

MIDDLE LEADERSHIP: THE POSSIBILITIES AND POTENTIAL

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This paper builds on the Education Council of Aotearoa New Zealand's previous work that informs leadership of Communities of Learning | Kāhui Ako, and explores the concepts and practices of middle leadership that will help us in the development of the draft leadership strategy. The paper discusses why effective middle leaders are fundamental to our education system, identifies the challenges to middle leadership development, and makes recommendations for the development of middle leadership at all levels of the education system.

Background

The middle leadership model in *Leading from the middle* (Ministry of Education, 2012) outlines that all middle leaders have responsibility for leadership functions including: leading pedagogical change; providing leadership that is responsive to student identity, culture and language; liaising with the community; providing an orderly school environment; developing staff; and building relationships.

In 2015 the Education Council commissioned five think pieces on leadership for Kāhui Ako (Bendikson, Robertson, Wenmouth, Durie, & Gilbert, 2015)¹. The papers identify the key concepts to enhance the understanding and development of leadership roles necessary in the education system and describe the support, guidance and expertise required to develop leadership skills and practices across early childhood and schooling sectors (in English and Māori Medium settings). The think pieces also argue that the development ideas and practices of middle leadership are not new and are evident across all educational settings.

Why effective middle leaders are fundamental

Evidence base

Research increasingly demonstrates the prevalence and impact of dispersed forms of leadership in middle-level leadership roles, with many of these teachers leading curriculum areas, syndicates of year level teachers or other systems level leadership. The role of a

¹ <https://educationcouncil.org.nz/sites/default/files/Education%20Council%20Five%20Think%20Pieces%200612.pdf>



middle leader is crucial in this era of distributed leadership and change focused on the personalisation of learning and employing modern, culturally responsive curriculum and pedagogy.

The literature over the last twenty years in various Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) studies describe the middle leadership practices that are associated with successful outcomes for learners (Dinham, 2007; Harris, 1998, 1999; Harris, Jamieson, & Russ, 1995; Sammons, Thomas, & Mortimore, 1997). In summary, effective middle leaders are described as:

- leaders with personal qualities and relationships whose commitment, energy and enthusiasm for teaching motivated those around them
- establishing themselves as experienced and effective teachers who possessed depth and breadth of knowledge and a sound understanding of curricula and of current developments in their field
- consistently demonstrating pedagogical leadership of teachers in their department, centre or syndicate with strong academic and social outcomes for learners
- influencing evidence-based department planning and organization, ensure resources are well used and take a leading role in program design
- facilitating national and school/centre based policy and processes with their staff, which aided effective communication.

The OECD studies also highlighted that when key leadership practices are absent at whole-school/centre and department level or if they are dysfunctional, learners do not appear to be so well served by their teachers (Harris, 1998).

The career move to middle leadership is often the first step for a teacher in facilitating learning and change in adults as opposed to students. Highly complex learning environments, require teachers able to problem solve in novel situations and to respond flexibly, efficiently and effectively. This can often be against the resistance of colleagues and in complex educational environments with multiple issues needing to be addressed (Le Fevre, Ell, Timperley, Twyford, & Mayo, 2014). Research also shows that a key driver for improvement are the specific practices used by middle leaders in motivating teachers in ways that relate positively to learner outcomes. (Highfield & Robertson, 2016).

Bi-cultural partnership

In Aotearoa/New Zealand it is important to consider the bi-cultural partnership that exists in education and the tensions that exist when attempting to fit eurocentric views of leadership into contexts that are rightfully indigenous. Educational leaders are not a homogenous group and their support needs to be culturally located (Hohepa, 2013). Leaders in Māori medium education carry out a range of duties and tasks centred on the development and expansion of the kura community, and the interests of the wider community. These could include leadership presence, together with engagement in a range of roles that have significance to achieving opportunities and success for Māori, and contributing to te ao Māori (Ministry of Education, 2010). Leaders in Māori-medium settings are often focussed on a commitment to building relationships across and within the school community in order to bring diverse values and practices into the core culture of the school or centre (Durie, 2006). In some communities the Māori-medium centre or kura is the primary source of language and cultural revitalisation



efforts. These teachers are therefore regarded as leaders not just within the centre or kura, but across the entire community - a factor that has workload implications for all concerned (Newbold, Trinick, & Robertson, 2016).

Early childhood education

In the early childhood sector there are also diverse demands made of leaders both inside and outside their work environment. In a decentralised approach, usually in a rapidly changing social context, leaders constantly work cohesively and strategically to build relationships with young children and their families. Effective leadership in early childhood settings emerges through the creation of a culture of learning and the requirement to share knowledge and collaborate. There are considerable complex administrative and managerial demands on these leaders who are sometimes required to take on major operational tasks; the result being that distributed leadership styles have emerged as much from circumstances as choice (Aubrey, Godfrey, & Harris, 2012).

Current situation

Professional development programmes and qualifications

Other than a teacher qualification and a practising teacher certificate, there are no mandatory requirements for undertaking professional development programmes, and no formalised qualifications necessary to become an early childhood centre or school's senior or middle leader. Preparing to be a senior leader has largely been the responsibility of the individual relying on an apprenticeship model where aspiring senior school leaders progress, based on the skills and experience gained on the job (Gurr & Drysdale, 2013). Postgraduate qualifications are an option for individuals to gain specific knowledge and skills in educational administration but they are not a requirement. However in the early childhood setting evidence suggests that educators who undergo formal training acquire greater skills in problem-solving and making decisions, which support effective relationships with other professionals and clients (Brock, 2011). Teachers are often motivated to complete post graduate university study programmes in educational leadership in order to be successful in winning a position, but the resourcing and time required is often a barrier to teachers who want balance in their professional and personal lives.

Kāhui Ako leaders

The scope for expanding concepts of middle leadership in schooling has recently been initiated within the education system as a result of the government's policy of encouraging collaboration within Kāhui Ako. Traditionally, leadership professional development has been focused on principals or emerging principals. Teachers in English and Māori-medium settings now have opportunities to apply for roles to lead not just a department or syndicate but colleagues across across their own schools/kura with the goal of improving student academic achievement. The new leadership challenge is in developing the effectiveness of Kāhui Ako by appointing teachers who are sound classroom based practitioners. These effective teachers are being promoted into roles where they are expected to influence their colleagues to inquire into and improve their teaching practice which in turn will improve outcomes for learners.

Traditionally, middle leaders' influence on teacher effectiveness and the extent to which



teacher leadership can act as a catalyst for improving practice in the classroom (Harris & Muijs, 2005) has been fundamental to the improvement that underpins the Kāhui Ako policy. In every school and early childhood setting, the principal or professional leader relies on the department leaders, syndicate leaders, or senior teachers to provide the instructional and pedagogical advice and expertise required for effective leadership of teachers that is focussed on learning. The effectiveness of newly appointed school leaders will be critical to the success of the Kāhui Ako in lifting learner achievement. These colleagues will be working to build effective professional relationships that enable collaboration, problem solving and shared commitment. Those in the role are being required to focus on improving teaching practices in order to meet the shared achievement challenges across a number of schools. The Kāhui Ako teachers will use their expertise to work with colleagues to identify and address professional practice issues (Ministry of Education, July, 2016).

It is important to note the transformational leadership practices demonstrated through being effective curriculum advocates and well-respected school community members in the Kāhui Ako context (Robinson, Hohepa, & Lloyd, 2009). This has been shown to support networking ability and skills to operate politically within the school /centre culture and secure resources focussed on improving teaching and learning.

Many middle leaders in New Zealand early childhood and schooling settings lead teams of between 6 and 15 colleagues, as well as managing a substantial budget and physical resource. In order to meet the prescribed achievement challenges of the Kāhui Ako, newly appointed leaders will be leading the professional development and facilitating changed practice with colleagues not only in their own school but also in other local schools. A tuakana-teina model of mentoring of teachers into leadership roles exists in some schools and ECE settings but the training and support is often not explicit or resourced systematically. In many cases these appointed Kāhui Ako teachers will have no experience leading the professional learning of groups of adults which could result in an inconsistent and ineffective approach. In addition, they may not have the knowledge to identify their own professional development and training needs for their leadership role.

Current challenges to the development of middle leaders

The potential for teachers in middle leadership roles to lead transformative teaching and learning is exciting, but unfortunately, too often the expectations and support for these roles is lacking (Gurr & Drysdale, 2013).

In Aotearoa/New Zealand **national leadership development programmes have been aimed primarily at principals and those aspiring to be principals.** The importance of the relationship between the professional leader or senior leader as pedagogical leader, and the practices of the middle leader where the school wide and national priorities/decisions are put into operation, is critical. The interrelationship between the roles of leaders within the compulsory schooling and ECE context will be even more complex and dialogic in the Kāhui Ako environment, relying on a facilitative coaching style where adaptive expertise (Bransford et al., 2009) will be required.

Currently there is **no national level information, tools or resources about the middle leader competence or professional training needs** required to ensure a depth of leadership capacity



and capability across the system. Policy makers have no way of understanding the scale of the leadership training and support requirements and these factors are difficult to measure. There is no formalised needs analysis tool that could be used to identify the learning needs of middle leaders in the early childhood or schooling sector or those who are being appointed into the across and within school leadership roles in Kāhui Ako.

The investment in, and commitment to, quality implementation of **professional learning and development** through the current centrally-funded infrastructure, and the provision of expert support (at both the local and central level) is **not aimed at building the expertise of specific individuals**, but focussed on a theory of improvement at whole school or centre level. Accessing external expertise for professional support and expertise to support leadership development of colleagues in a school or kura is currently not mandatory in the self managing environment.

Professional learning communities have the potential to provide the required infrastructure for the development of professionalism and leadership expertise - if the implementation is supported with careful and responsively designed support and professional training opportunities for the appointed leaders. The training and support required to develop the essential professional practices and dispositions to be successful and effective leaders will require long term sustained investment. There will also be a need for reflection and self evaluation where teachers understand their professional leadership role, develop responsibilities and culturally appropriate practices that are regularly monitored and evaluated.

Recommendations for the development of middle leaders at all levels

The success or failure of any education intervention depends upon the nature, quality and sustainability of implementation and the extent to which it is relentlessly embedded, evaluated, refined and changed (Harris & Jones, 2016).

Like the opportunities that exist for teachers within Kāhui Ako, we need to provide all teachers with opportunities for collaborative, culturally responsive leadership development – whether they are aspiring leaders or already in leadership roles, and whether they are working in early childhood, kura or schooling roles.

Recommendations for developing middle leaders at all levels of the education system include:

1. Teachers need to understand their professional responsibility and be encouraged to engage in a wide range of professional learning throughout their career as they aspire to leadership roles across the education sector. The Education Council's Standards for the Teaching Profession will help identify development opportunities and the depth of experience they will need to build across their career.
2. The development of leadership knowledge, practices and dispositions of middle leaders needs to occur in a setting where professional learning is valued. Formalised professional learning, coaching, mentoring and support should be available for those aspiring to leadership at every level. Time and resources must be prioritised to ensure teachers have a clear pathway for their development to grow leadership capability and capacity (e.g. the



enrolment in formal qualifications to build knowledge and sound evidence developed in the form of a portfolio of effective professional practice and leadership). Professional development strategies for middle leaders need to be well resourced and connected to examples of existing practice so that teachers have the opportunity to practice with and learn from colleagues in their own context (OECD, 2014).

3. Middle leaders in all education sectors require a model of leadership development that is culturally appropriate to their context (such as early childhood or Māori-medium setting) and therefore identifies the individual leadership learning needs of colleagues. It is critical that there are multiple opportunities to learn that are flexible and well resourced sufficient to include a tuakana-teina model that can provide resources to develop leadership practice in a supportive yet challenging environment is critical. The Ministry of Education's Tū Rangatira is a good example that brings together shared ideas, experiences and leadership practices (co-constructed with educators within the Māori-medium education sector). It provides insights into how effective professional development programmes can work towards strengthening leaders' capabilities, growing capacity and sustaining exemplary leadership.
4. Professional leaders in educational settings should be encouraged to prioritise and implement formal, planned instructional leadership development programmes for senior and middle leaders. Responsibility for the identification and development of leadership capabilities should be a critical senior leader responsibility in order for them to focus on the learning needs of middle leaders for whom they are directly responsible (Rhodes, Brundrett, & Nevill, 2008).



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