsh, 2009; Ministry of Education, 2012; Robinson et al., 2009). There was a difference, however, between how the middle leaders saw this aspect of their role and the perspectives of the principals. Four of the middle leaders suggested that there was the expectation that their role included working with teachers to support their teaching practices, and only two indicated that their role included using student data to improve teaching practices. None of the middle leaders spoke about modelling practice for a teacher, instead using terms such as *'working alongside'*, *'give advice',* and *'have conversations about their practice".* This aligns with Bassett's (2016) research of secondary school middle leadership which found that much of the staff development came from informal interactions that were underpinned by positive relationships.

Pedagogical leadership was provided mainly in the form of syndicate meetings, which had a focus on the improvement of teaching practices. This is supported by Grootenboer et al. (2015) who found that middle leaders tend to exercise their leadership from alongside their peers. All six middle leaders reported that the pedagogical focus and professional development needs of these meetings came predominantly from the direction of the senior management team. Oscar suggested the reasons behind the initiatives were that *"we've looked at the data. So we're doing maths and writing because our data is... our boys are behind in writing, and our Maori children, especially, are behind in maths, so it's improving those practices".* Cardno (2012) and Bush (2009) propose that professional development has a dual purpose of supporting the goals of the organisation and the personal development of the individual. However, it was unclear from my research how much of a role the middle leaders played in the identification of the individual development needs of the teachers, as the focus appeared to be weighted more towards the strategic needs of the schools

Managing Relationships

Four of the six middle leader participants in my research had responsibilities for leading syndicate teams, while the other two middle leaders had no specific team, yet led learning across the school. Relationships were prominent in the discussions

of all the middle leaders and even more so for those who led teams. It was clear that collegial relationships were very important to them. This is similar to the research of Fitzgerald and Gunter (2006), who suggest that leading learning at any level in a school involves influencing and working with others in a highly collaborative, collegial and supportive environment. When discussing relationships with staff, it appears that the middle leaders placed the happiness and wellbeing of their teams as paramount; they essentially wanted their team to be happy. "*I think for me the biggest one is probably the pastoral care, making sure that your teachers and your team are happy" (Jane).* It was unclear if developing these relationships were particularly important to them as new leaders or not. The principals did, however, make this explicit, suggesting that development of relationships within their teams was important for new leaders. "*I think it's around just building their relationships with the team that they're in. (Monica)".* The principals also suggested that new middle leaders are afforded more time in which to develop these relationships, which is supported in the literature by the notion that: successful relationship building requires time, resources, trust and support from senior management (Fitzgerald & Gunter, 2006; Grootenboer et al., 2015; Robinson et al, 2009; Struyve et al., 2014).

My research revealed that relationships play a substantial role in the work of middle leaders and appear to provide first-time middle leaders with their most difficult challenges. The middle leaders in Busher's (2005) research found negotiating and interacting with colleagues to be quite challenging and that persuading colleagues to follow policy and practice, especially with diverse people, was very difficult. The principals suggested that in their experience middle leaders' biggest challenges appeared to be managing difficult relationships. The issues that they put forward were *"people wanting to do things their own way" (Damian),* and they used the example of a situation where there was a lack of respect from older teachers for a new middle leader. My research found that the prominent issues when dealing with challenging relationships were divisive team members and those who did not follow correct school procedures. The effect on the middle leaders ranged from simple frustrations to the severe, where two middle leaders had considered quitting their leadership role. Blanford (2006) suggests that a middle leader with responsibility for leading people will always have problems and dilemmas and how middle leaders approach difficult people often reflects their own personal integrity. However, my

research found that many of the potential problematic relationships were identified prior to the new middle leader starting their role. This creates questions around how middle leaders are prepared and supported when stepping into situations where there are already probable relationship challenges.

Positional Importance

My research highlighted that middle leaders operated as the conduit between their teams and the senior leaders, consistent with Fitzgerald's (2009) findings. This provided both opportunities and challenges for the first-time middle leaders. Three of the middle leaders saw that it was their role to advocate for their team, for their people. There appeared to be a genuine interest in wanting to look after their colleagues, as Lois describes, "*if there's anything that we're unhappy with or I've got team members that are unhappy, I see my role as sharing that in our senior management meetings so that we can come to some sort of consensus."* This finding is comparable to several pieces of research that found middle leaders play a sizable role in the advocacy of their colleagues (Bennett et al., 2007; Busher, 2005; Grootenboer et al., 2015).

More than just advocacy, however, my research indicated that middle leaders acknowledged their role in supporting the initiatives and ideas of the senior management teams and principals while simultaneously working through issues in a collaborative way. The principals from the focus group too saw this as a key part of the middle leader's role and acknowledged the potential challenges that it provides. *"It's a tricky position in lots of ways, because they run the fine line of working alongside the colleagues but being a leader" (Monica).*

The middle leaders in this study offered that while they played a part in both their own syndicate teams and the senior management teams, the idea of divided loyalties did not appear to be an issue. While the research of Heng and Marsh (2009) and Bennett et al. (2007) did find that middle leaders felt vulnerable and had a sense of divided loyalties, the middle leaders in my research appeared to accept it was their role and were compliant. Oscar describes almost an impartiality when working through issues:

> *Sometimes there's conflicts of interest. You know, what [the principal] says might be different to what one of my team members say, because they're at different ends of the schools. I see my job as almost like sitting on the fence in terms of saying, 'Actually, here are the ideas here. I'll take your ideas back.' Just sharing, communicating those ideas.*

This was a common feeling among the four middle leaders who had responsibilities for leading teams. It is clear, however, that middle leaders are in a position where they may find it difficult to have strong opinions, as there is the expectation that they need to work *"as part of a management team supporting their teachers, supporting me as a principal" (Damian).*

Time

Time was an issue for all the middle leaders. Interestingly it did not appear to matter how much time each leader was given, as the disparity between how much classroom release each middle leader received varied from as little as two days a term through to a day a week; the lack of time was still an issue. It was also a common issue in much of the middle leadership research (Bassett, 2016; Busher, 2005; Fletcher-Campbell, 2003; Grootenboer et al., 2015; Struyve et al., 2014).

The findings of this study highlighted one of the unique challenges facing primary school middle leaders. Unlike those middle leaders in secondary school who are allocated a number of different classes to teach a day, the vast majority of primary schools are structured in such a way that a single teacher teaches the same group of students all day, every day, for the entire year. Essentially any time out of the class to fulfil leadership responsibilities meant that they were away from their students; as Selina described, "*I am finding I'm having a lot of time out of my class, and it's too much".* This is consistent with the findings of Fletcher-Campbell (2003), who found that middle leaders disliked being called away from their class. The principals felt this to be a difficult balancing act, as they suggested that as classroom teachers they should spend their time during the day within their own classrooms and that much of the leadership work should occur outside of school time. *"It's after hours when they*

do their collective reflection or thinking through, 'What's our next step? What do we need to change here?'" (Olivia). There was, however, an acknowledgment that they did not want middle leaders working all night. The principals suggested that the release time they provide should be used for working with teachers on improving practice. The reality was somewhat different. Only three of the five middle leaders who had regular release time suggested using some of this time to observe in classrooms. *"I will get into my teachers' classes during that time, probably once a fortnight*" *(Oscar).* However, there was little indication outside of observing teaching and talking to students as to what the middle leaders actually did to improve the teachers' practice. Four of the middle leaders spoke of using this time to undertake administrative tasks, such as organising camp, planning, ordering resources, sorting out newsletters and working with misbehaving students. This finding is fairly consistent with the research of Busher (2005), who observed that middle leaders often found themselves using classroom release time to undertake such tasks. This is concerning, as Gurr and Drysdale (2012) found that less effective middle leaders focus almost exclusively on administrative tasks. The literature suggests that in order to improve student learning, it is important that the quality of teaching and learning is constantly monitored (Adey, 2000; Bennett et al., 2007; Blanford, 2006; Burton & Brundrett, 2005; Gurr & Drysdale, 2012). However, the middle leaders in my research appeared to use little of their time for this. In fact, Lois admitted that "*I guess the one thing I don't get time to do is to actually go in and sit in the classrooms and watch what's happening. And I would like to do that more often, but that is something that I often don't have time for. That usually comes last".* This would suggest that the lack of time is not the only issue, but also how that time is being used. This finding is similar to those of Bennett et al. (2007) and Glover et al. (1998), who observed that middle leaders were prone to avoiding the more difficult task of working with staff to improve teaching and learning and that they focused more on their administrative tasks, as they were less challenging.

The job description and leadership development must play a role in focussing the work of middle leaders to what is really important. In fact, three of the four middle leaders also suggested that although more release time would be beneficial, they acknowledged their need to develop better time management skills. This would therefore indicate that the lack of time is not necessarily an isolated issue and that

appropriate development is required to assist middle leaders in how to prioritise and use their time effectively and efficiently.

Confidence

My research found that confidence played a significant part in the experiences of first-time middle leaders. Confidence seemed to play a part in many of the ideas that have been discussed. These include the difficult relationships that were particularly challenging for two of the participants. *"They talk about that pit of despair, and I was in that pit" (Rachel).* It would suggest that when someone is considering resignation, there is a complete loss of confidence in one's own abilities to successfully carry out the role. Confidence however was not only evident in how the first-time middle leaders came up against challenges. Two of the six middle leaders, both of whom were female, expressed some form of what I describe as self-doubt. They appeared to question their own abilities to lead and whether or not they were going to meet the expectations of those who hired them. Moreover, two other participants, again female, felt the strong need to prove themselves to others. They all identified these as challenges that they faced, yet in these instances the challenges appear to be entirely internalised. When middle leaders either appeared to question their abilities or felt that because they were younger or new to the school and needed to prove to others that they were capable leaders, it was never suggested that the principal or other school leaders added to this issue. In fact, all middle leaders spoke in rather positive terms regarding the support that senior leaders gave them, yet they still had these feelings. The research of Eraut (2007) found that it was important for those going through mid-career learning to be confident in having the support and trust of their colleagues. This was the case in the findings of the principal focus groups where they suggested that they needed to demonstrate confidence in the new leaders. "*There's a reason why they've got to here* (middle leadership). *It's because you have seen something big there" (Barbara); "If you've promoted them to leadership, then you've got to have confidence" (Olivia).* So although it appeared that principals supported the first-time middle leaders, it did not change the fact that the middle leaders struggled with internal confidence challenges. There are some parallels with the research of Bennet (2008), who, in his research of first-time subject leaders in secondary schools, observed that they lacked confidence, but this came

generally from not knowing what to do rather than them doubting if they could do the job.

The work of Gronn (1999) suggests that self-belief plays substantial role in how leaders go about their work. The suggestion is that one's potency, competence, and capacity to make a difference to organisational outcomes, along with positive feelings of one's worth and value, are important to recognise. Gronn (1999), citing the research of Zalezik (1967) and Kaplan (1990), suggests that "the strong motivation to achieve and be successful displayed by many leaders and would-be leaders often masks a profound sense of inadequacy and failure" (p. 36). It could be that middle leaders are so determined to do well that the fear of failure or inadequacy creates confidence issues.

Middle Leadership Support and Development

Leadership Development

One of the key findings was what appears to be a limited understanding of leadership development and its practices. This was evident in the responses from both the principals and middle leaders. All participants were asked about their understanding of what leadership development was, and the responses indicate a widely varied understanding. This is consistent with the research of Cardno and Bassett (2015), who found that there was a variety of understandings that exist about the nature and purpose of leadership development as a concept within New Zealand secondary schools. This limited and varied understanding of leadership development is reflected in the experiences of first-time middle leaders.

Findings confirm that the first-time middle leaders all had quite different experiences of leadership development within their schools. Four of the middle leaders suggested that their development was the same or similar to what the other middle leaders were doing in their schools. *"There's not really been anything specific for me as a leader as such" (Selina).* The development generally came from a school-wide initiative and was generally delivered in a meeting with the senior management

team. As Bush (2009) suggests, leadership development has a dual focus to meet the needs of the school and the individual. In this case, two of those four leaders suggested that they were given other more specific leadership development, while the other two felt otherwise. There is some consistency here with what the principals said. The examples of leadership development they provided were: *"working in the leadership team*" (Barbara) or *"I like to take them with me on the leadership days … coming back and sharing, that we actually do it as a team" (Monica).* The principals spoke predominantly on group development as opposed to individual developmental needs of middle leaders.

This is perhaps reflected in the middle leaders' leadership goals. While five of the six middle leaders said they had leadership goals, their articulation of them suggests that they are not a priority, as they used phrases such as *'my goal off hand is'* and *'I think it was around'*. These comments suggest to me that the leadership goals were not something that was at the forefront of their thinking, and that there is a lack of focussed development being provided. This was also reflected in the documents. In fact, it appears that Selina's goal was more of a task than a goal, as it suggested that she use her skills to improve student outcomes. Rachel's goal, on the other hand, lacks specificity, and despite saying she had a leadership goal, Jane's appraisal document showed only teaching goals.

Where middle leaders were provided with individual development opportunities, much of them were 'one off' courses or conferences. It was unclear if these courses were targeted to their individual needs or not. Piggot-Irvine (2006) suggests that these one-off learning experiences lead to very little or no retention in learning or change. In the research of Glover et al. (1998) this was actually the most common experience of leadership development for middle leaders. My research, however, found that although this is a common form of leadership development, it is not the most prominent.

Findings demonstrated that a common form of learning and development for the middle leaders was learning from others and learning as they went. Five of the six middle leaders used the expertise of their middle leader colleagues to solve problems as circumstances arose and to get ideas about how to do things. The

principals also suggested that middle leaders were expected to learn from *"experience on the job" (Damian)* and that they *"want to see them [middle leaders] chatting amongst themselves and learning from each other" (Monica).* The experiences of these middle leaders are similar to those described by Adey (2000) and Gurr and Drysdale, who found that middle leaders often had to rely on watching others as a form of training and learning 'on the job'. Van Velsor and McCauley (2004) contend that although we all learn through experiences, it is essential that "to enhance the development of leaders, we need to help them find, create, and shape a wide range of learning experiences, each of which provide assessment, challenge, and support" (p. 5). The experiences described by the middle leaders suggested that their experiences where not planned learning experiences, but simply a way in which they worked out how to do the role. As discussed earlier, first-time middle leaders struggled with knowing what to do when they started their role, and it appears that one of the ways they worked through that challenge was to learn 'on the job' and from others who have had similar previous experiences.

My research found that much of the middle leaders' development came from conversations they had with their principals or deputy principals. The middle leaders valued the opportunities to talk in both formal and informal settings about their practice or challenges they were dealing with. The middle leaders suggested that these interactions had a positive impact on their leadership. Fletcher-Campbell (2003) obtained similar results where 'in house' mentoring by senior colleagues provided middle leaders with good role models and helped to provide an understanding of the nature of the role. The principals from the focus group suggested that it was their role to develop middle leaders; however, they also admitted that generally it was the deputy or assistant principals who had direct line management responsibility.

Leadership Support

A key finding in my research was how well the middle leaders felt supported by their senior leaders. The middle leaders felt that they could approach the senior leaders for advice or guidance and they would be listened to. Lois articulated the level of support when describing her deputy principal:

she is my support person, and I will ask her anything at any time of the day or night, and I guess she's been [pause] she's the one that is developing me into this role. I can't really say anything more than that. I could talk her up, but she's just been amazing.

The principals suggested that it was important that they supported first-time middle leaders, almost as an obligation, because they had hired them in the first place. The principals also spoke of being available to middle leaders to ensure communication lines are open. Hammersley-Fletcher and Strain (2011) suggest that this is a bit easier in primary schools as opposed to secondary schools, as interactions with people are more common due to their size and structure. The principals also identified that they played a key role in growing leaders and it was important to do so in a supportive way. *"We're not into guilt, we're not into failure. We're into support." (Olivia).* This finding was similar to Bennet's (2008), who found in his research of first-time subject leaders in New Zealand secondary schools that middle leaders had access to the support if they needed it. Although the support that the middle leaders received in my research was very positive, as discussed beforehand, this appears to be despite the fact that some of the first-time middle leaders had confidence issues, self-doubt and the feelings that they needed to prove themselves.

Three of the middle leaders identified that the positive impact from the confidence senior leaders had in them to try new things and lead initiatives improved their motivation for the role. The principals from the focus group indicated that it was important to give first-time middle leaders the *"freedom to make choices" (Olivia)* and that they had a responsibility to demonstrate confidence not only in the middle leader but also in their decision to appoint them in the first place. The research of Grootenboer et al. (2015) found that without exception the support of the school principal, or the direct line manager, either enabled or constrained the practices of the middle leaders. This is reinforced in my research where those middle leaders who had the confidence of their principals where able to initiate and effect change in their schools.

Feedback

My research found that there was inconsistency in the quantity and quality of leadership feedback that was given to first-time middle leaders. All six middle leaders indicated that they had received informal feedback from senior leaders in response to a leadership activity that they had run, such as a staff meeting; while formal leadership feedback was only identified by two of the middle leaders, but there had been a long time between formal discussions. Group feedback was also the reality for two other middle leaders, where they were not given feedback specifically regarding their leadership. The principals suggested it was the role of their appraiser, in most cases the deputy principals, who where responsible for giving middle leaders feedback. "*DPs do their appraisals and their observations and their feedback" (Monica).* The appraisal documents that were analysed showed little feedback or comment from appraisers or the principal, confirming what the middle leaders suggested regarding formal feedback being rare. Two middle leaders had received feedback from their teams, although only one found this useful, as the other one felt her team had not been honest and that perhaps they were afraid to be critical. One of the principals suggested that at their school they sought feedback from the middle leader's team to ask *"what's going well or what they may need to work on" (Barbara).* Eraut (2007), in his research on mid-career leaders, found that there needs to be a mixture of on the spot and formal feedback, particularly early on, as he suggests it is critically important for learning, retention and commitment. My findings indicate that although there appears to be informal feedback occurring, there is a scarcity of formal feedback provided. Middlewood and Cardno (2001) attest that formal appraisal dialogue that allows for the individual to receive feedback is critical for both improvement and development. My research suggests that first-time middle leaders are missing this key component of development.

Conclusions

This research was born out of the experiences that I had personally as a first-time middle leader in a New Zealand primary school. I questioned if the challenges and development that I had were unique to me or were the norm amongst my peers. My research set out to identify the expectations of middle leaders, what were the

challenges first-time middle leaders faced, and what was the nature of middle leaders' support and development in New Zealand primary schools. The results of which were similar to much of the current literature, which is that middle leaders play key roles in both teaching and leadership, yet have unique challenges due to their position within the school hierarchy and the support and development that they receive. Middle leaders have the expectation to undertake a variety of divergent tasks that range in complexity from staff development, monitoring student achievement, and managing relationships, through to ordering books and organising a class trip. All these responsibilities are placed on someone who, in a primary school, is also responsible for their own classroom, which is a full-time job in itself.

My findings conclude that middle leaders play a key role in the communication and implementation of school initiatives and working towards achieving school goals. This occasionally places them in a difficult position where they are part of both the senior management and their own teams. Their position in the middle provides them with opportunities and constraints. As support and advocates for their own team, they could potentially be seen to be at odds with the senior leaders. However, the middle leaders in my research appear to understand their position and work hard to please both groups.

My research found that first-time middle leaders face a number of challenges, in particular, dealing with difficult relationships. For some middle leaders these relationships were so difficult that they questioned if they were even suitable for the job. For the majority of middle leaders confidence played a part in how they felt challenged, whether trying to prove themselves to more experienced colleagues or questioning their abilities to lead. These feelings came despite the fact that they felt supported by their senior leaders.

The challenge of time was also evident in my research. Despite the amount of time they were given, it appeared there was not enough. However, a tension exists where the more time they are given, the more they are away from their students. How the time was used also suggested that middle leaders were not focussing on the key elements of the role and many fell into the work of administration.

The limited understanding of leadership development by both middle leaders and schools appears to be the biggest challenge. If there was a robust understanding, there would be a greater emphasis on the individual needs of the middle leaders. My research has shown that the majority of leadership development is focussed on the needs of the school rather than the needs of the leader. This is reflected too in finding that there is a dearth of formal feedback provided to first-time middle leaders. Much of the learning and development of a middle leader, in the end, comes from doing the job and working with their peers.

I would suggest that it is difficult to separate the expectations, challenges, support and development of middle leaders, and they are, in fact, all delicately intertwined. If middle leaders are appropriately developed and prepared for the role they are expected to undertake, and they are acquiring the skills to work their way through challenges, they will have a greater chance of success. Having ongoing support and development would allow middle leaders to try new things and have the confidence that if they come across challenges, then they would have the tools and people available to help work through them.

The literature suggests that middle leaders are key players in leading teaching and learning in ways that positively impact student learning (Cardno, 2012; Fleming & Amesbury, 2001; Ministry of Education, 2012; Robinson et al., 2009). It would therefore seem paramount that middle leaders be given the support and development opportunities that would see them excel. However, it is not just the responsibility of the senior leaders, but the middle leaders who also need to take more control and responsibility for their own leadership development (Blanford, 2006; Ebbers et al., 2010; Gurr & Drysdale, 2012).

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions of my research there are a number of recommendations that could potentially aid in the effectiveness of middle leaders and look to minimise the challenges they face.

Recommendations for Ministry of Education

In New Zealand schools, beginning teachers are given two years of induction and mentoring from an experienced teacher along with additional classroom release time to help support their additional developmental needs (Education Council, 2016). I propose a similar programme whereby schools are funded and provided resources to meet the needs of new and aspiring leaders. If, as Leithwood et al. (2006) attest, school leadership is second only to classroom teaching as an influence of student learning, then priority needs to be given to leadership development. I recommend a system whereby senior leaders are themselves trained in how to provide support and leadership development, and they in turn work with first-time middle leaders in an induction and mentoring programme. As Bush (2009) suggests, being qualified for the role of a classroom teacher is no longer sufficient for the role of leadership. It is therefore recommended that the Ministry of Education develop an induction and mentoring programme specifically for middle leaders which focuses specifically on their unique roles and challenges.

Recommendations for Schools

My research has shown that there appears to be a lack of understanding of what leadership development is and how it is provided to middle leaders in schools. Notwithstanding the above recommendation, I also recommend schools and senior leaders look to develop a more robust understanding of leadership development and what best practices are in providing it. It is recommended that schools also look to develop systems and processes for better identification and preparation of middle leaders. Their development needs to begin before they start the job. It would be advantageous to develop a clear and robust job description to ensure clarity around the expectations of middle leaders. Middle leaders need to have an individual, co-created, leadership development plan that focuses on the dual purpose of achieving organisational and personal goals (Bush, 2009). Schools should provide quality

leadership mentors who work with first-time middle leaders to support their practice, work through challenges, and frequently provide both positive and constructive feedback. Senior leaders must take an active role in working with middle leaders to ensure they are focussing on their key role of improving student outcomes, which Gurr and Drysdale (2012) suggest is the essential work of an effective middle leader.

An additional recommendation for schools would be for them to provide meaningful classroom release time that allows middle leaders the opportunities to successfully perform their key roles, in particular providing pedagogical support to staff. The release time should also look to create as little impact as possible to the students of the middle leaders. Providing release on a consistent day and at a consistent time, while using the same relieving teacher, should provide the students with continuity and limit any impact on the classroom routines. Providing support and development opportunities to middle leaders to help develop their time management skills and the ability to prioritise is also recommended.

Strengths and Limitations of this Study

The strengths of this study lie in the multiple perspectives that were sought to understand the expectations, challenges, support and development of middle leaders. Not only were middle leaders able to explain in much detail their work, opinions, and ideas, but school principals were able to share their experiences and ideas of middle leadership as well. The use of documents also added important data and offered complementary evidence to that collected during the focus group and semi structured interviews. This helped to provide depth to my research.

This research was of a relatively small scale, and although it provided a rich and detailed picture of the experiences of the participants, one must be careful in drawing conclusions too broadly. The research setting of middle-sized to large primary schools and the criteria that looked for middle leaders who were remunerated for their work, had a formal job title, and had a substantial classroom teaching responsibility may not reflect all middle leadership roles in all New Zealand primary schools.

Areas of Further Research

My research looked into the practices of middle leaders and worked to understand the challenges they face, along with what support and development they receive. To provide a greater insight into the work of middle leaders in New Zealand primary schools, I suggest the following ideas as potential areas of further research:

1) Research to look into how and why middle leaders are selected. Particularly how do senior leaders identify and prepare potential middle leaders and how do potential middle leaders prepare themselves for such a role?

2) My research identified that confidence provided a substantial challenge for middle leaders and in particular the female participants. Further study into the role of gender and middle leadership may be of potential value.

3) As team leadership is the predominant form of primary school middle leadership, research into the perspectives of those being led could provide valuable insight into the potential effectiveness of middle leaders.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Interview Schedule

Thesis Title: *Supporting First-Time Middle Leaders in New Zealand Primary Schools*
Researcher: Nick Shaw
Programme: Master of Educational Leadership and Management

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1) What initially interested you in moving into leadership?

2) What are the leadership tasks that you do?

    2a) How did you know these tasks were your responsibility?

3) What have been some of the challenges you've faced as a middle leader?

    3a) How were these challenges, or have they been addressed?

4) What professional leadership support have you received?

    4a) What impact has this support had on your leadership?
    4b) Do you get classroom release to give you time to perform your leadership role?
    4c) If so, what do you do during this time?

5) What is leadership development?

6) How has your leadership been developed?

7) Do you have plans for further leadership opportunities, senior leadership, principalship for example?

    7a) If so, how do you see your leadership development in regards to these aspirations?

8) Can you tell me about any external professional development opportunities you may have had?

9) Is there anything I have missed?

As this is a semi-structured interview supplementary questions can/will be asked when more explanation or elaboration is needed.

Questions such as …

1) What do you mean by …

2) Could you say some more about …

3) What did you do then?

Appendix B: Organisation Permission Form

[Organisation's letterhead]

Date

Nick Shaw
6a Nielsen Place
Massey
Auckland, 0614

RE: Master of Educational Leadership and Management

Supporting First-Time Middle Leaders in New Zealand Primary Schools

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

I have been given and have understood an explanation of this research project and I give permission for research to be conducted in my organisation. I understand that the name of my organisation will not be used in any public reports.

Signature

Name of signatory

Appendix C: Focus Group Questions

Thesis Title: *Supporting First-Time Middle Leaders in New Zealand Primary Schools*
Researcher: Nick Shaw
Programme: Master of Educational Leadership and Management

Focus Group Questions

1) What are your expectations of middle leaders?

    1a) as a teacher?
    1b) as a leader?

2) Do you think this is the reality for middle leaders?

3) From your experiences, what are the challenges that first-time middle leaders face?

4) What is leadership development?

5) What support and development do you think is required for a first-time middle leader?

6) How do you support your middle leaders' career aspirations?

7) Do you encourage external professional development or study?

8) Is there anything we have missed?

Appendix D: Interview Information Sheet

INFORMATION SHEET FOR INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS

Title of Thesis:
Supporting First-Time Middle Leaders in New Zealand Primary Schools.

My name is Nick Shaw. I am a primary school deputy principal with an interest in leadership development. I am currently enrolled in the Master of Educational Leadership and Management degree in the Department of Education at Unitec Institute of Technology and seek your help in meeting the requirements of research for a thesis course which forms a substantial part of this degree.

The aim of my project is to look at the support and leadership development that first-time New Zealand primary school middle leaders receive. The project will also look at the expectations and challenges that middle leaders face. I request your participation in the following way. I will be collecting data using an interview schedule and would appreciate being able to interview you at a time that is mutually suitable. I will also be asking you to sign a consent form regarding this event. There is flexibility around the venue of the interview, and I am happy to accommodate your timetable and travel where necessary. The duration of the interview will be no more than one hour. You will be provided with a copy of the interview transcript to check for accuracy and will be asked to verify this within a week of receipt of the transcript.

Neither you nor your organisation will be identified in the thesis. I will be recording your contribution and will provide a transcript for you to check before data analysis is undertaken. I do hope that you will agree to take part and that you will find this participation of interest. If you have any queries about the project, you may contact my supervisor at Unitec Institute of Technology.

My supervisor is Martin Bassett and may be contacted by email or phone.
Phone: (09) 815 4321 ext. 8501. Email: mbassett@unitec.ac.nz

Yours sincerely

Nick Shaw

UREC REGISTRATION NUMBER: 2016-1024
This study has been approved by the Unitec Research Ethics Committee from 18/05/2016 to 18/05/2017. If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this research, you may contact the Committee through the UREC Secretary (ph: 09 815-4321 ext 6162). Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully, and you will be informed of the outcome.

Appendix E: Focus Group Information Sheet

INFORMATION SHEET FOR FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS

Title of Thesis:
Supporting First-Time Middle Leaders in New Zealand Primary Schools.

My name is Nick Shaw. I am a primary school deputy principal with an interest in leadership development. I am currently enrolled in the Master of Educational Leadership and Management degree in the Department of Education at Unitec Institute of Technology and seek your help in meeting the requirements of research for a thesis course which forms a substantial part of this degree.

The aim of my project is to look at the support and leadership development that first-time New Zealand primary school middle leaders receive. The project will also look at the expectations and challenges that middle leaders face. I request your participation in the following way. I request your participation in the following way. I will be conducting focus group interviews and would appreciate your contribution as a member of the group. I will also be asking you to sign a consent form regarding this event. The focus group interview venue will be at a location suitable for all participants and the duration of the focus group interview will be no more than one hour. Participants will be informed of the confirmed location of the focus group two weeks before the interview takes place.

Neither you nor your organisation will be identified in the thesis. I will be recording your contribution and will provide a transcript for you to check before data analysis is undertaken. I do hope that you will agree to take part and that you will find this participation of interest. If you have any queries about the project, you may contact my supervisor at Unitec Institute of Technology.

My supervisor is Martin Bassett and may be contacted by email or phone.
Phone: (09) 815 4321 ext. 8501. Email: mbassett@unitec.ac.nz

Yours sincerely

Nick Shaw

UREC REGISTRATION NUMBER: 2016-1024
This study has been approved by the Unitec Research Ethics Committee from 18/05/2016 to 18/05/2017. If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this research, you may contact the Committee through the UREC Secretary (ph: 09 815-4321 ext 6162). Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully, and you will be informed of the outcome.

Appendix F: Focus Group Participant Consent Form

CONSENT FORM – FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS

RE: Master of Educational Leadership and Management

THESIS TITLE: Supporting First-Time Middle Leaders in New Zealand Primary Schools

RESEARCHER: Nick Shaw

Participant's consent

I have been given and have understood an explanation of this research and I have had an opportunity to ask questions and have had them answered. I understand that neither my name nor the name of my organisation will be used in any public reports. I also understand that I may withdraw myself or any information that has been provided for this project up to two weeks after the focus group interview event.

I agree to take part in this project.

Signed: _____

Name: _____

Date: _____

UREC REGISTRATION NUMBER: 2016-1024

This study has been approved by the Unitec Research Ethics Committee from 18/05/2016 to 18/05/2017. If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this research, you may contact the Committee through the UREC Secretary (ph: 09 815-4321 ext 6162). Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully, and you will be informed of the outcome.

Appendix G: Interview Participant Consent Form

CONSENT FORM – INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS

RE: Master of Educational Leadership and Management

THESIS TITLE: Supporting First-Time Middle Leaders in New Zealand Primary Schools

RESEARCHER: Nick Shaw

Participant's consent

I have been given and have understood an explanation of this research and I have had an opportunity to ask questions and have had them answered. I understand that neither my name nor the name of my organisation will be used in any public reports. I also understand that I will be provided with a transcript of the interview for verification and that I may withdraw myself or any information that has been provided for this project up to two weeks after the return/confirmation of my verified transcript.

I agree to take part in this project.

Signed: _____

Name: _____

Date: _____

UREC REGISTRATION NUMBER: 2016-1024

This study has been approved by the Unitec Research Ethics Committee from 18/05/2016 to 18/05/2017. If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this research, you may contact the Committee through the UREC Secretary (ph: 09 815-4321 ext 6162). Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully, and you will be informed of the outcome.

Unitec
Institute of Technology
TE WHARE WĀNANGA O WAIRAKA

Full name of author: Nicholas Shaw

Full title of thesis/~~dissertation/research project~~: Supporting First-Time Middle Leaders in New Zealand Primary Schools

Department of Education

Degree: Master of Educational Leadership and Management **Year of presentation** 2016

EITHER:

(1) I agree to my thesis/~~dissertation/research project being~~ lodged in the Unitec Library

(including being available for inter-library loan), provided that due acknowledgement of its use is made. I consent to copies being made in accordance with the Copyright Act 1994.

and

I agree that a digital copy may be kept by the Library and uploaded to the institutional repository and be viewable world wide.

OR:

(2) I wish to apply for my thesis/dissertation/research project to be embargoed for a limited period as per Academic Policy 12 Conduct of Student Research , Guideline ~~12/8~~.

Reason for embargo: .....

Supervisor Approval: .....

Dean, Research Approval: .....

Embargo Time Period: .....

Signature of author: .....

Date: 24/11/2016