

**Middle Leadership in a Composite School
in New Zealand:
A Complex and Challenging Role**

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Attestation of Authorship

I declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgments), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award or any other degree or diploma or a university or institution of higher learning.

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Abstract

A constant challenge for middle leaders in schools is juggling the myriad of responsibilities within their role. These include: managing the complexity of the role, working with a team of staff, encouraging and promoting student achievement and conflict resolution, as well as finding the time to do all the above.

This research focused on gaining an in-depth understanding of the role of a middle leader in a composite school - that is, a school that encompasses Years 1-15, in comparison to middle leadership in a primary, intermediate or secondary school. The research examined the complexities of middle leadership and the key challenges faced. It also investigated the level of professional development and support offered by senior leaders. I chose to take a qualitative methodological approach to my research. Semi-structured interviews, involving two participants in each of three schools were used to collect data. The key research questions were:

- Do middle leaders see their core roles and responsibilities in a composite school as different to those in a primary or secondary school?
- What key challenges do middle leaders face in a composite school and how they are supported by senior leadership to overcome these challenges?
- In what ways do middle leaders in composite schools feel equipped to manage and lead a team of people?

This study revealed that middle leaders in composite schools find the challenges different to those in a primary, intermediate or secondary school. The findings highlight that the role in composite schools is complex, requires a broad managerial and leadership skill set, along with a breadth and depth of curriculum knowledge. A key recommendation arising from this research is that composite schools are deliberate and intentional when offering support and guidance to those in middle leadership positions. A nationwide programme that is accessible and targeted to the specific needs of those in middle leadership in composite schools would be an asset according to participants of this study.

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Table of contents

Attestation of authorship	(i)
Abstract	(ii)
Acknowledgements	(iii)
List of tables	(vi)
List of figures	(vii)
Chapter One: Introduction	1
Introduction	1
Background of the study	2
Rationale	3
Research aims	3
Research questions	3
Dissertation outline	4
Chapter Two: Literature review	6
Introduction	6
Composite schools	6
Role definition	6
Middle leadership	7
Role clarity	8
Complex nature of the role	9
Challenges for middle leaders	10
Summary	16
Chapter Three: Research methodology	17
Introduction	17
Positioning	17
Research methodology	18
Data collection	20
Data analysis	22
Ethical considerations	23
Summary	25
Chapter Four: Findings	26
Introduction	26
Participants	26
Presentation of findings	27
Roles and responsibilities	27
Key challenges	32
Professional development	43

Comparison with non-composite schools	45
Summary	47
Chapter Five: Discussion of findings	48
Introduction	48
Core roles and responsibilities	49
Key challenges facing middle leaders	52
Professional development and mentoring	60
Summary	63
Chapter Six: Conclusion	64
Overview	64
Conclusions	64
Strengths and limitations	66
Recommendations	67
Final conclusion	68
References	70
Appendices	76
Appendix A - Interview schedule	76
Appendix B - Participant information sheet	77
Appendix C - Participant consent form	80

List of tables

Table 4.1	Participant role in current school	27
Table 4.2	Key roles and responsibilities	28
Table 4.3	Challenges middle leaders experience	33
Table 4.4	Comparison with non-composite schools	46

List of figures

Figure 4.1	Challenges faced by middle leaders in a composite school versus a non-composite school.	34
Figure 4.2	Continuum showing participant response	46

Chapter 1 Introduction

This dissertation reports on research that examines the role of a middle leader. The particular focus is on those in middle leadership roles in a composite school. The role of a middle leader in any school is complex and challenging (Cardno, 2012; Fitzgerald, 2009; Grootenboer, Edwards-Groves & Rönnerman, 2015). Middle leadership may be particularly complex in a composite school which, in New Zealand, is defined as a school that caters for students from Year 1 to Year 15 (Education Counts, 2017). A possibility for this added complexity is that many leaders are required to maintain oversight of a range of curriculum areas, a range of student age groups and, furthermore, manage multiple staff with roles that span the entire school. This contrasts with those middle leaders in a primary, intermediate or secondary school setting whose oversight may only cover one, two or possibly five, year levels. The role of a middle leader in a composite school in New Zealand is under-reported in any research available currently and there is a dearth of specific literature related to my topic of research as far as I am aware. This dissertation helps to fill that gap within available literature.

Middle leaders are typically defined as leaders with pedagogical or pastoral care responsibility within a school environment (Fleming, 2014). They fill roles such as: Head of Department, Teacher in Charge, Year Level Dean, and Specialist Classroom Teacher. They play an extremely important role in any school and senior leaders greatly value the contribution these leaders make to the school environment (Koh, Gurr, Drysdale & Ang, 2011; Thorpe & Bennett-Powell, 2014). They directly affect the quality of the teaching and learning, unlike the Principal or Head Teacher whose impact is largely indirect (Grootenboer et al., 2015). Irvine and Brundrett (2016) similarly comment that “the role of a middle leader in a school is demanding, different to that of the classroom teacher, and so a new set of skills needs to be learned” (p. 87). These writers highlight the notion that middle leaders are the vital link between policy and the teachers at the ‘coal face’. Middle leaders manage and influence teacher performance with a focus on improved student outcomes. The middle tier within any organisational system or structure is vitally important when attempting to generate positive change and improvement (Harris & Jones, 2017). According to De Nobile and Ridden (2012), this is because the middle leaders have more time and capability to do the work that senior leaders cannot complete due to their workload. In addition, much of what middle leaders do is “grounded in collegiality because of the close contact they have with teachers and their mediations between them and senior leadership” (De Nobile & Ridden, 2012, p. 81). Fleming (2014) writes that it can be difficult to accurately describe and quantify the roles and responsibilities of middle

leaders. He notes that middle leaders often struggle with the ambiguity of their role, a lack of role clarity and dealing with conflict amongst staff. Often the expectations of middle leaders in a school are unclear. Carter (2016) emphasises that it is essential to have middle leaders who are high performing. This, she argues, is core to the success of any school. Schools are tasked with ensuring that effective teaching and learning is operative in the organisation. Strong senior leadership and management assist in guiding the middle leaders in their growth and development. The result should be “qualified leaders who are talented, determined, knowledgeable and capable” (Mampane, 2017, p. 144).

Background of the study

My own experience and development when thrust into a middle leadership role in a large secondary school mirrored the thoughts of Evans (2016). Evans (2016) comments that dictums of practice of senior leaders, particularly in well established, traditional schools, would osmotically filter down to those in middle leadership roles. Searby and Armstrong (2016) indicate that the majority of middle leaders are socialised through on the job training. This was my experience. I was self-taught, learning through observation and informal role-modelling. There were no targeted professional development opportunities for me, yet expectation from school leadership was high. Those of us in middle leadership roles were held directly accountable for the success or failure of students and staff in our area of responsibility. This measurement strategy was managed through a robust appraisal process and the focus was predominantly biased toward student achievement in external examinations. My own experience also mirrored several of the findings in a report presented at the 2017 Post Primary Teacher’s Association conference by the middle leadership taskforce team. The findings suggested that a tension exists between trying to do an excellent job as both a middle leader and as a classroom teacher. Furthermore, change is constant and often poorly managed, so that there is never a stable state during which to reflect and evaluate. Middle leaders are under pressure to constantly drive up student achievement, leaving no room for work/life balance for teachers and especially middle leaders (PPTA, 2017).

In more recent times as a senior leader in two composite schools, I have observed and managed a significant number of experienced middle leaders who are excellent classroom practitioners. Most, if not all, have indicated on a regular basis, that they feel overwhelmed, struggle to cope with the complexity of the position and do not have enough time for the demands of the role. They also lack a real sense of role clarity, struggle with managing people and tasks and also find it difficult to maintain an

acceptable work life balance. The research I have conducted, therefore, has been invaluable for my own understanding of how to best support middle leaders in their roles in the school in which I am currently a senior leader.

Rationale

I have been able to locate only a thin body of literature and scant scholarship regarding the role of a middle leader (Harris & Jones, 2017; Koh et al., 2011; Searby & Armstrong, 2016). The little research that has been written is focussed on secondary and higher education contexts (Fleming, 2014; Irvine & Brundrett, 2016; Thorpe & Bennett-Powell, 2014; Vilkinas, 2014; Wise, 2001). A selection of writers (Edwards-Groves, Grootenboer & Ronnerman, 2016; Koh et al., 2011; LaPointe-McEwan, DeLuca & Klinger, 2017; Searby & Armstrong, 2016) also address the middle leadership role in a primary setting. However, there appears to be a distinct gap in the current literature that relates to the role of middle leaders working in composite schools. Similarly to middle leadership positions in primary, intermediate and secondary schools, it seems that middle leaders in composite schools have diverse, complex and often challenging roles. The role may appear to be more complex due to the composition of a Year 1 - 15 school. Middle leaders are most likely to require a more extensive curriculum knowledge as they work with staff who teach across a wide range of year levels. I have also identified that whilst there has been some literature written regarding middle leadership in schools throughout the world, in many cases there appears to have been little action in response to the recommendations from that research. Australia, the United Kingdom, USA, Canada and Singapore all offer professional development programmes targeted at the middle leadership level where we see this case in point. A range of recommendations including the provision of targeted professional development support and an increasing allocation of time are suggested by a number of the writers when referring to these programmes. In 2017 the Ministry of Education in New Zealand initiated a leadership development programme for potential leaders in Communities of Learning¹ (Educational Leaders, 2017). This programme appears to be the first acknowledgment that professional development is required for those in middle space roles with leadership ability.

Research aims and questions

The aim of this research was to examine the complex role of a middle leader in a composite school setting and explore the key challenges these middle leaders face. The research also endeavoured to examine the availability and quality of senior

¹ The Ministry of Education in New Zealand initiated a leadership development programme for potential leaders in communities of learning in 2017 to assist those who were newly appointed into leadership roles.

leadership support in addition to professional development opportunities available. Of focus and interest has been how middle leaders function and operate within a composite school setting in comparison to a primary, intermediate or secondary school context.

The following questions have guided the research:

1. Do middle leaders see their core roles and responsibilities in a composite school as different to those in a primary, intermediate or secondary school?
2. What key challenges do middle leaders face in a composite school as compared to a primary, intermediate or secondary school?
3. In what ways do middle leaders in composite schools feel equipped to manage and lead and how they are supported by senior leadership and professional development opportunities to do so?

Dissertation outline

This dissertation consists of six chapters. Chapter One overviews the research study including a summary of my own experience in educational leadership. It also identifies the aims and objectives of the study.

Chapter Two presents a critical review of the literature regarding middle leadership. Key themes are identified and discussed, including the clarity and complexity of the role and the challenges middle leaders face in their role. The matter of support and guidance from senior leaders along with the existence of professional development opportunities are also discussed. The lack of literature related to composite schools is identified.

Chapter Three outlines the methodology used in the research process. The rationale for embracing an interpretive approach to the study is presented and the decision to utilise semi-structured interviews for data collection is justified. The selection of participants is outlined along with a discussion on trustworthiness and transferability of data. Ethical issues involved in the research are considered.

Chapter Four presents the findings from the semi-structured interviews. The themes that emerged from the findings are identified.

Chapter Five discusses the findings, linking these to the literature in Chapter Two.

To conclude, Chapter Six presents a summary of the overall findings in the research study. Areas of further research are identified and suggestions are made related to

middle leadership in composite schools, along with an outline of the strengths and limitations of this study.

Chapter 2 Literature Review

Introduction

Currently limited research has been undertaken in the field of middle leadership within schools (Bassett, 2012; Leithwood, 2016; Harris & Jones, 2017). It also appears that many of the issues and concerns (predominantly related to a lack of targeted professional development) identified by writers such as Adey (2000), Busher (2005) and Harris (2000) decades earlier have not been addressed. Far greater attention in the available literature appears to be given to focusing on those in Head Teacher or Principal roles rather than those in the middle leadership space (Grootenboer et al., 2015; Harris & Jones, 2017). It also seems that potentially other areas of interest such as distributed leadership (Youngs, 2008) and teacher leadership have superseded literature on middle leadership as examples of such curiosity. It is of concern that there is very little, if any, research that is specifically focussed on the role of a middle leader in a composite school. This is particularly surprising when there are 160 composite schools in New Zealand.

Composite schools

With an absence of literature specific to middle leadership in composite schools I have relied predominantly on literature and research conducted in primary and secondary schools to conduct this literature review. The research conducted by Stone, Horejs and Lomas (1997), whilst more than 20 years old, has merit as important comparisons are made regarding the role of teacher leaders in an elementary, middle and high schools in the United States. This literature, along with the work completed by Javadi, Bush and Ng (2017) across four international schools in Malaysia, provide information of use to this research study. The implication is that the role of a middle leader is very similar in any school, regardless of the context.

Role definition

What is commonly accepted and understood in all schools, regardless of type or function, is the importance of the quality and effectiveness of those in middle leadership (Crane & De Nobile, 2014). Middle leaders in schools have a very diverse and challenging role (Fleming, 2014). They work at the nexus between teaching and leadership (Crane & De Nobile, 2014; Searby & Armstrong, 2016). They are expected to play a vital part in ensuring that the quality of teaching and learning is of the highest standard, as well as provide instructional leadership of staff within their department. Middle leaders are required to work collaboratively (Edwards-Groves et al., 2016; Harris

& Jones, 2017) with their team and senior leaders, juggling a myriad of daily and weekly routines and tasks. Middle leaders in schools are likely to be pedagogical leaders at the subject, curriculum, and faculty levels, or function as team and syndicate leaders. A number of middle leaders also work in the area of pastoral care or are involved in student services such as career or guidance counselling. There seems to be a reliance by many schools on a process of 'osmosis' where middle leaders gain knowledge in ad hoc or informal ways, rather than a structured, theoretical one where they are guided by experienced middle leaders or senior leaders (Fleming, 2014). The expectation is high for those who are newly appointed into roles with an expectation that they will develop the skill and expertise required to fulfil their role and responsibility with no specific or intentional training (Thorpe & Bennett-Powell, 2014).

The Ministry of Education in New Zealand sees the professional growth and development of middle leaders as a priority. In *Leading from the Middle* (Ministry of Education, 2012), the Ministry highlights that leadership is about empowering, transforming, and working together. Middle leaders lead pedagogical change, manage and appraise teachers, and participate in professional development (De Nobile & Ridden, 2014; Fleming, 2014). The *Educational Leadership* model (Ministry of Education, 2012) sets out the qualities, knowledge, and skills that middle and senior educational leaders need in order to lead their schools in the twenty-first century. Middle and senior leaders need to respond to the priorities set by the Ministry of Education, the type of school they work in, and their specific negotiated responsibilities (Ministry of Education, 2012).

Middle leadership – management or leadership?

The term 'middle leader' is widely used throughout the literature to categorise Heads of Department, Faculty Leaders, Heads of Learning and those in Pastoral Lead roles (De Nobile & Ridden, 2014; Fleming, 2014; Grootenboer et al., 2015). Some writers describe those in middle leadership roles as managers rather than leaders (Mampane, 2017; Vilkinas, 2014; Wise, 2001). Mampane (2017) argues that the function of a middle leader is predominantly management related hence the desire to use the title 'middle manager'. Mampane (2017) utilises the term 'middle management' to define individuals who are "in formal roles of responsibility and who form the middle leadership level in schools" (p. 144). Vilkinas (2014) uses similar terminology, accepting that in emphasising the increasing importance of the role they play, middle managers are now often titled 'middle leaders'. Schools that use the term 'leader' may be more focused on strategic intent, whereas those who emphasise the operational component of the role utilise the term 'manager'. The National College for School Leadership in England differs in opinion from

many writers and now use the term 'leader' in place of 'manager'. This approach is intentional as it recognises and highlights the concept of middle leaders being leaders of learning rather than managers of tasks with an administration focus (Grootenboer et al., 2015). Koh et al. (2011) also prefer to utilise the term 'leader' as it has a proactive element to it, along with a progressive, visionary component. Spillane and Diamond (2007) comment that the terms are indistinguishable and merely theoretical, but some argue it may indicate role clarity for others (Crane & De Nobile, 2014; Wise, 2001). For the remainder of this literature review I have chosen to use the term 'leader' rather than 'manager'.

Role clarity

Expectations of middle leaders can vary depending on the context and individual job descriptions (Wise & Bennett, 2003). The definition of a middle leader in schools is often not clear (Fleming, 2014; Harris & Jones, 2017). The middle leader is expected to fulfil a vital role, yet very little attention has been paid to providing the clarity regarding the exact nature of this role (Crane & De Nobile, 2014; Dinham, 2007; Robinson, Hohepa & Lloyd, 2009). Job descriptions of middle leaders vary considerably based on the actual role and responsibility. Therefore, it is often difficult to define and articulate role clarity, creating ambiguity and even role conflict (Fleming, 2000). Job descriptions are essential as they list tasks and various responsibilities; however, many roles are fluid and require adaptability and flexibility. This constant environment of role change can create job strain and may lead to role overload. This concept is supported by the notion of being the 'meat in the sandwich' where some middle leaders may feel torn as they may not be part of the senior leadership team in their school nor might they be just a teacher (Fitzgerald, 2000). Middle leaders may often be given mixed messages by their line managers. This will create tension and a considerable amount of stress and anxiety. They feel uncertain when responding to the demands of senior leadership, monitoring department performance and concerned how this may impact on the working relationship they have with their staff (Wise, 2001). Many middle leaders are then placed in a difficult position, balancing the pressures from below and the objectives from those above.

The literature includes a variety of rationales for the importance of the middle leadership role by describing its prominence due to middle leaders operating between senior leadership and the respective department or faculty. Feist (2008) utilises the term 'conduit' to describe this positioning of middle leaders in an organisational hierarchy. Some writers reinforce this idea, noting that the middle leader is the 'critical link' in the operational chain. These writers also suggest that middle leaders are located in the

epicenter of an organisation, acting in a space between the Principal or Head Teacher and the teaching staff (Koh et al., 2011; Searby & Armstrong, 2016). This key position enables middle leaders to maintain close connections with the classroom teachers (De Nobile & Ridden, 2014; Grootenboer et al., 2015). The importance of the middle leadership role is further highlighted by Hawes (2015) who describes middle leaders as the engine room of the school or organisation. Middle leaders, above all others, have the “potential to make the greatest difference to student achievement” (Hawes, 2015, p. 6) as they work closely with classroom teachers. Harris and Jones (2017) underline how important the middle tier is “to generate positive change and improvement” (p. 213). Middle leaders are a significant source in ensuring that the quality of education reaching the pupils is high (Koh et al., 2011). Overall, the literature indicates that middle leaders make a significant difference, particularly when the focus is on student achievement. What is essential is that they are given responsibility and autonomy to lead, not burdened with unnecessary bureaucracy and hierarchical tension.

In New Zealand schools, middle leaders are expected to provide intentional, strategic and functional leadership. Professional standards for teachers with leadership responsibility were generated by the Ministry of Education in New Zealand (MoE, 2009). However, these fail to identify leadership of any manner within their framework. This reinforces the lack of clarity that many in middle leadership face. Many middle leaders feel that the function of their role is unclear, “placing them in an ambiguous organisational middle space between teachers and administrators” (Searby & Armstrong, 2016, p. 163). The literature also states that successful schools have high performing middle leaders who are focused on improving academic achievement and the quality of educational outcomes (Edwards-Groves et al., 2016; Harris & Jones, 2017; Koh et al., 2011). Within the rapidly changing nature of education, middle leaders are trusted with the core business of learning and teaching (Grootenboer, et al., 2015; Mampane, 2017). They have the greatest potential to impact on student learning, as Principals are restricted in their ability to make a difference in the actual classroom (Carter, 2016; Grootenboer et al., 2015; Koh et al., 2011). Middle leaders are instrumental in initiating curriculum opportunities and innovation, along with any form of pedagogical change in the school (Grootenboer, et al., 2015).

Complex nature of the role

A number of writers articulate the complex nature of a middle leadership role (Busher, 2005; Edwards-Groves et al., 2016; Harris & Jones, 2017; Irvine & Brundrett, 2016). The role often involves; a classroom teaching component, supervision of other staff, administrative and leadership function along with a myriad of roles and

responsibilities. Koh et al. (2011) note that the middle leadership position is even more complex in an environment where expectations are in a constant state of flux. Irvine and Brundrett (2016) support this notion and comment that middle leaders must be able to lead and manage as they are required to lead people and manage departments. This complex nature of the middle leader role involves a change in practice from what was seen historically as purely an administrative focus to one that incorporates; leadership and management, responding to delegated tasks from Principals for whole school organisation, taking on greater responsibility for departmental areas and transference of change management to classroom teachers (Koh et al., 2011). These writers (Adey, 2000; Busher, 2005; Harris, 2000; Koh et al., 2011; Vilkinas, 2014) have grouped the roles and responsibilities of middle leaders into distinctive subsets or categories. The fact that many of these lists involve over 30 tasks or areas of responsibility highlights the complexity of many middle leadership roles. Many of the lists contain significant differences, further highlighting this ambiguity, possibly due in part to the school type. Edwards-Groves et al. (2016) note that middle leadership responsibilities in many primary schools are not clearly distinct or predictable. The fact that so many writers cannot agree on a distinctive, finite list of tasks for middle leaders in secondary schools also emphasises the diverse and complex nature of the role (Adey, 2000; Busher, 2005; Harris, 2000). Regardless of the type of school they work in, middle leaders often feel overwhelmed with administration and crisis leadership, with very little time to set aside for strategic thinking (Irvine & Brundrett, 2016). Interestingly, most middle leaders are often selected for a position of authority based on their expertise as a classroom practitioner (Fullan, 2015; Grootenboer et al., 2015; Killion, 2012). Perhaps, therefore, many in middle leadership prefer to identify as classroom practitioners rather than located in the echelon of leadership (Busher, 2005).

Challenges for middle leaders

The literature indicates that the quality of the role that middle leaders play is dictated by the magnitude of autonomy and responsibility to engage with teachers in supportive and innovative ways (Harris & Jones, 2012; Engle, Lopez, Gormley, Chan, Charns & Lukas, 2017). For many middle leaders this may be a significant burden. Fleming (2014) notes that all middle leaders will face challenges, even at times feeling demoralised or frustrated. However, the role “can be exciting, challenging, rewarding and fulfilling” (p. 50). Fleming (2014) goes on to indicate that the value and satisfaction that middle leaders will get out of their job is “proportionate to the effort they put in” (Fleming, 2014, p. 50). The challenges faced by middle leaders are varied and diverse and include a lack of time to complete all aspects of the role, balancing the administrative components of the role versus the leadership function, managing the tension that exists when sitting in

the middle space between senior leadership and their respective team, and having the ability to build an effective team. Each of these challenges will be discussed in more depth.

Time

A significant number of middle leaders have gained promotion to middle leadership positions because of their track record as an excellent classroom practitioner (Fleming, 2014; Koh et al., 2011). Once in these positions of leadership they are often entrusted with responsibilities previously held by those in a senior leadership capacity. This additional responsibility, however, is often not accompanied with the provision of extra time to fulfill the function and role (Irvine & Brundrett, 2016; Koh et al., 2011). Provision of time is a substantial factor for all middle leaders (Wise, 2001). For middle leaders to develop as the “treasure within the school community, they need to be given the space and time to do so” (Carter, 2016, p. 41). Fitzgerald (2007) also notes that significant workload has been delegated “from the apex of the hierarchy (Principal) to the middle” with no additional time allocation (p. 61). The literature highlights that time is the enemy of the middle leader and a negative aspect of the role (Crane & De Nobile, 2014; Fullan, 2007; Harris, 2000; Wise, 2001). Whilst many middle leaders receive additional remuneration and a time allocation, they lack the appropriate amount of time required to perform their role effectively (Edwards-Groves et al., 2016; Koh et al., 2011; LaPointe-McEwan et al., 2017). As a result, several responsibilities are completed to an unsatisfactory level or are even neglected. Koh et al. (2011) articulate that the expectancy for a middle leader with limited time is an “inexorable challenge” when managing the increasing expectations placed upon them (p. 612). Middle leaders who manage large teams with a desire to function in a collaborative manner note that time is often the barrier when attempting such activities (LaPointe-McEwan et al., 2017). They feel undervalued in their role and under resourced regarding time (Crane & De Nobile, 2014). The importance of time available to middle leaders is also accentuated by Hoy and Miskel (2008). They comment that “time limits the extent of participation in decision-making, but if time permits, the leader can develop the knowledge and skills” (p. 357).

Administration and leadership

Another challenge for any middle leader is the ability to balance the administrative component of the role and the responsibility of leading people. Middle leaders are required to combine both leadership and management skills in order to meet the requirements of their jobs effectively (Crane & De Nobile, 2014). They are required to be visionary and display leadership capacity on one hand, whilst administering the smooth day to day running of their department on the other (Fleming, 2014). Irvine and Brundrett

(2016) highlight this challenge faced, indicating that middle leaders not only “lead change and develop people but maintain their department through the management of systems and administration” (p. 87). This administration involves developing procedures and encouraging staff to follow them, with an intention of achieving efficiency (De Nobile & Ridden, 2014). Grootenboer et al. (2015) add that the administrative dimension of the role “also includes the bureaucratic demands in terms of compliance” (p. 516). Systems must be organised, monitoring of student achievement is a priority, and providing appropriate professional development for staff a key part of the organisational aspect of middle leadership. This focus on administration may take the middle leader away from the relational aspect of the role. Developing these relationships takes time and, therefore, space should be allocated for middle leaders to be able to spend more time to work with their teams (Fitzgerald, 2009). Alongside the administrative demands of the role, middle leaders are expected and required to lead by example (Koh et al., 2011). Teachers in middle leadership positions are defined as key instructional and curriculum leaders (Grootenboer et al., 2015). The focus of their leadership is to “be a leader of teaching and learning” (p. 509). This is a daunting challenge for many leaders, particularly those new into a role, as new sets of skills must be learned (Irvine & Brundrett, 2016). The leadership facet to the role involves an aspect of influence - an ability to articulate a vision for the department or area of responsibility and to encourage and influence others to support and follow school wide policy and strategic direction (De Nobile & Ridden, 2014). Interestingly, some research indicates that middle leaders spend most of their time on administrative tasks rather than those associated with leadership function (Cranston, 2007; Mercer & Ri, 2006).

Operating in the middle space

Middle leaders are positioned in a place that is “structurally and relationally situated between the school management and teaching staff” (Grootenboer et al., 2015, p. 524). The challenge for middle leaders in this intermediate space is that they feel torn between the administrative responsibilities of their department or team and the expectations from senior leadership in the school. This is especially noteworthy when the department culture may conflict with school wide policy, potentially hindering school improvement (Feist, 2008; Fitzgerald, 2009; Fleming, 2014). Middle leaders are required to collaborate with staff in both directions, upwards to Principals and downwards to staff and students (Crane & De Nobile, 2014). Grootenboer et al. (2015) emphasise that the relationship with teachers is not in a downward manner but ‘across’ to their teaching colleagues. Either way, a tension exists when senior leaders perceive that the departmental goals and vision are contradictory to the schoolwide strategic intent (Irvine & Brundrett, 2016). Middle leaders are forced to balance this tension. De Nobile and Ridden (2014) write

that middle leaders can become disillusioned with their relationship towards senior leaders, should the relationship not be well managed. Irvine and Brundrett (2016) describe this as a state of confusion, maintaining that middle leaders find themselves “squeezed between the conflicting requirements of the senior leadership team and departmental colleagues” (p. 87). Middle leaders find it challenging to encourage and persuade staff to collaborate and work together towards the school wide goals that have been delegated from above. Marshall (2012) uses the phrase ‘piggy in the middle’ to describe this positioning. Senior leaders need to take on the responsibility of providing the clarity for middle leaders and indicating how essential that role is in the school. Senior leaders and middle leaders are required to work collaboratively to achieve positive learning outcomes for students (Brown, Boyle & Boyle, 2000; Fleming, 2014; Harris & Jones, 2017).

The tension of being a middle leader, involved in a leadership capacity and in the role of classroom practitioner - emphasises the dichotomy in which many middle leaders find themselves. The issue for middle leaders when operating in the middle space is not new. Harris and Jones (2017) refer to the extensive research conducted by Bennett, Woods, Wise, and Newton (2007) who found that two key tensions exist for middle leaders. One of the two tensions refers to the dilemma the middle leader role has when faced with a school wide focus versus a loyalty to their department. Fleming (2014) articulates this concept well suggesting that whilst good middle leaders fight their corner, they can also appreciate and “take a wider perspective and should be supportive of the agreed school aims” (p. 36).

Building an effective team based on trust and collaboration

Middle leaders articulate that they feel inadequate for many aspects of the role (Busher, 2005). This is predominantly when they are expected to negotiate and relate directly with colleagues (Busher, 2005). Middle leaders are, however, extremely aware as to how important it is to have good rapport with the staff in their team (Koh et al., 2011). Leaders may deal with defensiveness from staff and, therefore, work intentionally to create an environment of trust, collaboration and genuine collegiality. Middle leaders must also have professional integrity as staff will only respect and trust them if this is the case (Fleming, 2014). There is evidence from several writers to indicate that middle leaders struggle with the apparent contradiction of building effective and productive relationships within their team, whilst also managing staff performance through appraisal and even competency at times (Adey, 2000; Bennett et al., 2007; Koh et al., 2011). An important function is to develop trust within the team. This is often a challenge but success stems from engaging in dialogue and discussion (Cardno, 2002). Fullan (2007) warns that open

dialogue and discussion can sometimes lead to conflict. The potential for positive outcomes are great when the dialogue is regular, with each person able to present their point of view in an environment founded on trust (Fullan, 2007). The literature also shows that effective and well respected middle leaders realise how important it is to have a good understanding of their staff. They are also aware of the difficulty in managing and working with some people and come up with strategies to work with all of their staff effectively and with respect (Dinham, 2007, Feist 2008;). Whilst the challenges of middle leadership are clear and evident in the literature, middle leaders can “take some comfort in knowing that many teachers and senior leaders alike see them as the voice of reason in a school” (Fleming, 2014, p. 21).

Dealing with conflict

Conflict is a significant problem that arises in all schools (Saiti, 2015). Middle leaders are tasked with managing conflict as core component of their role. They appreciate that conflict has a negative influence on school culture and climate, and that their leadership in such instance is critical (Cronk, 2017; Saiti, 2015). Middle leaders must be equipped with a range of strategies to cope with scenarios as they arise. Drewery (2016) writes that a fundamental shift in thinking is required by middle leaders. The transition to relational practices based on respect are a prerequisite to a successful outcome when managing tension between two parties. The power relationship should not exist. When working with students, middle leaders must “commit themselves to hear the students speak and to try and understand them in their own terms” (Drewery, 2016, p. 201). This methodology is not advocating for a ‘child-centered’ approach to education Cronk (2017). It is also not implying that if parties are nice to each other a successful outcome is guaranteed. Middle leaders are tasked with managing interpersonal conflict and must be equipped with the skills to do so to be effective in their role.

Professional development and mentoring

Fluckiger, Lovett and Dempster (2015) write that “the responsibility for learning has shifted to the middle tier and the middle leaders are critical leaders of learning” (p. 64). Therefore, middle leaders must be well prepared for this responsibility. Professional development for middle leaders must be taking place on a regular and ongoing basis to meet the fluid and evolving nature of the educational space (Koh et al., 2011; Mampane, 2017). School leaders require “continuous leadership development to carry out their role effectively” (Koh et al., 2011, p. 615). The result of this training and development should be “qualified leaders who are talented, determined, knowledgeable and capable” (Mampane, 2017). In their research conducted with middle leaders in secondary schools in the United Kingdom, Thorpe and Bennett-Powell (2014) found that the range of

professional development needs are varied and diverse. Middle leaders express confidence in their ability to perform the role in some areas such as raising teaching and learning standards, yet, stress the desire for professional development in areas such as time management and task prioritisation. The evidence also highlights that middle leaders, particularly those new in the role, find that the professional development available is limited and often ineffective to the role (Adey, 2000; Brown, Boyle & Boyle, 2002; Searby & Armstrong, 2016).

Writers disagree as to where the responsibility for providing professional development falls. Koh et al. (2011) note that middle leaders must take ownership for their own professional development needs to carry out their role effectively. Adey's (2000) research highlighted how ill equipped middle leaders feel regardless of who initiates or provides the professional development. Many stated that the expectation was to learn on the job and watch others in action. Adey (2000) points out concerns with this methodology, and Bush (2008) suggests schools cannot expect classroom teachers to qualify by default for a leadership role. The provision of leadership development focused on positive student achievement and outcome results in "improved teaching and learning" (Mampane, 2017, p. 149). Middle leaders should be ambitious and keen to learn and grow in their role. The more empowered they are to lead learning the greater the benefit to the school. Establishing a culture of continuous or lifelong learning is a core practice for middle leaders (Fleming, 2014) as "middle leaders achieve great things through others" (p. 259). High calibre middle leaders appreciate they can only impact some students, but can support others in the team to do so too. This improvement in teaching and learning across the school can only occur should middle leaders become effective learners themselves (Fleming, 2014). To support this practice and pedagogy, middle leaders require the skill set to play such an important role. Senior leaders play a significant role in developing those in middle leadership and should be very keen to "invest energy in developing the capacity of others to influence teacher quality and student achievement" (Cardno & Fitzgerald, 2005, p. 297). High performing middle leaders are then able to share that information, seeking creative ways to extend and develop their own staff (Carter, 2016). Mampane (2017) indicates that there has been a vacuum of professional development opportunities for middle leaders with a need for leadership and management programmes. In recent times the National College for School Leadership, established in 2000 in the United Kingdom (Bush, 2008) and the Leading from the Middle programme in New Zealand, established in 2012 (Ministry of Education, 2012) have attempted to address the void in professional development opportunities for middle leaders. Both programmes have experienced mixed reviews

with Fitzgerald and Gunter (2008) questioning the value of the United Kingdom programme.

Middle leaders maintain there is a deficit of support and guidance from senior leaders in a mentoring capacity in many instances. This is somewhat ironic as “middle leaders can positively influence teaching and learning processes by building strong professional learning communities where teachers can enquire and develop together” (Harris & Jones, 2017, p. 214). Several writers indicate that coaching or mentoring from a senior leader is the most suitable and successful form of professional development a middle leader can receive (Koh et al., 2011) and should be strongly encouraged.

Summary

This literature review focuses on the role of middle leaders in primary and secondary schools. It is clear that the role of a middle leader is a diverse and complex one that requires a multifaceted skill set. Middle leaders deal with a myriad of administrative tasks, focusing on raising student achievement, managing staff, and balancing the role of classroom teacher with the leadership responsibility. The diversity of the middle leadership role brings many challenges. Dealing with people is a key function of the role (Bennett et al., 2007) yet there is little reference in the literature to indicate how middle leaders are equipped to cope with this diversity and the leadership of people in their respective team (Southworth, 2004). Many feel a sense of uncertainty moving into a middle leadership role (Fitzgerald, 2009), exacerbated further by a lack of professional development available.

The lack of literature concerned with middle leadership in composite schools is evident by omission. This reinforces the need for this research to establish any differences in a middle leadership position in a non-composite school versus a composite school. It is surprising that there appears to be no literature available considering that there are thousands of composite schools all over the world. Throughout this literature review key indicators have emerged pointing to the range of difficulties that face middle leaders in their roles. Some different aspects of these difficulties have been explored across several countries. In the next chapter I describe how, using my chosen methodology, I have endeavoured to get some further clarity on this topic through an investigation of the issues facing middle leaders in three composite school in New Zealand.

Chapter 3 Research Methodology

Introduction

This chapter describes the research methodology and outlines the rationale behind selecting a qualitative approach for this research. The rationale for participant selection and the choice of semi-structured interviews to gather data are presented. Data analysis, trustworthiness, transferability and validity of the data are examined. To conclude the chapter, ethical considerations are discussed.

Positioning

Elements that fit under the paradigm umbrella are ontology, epistemology, methodology and outcomes. Ontology describes a set of philosophical beliefs people have about the kinds of thing that exist in the world (Tolich & Davidson, 2011). The ontological position of a researcher may differ from an understanding that there are limitations of the accessibility of any reality or consistency (Ling & Ling, 2017). Epistemology describes a set of philosophical beliefs people have about how they know things (Tolich & Davidson, 2011) or, as Maxwell (2008) indicates, epistemology is how we know, as well as the relationship between the knower and the known. Ling and Ling (2017) suggest that epistemology involves the theoretical perspective we have about how knowledge is constructed and the views that researchers hold about the nature of that knowledge. An epistemological position involves an understanding of objectivist approaches and subjectivist approaches to gathering understanding (Ling & Ling, 2017).

An interpretive epistemological position was taken to research the role of individual middle leaders in Year 1-15 composite schools in New Zealand. An interpretive position assumes multiple realities, enabling individual perspectives to be expressed and understood (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). An interpretivist approach is where the researcher places values on words and understands the worldview of their subjects (Bryman, 2008). The outcome of such an approach is often very personal, subjective and based on the researcher's understanding. Ling and Ling (2017) write that a subjective stance is adopted as the research is a value-laden activity. The rationale behind using an interpretive approach was justified when considering the nature of a typical school environment and the value placed on gaining a personal, subjective response from participants. The term 'research paradigm' can be used to describe a world-view or a set of assumptions and understandings about different aspects of research (Ling & Ling, 2017). (2006) indicates that a paradigm is a complete set of beliefs and "resultant

practices” (p. 216). The paradigm that underpins a research approach may be implicit rather than explicit and is the focal point of any research (Ling & Ling, 2017).

Education research occurs within five key paradigms: positivist, neo-positivist, interpretivist, transformative and pragmatic. In the social sciences field, it is widely recognised that there are two key paradigms that form the basis of any research; the positivist and the interpretivist (Bryman, 2008; Kumar, 2011; Ling & Ling, 2017). A positivist paradigm is described as an understanding that a consistent, logical, ordered reality exists in the social world (Tolich & Davidson, 2011; Ling & Ling, 2017). Bryman (2008) adds that a positivist paradigm entails the principle that “knowledge is arrived at through the gathering of facts that provide the basis for laws” (p. 8). An interpretivist paradigm is a contrasting paradigm to positivism. It indicates that a strategy is required that acknowledges the differences between people and objects and a requirement for the researcher to grasp the meaning of social action (Bryman, 2008). Kumar (2011) highlights that an interpretivist paradigm is known as the qualitative, ethnographic, ecological or naturalistic approach.

Research methodology

The methodology assists the researcher to understand the process of scientific inquiry rather than just the product (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). Research methodology is the philosophy or general principle that guides research (Dawson, 2010). Researchers typically utilise one of several different methodologies such as qualitative, quantitative, mixed method, case study, action research or ethnography. In recent times the number of researchers interested in qualitative approaches has increased exponentially (Lincoln, Lynham & Guba, 2011). Whilst qualitative and quantitative approaches represent different ends of a continuum they should not be seen as rigid or opposite. Neither is better than the other, they are just simply different, and both have their strengths and weaknesses (Dawson, 2010). The distinction between the two can be seen in the types of strategies used in the research process, and the specific methods used. Wilkinson (2001) states that the terms qualitative and quantitative do not act just as labels or categories for research methods but may also imply a particular outlook of the nature of the research. “Increasingly, the terms ‘quantitative research’ and ‘qualitative research’ came to signify much more than ways of gathering data; they came to denote divergent assumptions about the nature and purposes of research in the social sciences” (p. 8). As always, however, it is beneficial to consider alternative perspectives that may aid certain aspects of research.

It is also important to note that a quantitative approach once dominated the field in the 19th century, whereas a qualitative approach has gained interest and attention in the later part of the 20th century and into the 21st century (Creswell, 2014; Wilkinson, 2001). The rationale for this recent increased recognition is based on the notion the quantitative approaches failed to take into consideration the differences between people and objects (Wilkinson, 2001). The use of qualitative data has been described as an 'attractive nuisance' particularly in the analysis stage as there is no clear and universally accepted set of conventions when analysing qualitative data (Robson, 2011). Qualitative and quantitative methods can both be used within an interpretive approach. However, the qualitative approach allows a certain amount of flexibility and the opportunity to follow up initial conversations with further dialogue and discussion (Bryman, 2008). This is also a distinct advantage as there is more of an emphasis on the interviewees' own perspective. It does not allow time for surveys or observations and this can be perceived as a weakness. Qualitative research explores attitudes, behaviour and experiences through methods such as interviews or focus groups. The objective is to be able to access in-depth responses from all involved (Dawson, 2010). It also deals predominantly with non-numeric data, things that are concerned with quality of something rather than its quantity (Kumar, 2011; Tolich & Davidson, 2011). Qualitative methods seek to interpret the meanings people make of their lives in natural settings, on the assumption that social interactions form an integrated set of relationships (Payne & Payne, 2005).

I chose to take a qualitative methodological approach to my research. The key rationale for this decision is that I wanted to understand, explain, and explore participants' feelings, perceptions and experiences (Kumar, 2011). I was interested in uncovering the participants' emotive, genuine and sincere thoughts regarding their assigned leadership role. I was also able to focus on the detail of what participants indicated in the interview situation and use "inductive logic" (Payne & Payne, 2005, p. 176) to explore the data I collected. I was aware that there would be multiple perceptions of the reality of the research and, therefore, multiple interpretations (Ling & Ling, 2017).

Sampling

The quality of any research relies not only on the choice of methodology and the instruments chosen but also the appropriateness of the sampling strategy adopted by the researcher (Cohen et al., 2007). Sampling can be the key to good qualitative inquiry and understanding the dilemmas of qualitative validity (Richards & Morse, 2007). I appreciate that as my methodology was qualitative in nature and considering the aims and objectives of my research it was most appropriate to use non-probability sampling (Wellington, 2015). The decision to focus on utilising a purposive or purposeful sampling

approach allowed me to select participants because of their characteristics or because they are “politically and informationally rich sources of data” (Shank, 2006, p. 30). Purposive sampling ensured that I did not generalise to a population recognising that I was not working with a random or convenient sample (Bryman, 2008). This approach also recognised a focus on guidelines rather than strict rules (Tolich & Davidson, 2011). There was also the potential to utilise a ‘snowball sampling approach’ as several research participants recommended a colleague with an active interest in my research (Cohen et al., 2007; Dawson, 2010; Wellington, 2015). I did not end up utilising this option as the sample size was more than adequate to provide a rich data set.

Participant selection

Conducting my research in all 160 composite school in New Zealand was unrealistic so compromise was required. Therefore, on the advice from my supervisor, I limited my research to three large composite schools within New Zealand. I accessed the websites of these (over 1000 students) composite schools to gather email contact details of middle leaders. The rationale for selecting large schools was that these were similar to my current work context with which I am familiar. Furthermore, large schools were likely to have many middle leaders with diverse and complex roles spanning multiple year levels. I contacted several middle leaders by email to ask for their participation in the research process, confirming that each had been involved in middle leadership in a previous position outside the composite school environment. I received positive responses to participate in a semi-structured interview from the first two people in each of the three schools I contacted so I did not need to utilise a randomisation tool such as can be found in Microsoft excel.

Data collection

The gathering of data is not always a simple and straightforward process (Shank, 2006). Research to collect data is typically constructed through a process of rigorous, systematic inquiry and research instruments are the tools used to collect and structure data (Wilkinson, 2001). I chose to collect primary data using semi-structured interviews. Secondary data from the Ministry of Education (www.moe.govt.nz) statistics and literature around the employment of middle leaders was also very useful when evaluating the turnover of middle leaders in schools or the current health and wellbeing of many in middle management roles.

The flexibility of a semi-structured interview makes it attractive to many researchers (Bryman, 2008) and this flexibility is the prime reason that I chose to use this tool. The option to include open-ended questions and the ability to follow relevant topics that may stray from the interview questions was an advantage for this research. The objective

was to gather data from middle leaders whose job description involved working with staff and students over a range of year levels throughout the entire school, rather than just in the primary or secondary areas. These participants had also been involved in middle leadership in a primary, intermediate or secondary school prior to working in a composite school. I used a recording device to record audio at each interview and created a transcript of each session after the interview. Once the data had been gathered, I was able to provide each participant with a copy of their interview transcript for checking if they were interested. A key rationale for recording the interviews was that it allowed me to follow up interesting points that were made and minimised the distraction of having to make detailed notes throughout the interview (Bryman, 2008).

Semi structured interviews

In a semi-structured interview, the researcher is focused on gaining specific information that can be compared and contrasted with information from other interviews (Dawson, 2010). The objective is also to gain insight into the participants' own perspectives (Bryman, 2008). I asked a range of questions to which the participants could easily respond. This approach was also ideal as I had no predetermined knowledge of what responses the participants might have given. The intention was that I, as the researcher, could allow the participants to give a detailed response without feeling pressured. Whilst there was some structure to the process, the ability was there to ask additional questions and follow tangents should they arise. This happened on a number of occasions as I was aiming to receive "rich, detailed answers to the interview questions" (Bryman, 2008, p. 471). I also intended on interviewing some participants on more than one occasion should the need arise. However, this was not required. The use of semi-structured interviews allowed me to gain valuable insight in the personal experience of middle leaders in composite schools.

I used an interview schedule (see Appendix A) to ensure some consistency throughout the interviews. The interview schedule contained a list of topics rather than questions as this allowed the flexibility indicated earlier. I ensured that I covered as many topics as possible during the allocated period and noted the responses of the participants as accurately as possible to avoid any preference, or bias (real or perceived). I used a template to keep the information segregated and easy to review later. The interviews ranged in length from 45 to 60 minutes.

Data analysis

The qualitative data analysis process is very important as for data to have any meaning these must be interpreted. The value of this collective qualitative data is undeniable as it is rich, full and real (Robson, 2011). Cohen et al. (2007) highlight that any qualitative data analysis involves organising, accounting for and explaining the data noting “categories, themes and irregularities” (p. 461). Asking analytic questions of the data is the key to solid and significant research (Richards & Morse, 2007). Many researchers feel it is important to transcribe their own data rather than pass it to a professional transcriber. I intended to transcribe my own data although this proved to be somewhat of an ambitious goal and I ended up using a professional transcriber. I used coding as a tool to sort the data I collected into various categories.

Coding

Coding is an act of selective attention that should not be viewed as an automatic or prescriptive process (Shank, 2006). Coding is a tool used to aid the sorting and analysis of data (Wilkinson, 2001). Coding requires a lot of skill and is improved through much practice. Codes at their “simplest are just labels” (Richards & Morse, 2007, p. 137). I began the process by using different coloured highlighters to represent different subjects or topics. As I read through each transcript and used the various coloured highlighters I also wrote notes and used acronyms and abbreviations alongside the original text. Several categories emerged as I worked through this process I was then able to organise all the categories into themes, reducing the amount of data to analyse. The coding process assisted me in ‘fracturing’ the data, offering me the opportunity to look at the data with a fresh perspective and distance me from the original data set (Creswell, 2014; Richards & Morse, 2007).

Trustworthiness and transferability

To avoid research that is lacking value and worth, researchers must validate their findings (Amankwaa, 2016). For research to be worthwhile it should have truth value, applicability, consistency and neutrality. The true value of research is strengthened through its trustworthiness. Trustworthiness enables our thinking to move from challenging the validity of the research to maintaining a confidence of credibility (Hammond & Wellington, 2012). Once this trustworthiness has been established the responsibility of the researcher is to prove that the research can be applied to another context. To ensure this transferability, the research must be of thick description (Cresswell & Miller, 2000). Thick description relates to the depth and breadth of the research collected. With an abundance of detail an external assessor can confidently transfer conclusions to another setting or context (Amankwaa, 2016). I am confident that

the research conducted in this study provides enough detail that enables it to be of value to another situation and of use to those in composite schools. The fact that I spent a significant amount of time with each participant encourages credibility as does having data that is based on social desirability and more on personal experience (Kumar, 2011).

Validity

The validity of the data I collected and the research process I conducted was extremely important and was concerned with the integrity of the conclusions I generated (Bryman, 2008). It related broadly to the extent to which the measure achieves its aim (Tolich & Davidson, 2011; Wilkinson, 2001), or the degree to which a method, a test or a research tool measures what it is supposed to measure (Payne & Payne, 2005; Wellington, 2015). Kumar (2011) comments that validity relates to appropriateness and accuracy and may be applied to any component of the research process. I was able to ensure that any concerns regarding the validity of my data were addressed by clear methodological processes and repeatable instructions that were clearly designed for such a dataset. I also built into my research process the idea of 'participant validation' or 'respondent validation' (Bryman, 2008). This involved writing up responses from the semi-structured interviews and providing the participants an opportunity to sight this information. The desire was to confirm that the findings were congruent with the views of the participants.

Ethical considerations

Social researchers must take into consideration the possible effects that their research may have on any participants involved and act in such a way as to "preserve their dignity" (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 58). An ethic is a moral principle or code of conduct which governs what people do. A key criterion for all educational research is that it should be ethical and should be at the forefront of every researcher's thinking (Wellington, 2015). The British Educational Research Association Ethical Guidelines (2011) emphasises the theme of 'responsibility', which implies certain rights and rules. This document stresses the necessity for participants in any study to not just give consent but to give 'informed consent' (Wellington, 2015). One of the dilemmas that I considered as a researcher, was the balance between my approach to collecting the data, and the rights and values of the participants in the research process. This balance is known as the cost-benefit ratio (Cohen et al., 2007). The ratio refers to the conflict between two rights. Firstly, the rights to conduct research in order to gain knowledge, and secondly the rights of participants to self-determination, privacy and dignity (Cohen et al., p. 63). I considered the effects that the research could have on any participants and acted in a way that preserved the dignity of the participant.

Whilst there were benefits for the participants from this research, there was also the opportunity for emotional harm (Wilkinson, 2001). This study required ethics approval from the *Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee* as I was sending out an invitation for people to participate in my research. I did not involve any participants from the school I am currently working in or have been employed in the past. This was to ensure there would be no perceived conflict of interest. I wanted the participants to feel that I had no personal prejudice that may influence the research (Payne & Payne, 2005). The principles outlined by the *Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee* (AUTEC, 2014) were used as a guide for my research.

All the participants received information about my intended research process prior to them agreeing to be involved through the participant information sheet (see Appendix B). In this form I justified the relevance of the research to avoid wasting the respondents' time, which would be unethical. Participants involved in the research gave their written consent using the participant consent form (see Appendix C) and all ongoing communication was with participants directly (Wilkinson, 2001). This process was completed without any pressure placed on participants who were participating voluntarily. Informed consent is very important (Cohen et al., 2007), particularly if participants are exposed to any stress, and it enabled an opportunity for me as the researcher to give full information regarding any possible consequences of their participation. Informed consent ensured that subjects were made adequately aware of the type of information I wanted from them, why the information was being sought, what purpose it would be put to, how they were expected to participate in the study, and how it would directly or indirectly affect them (Kumar, 2011, p. 220).

Confidentiality was an important aspect of the process and I ensured that all participants felt valued and that their opinions were respected. There was no connection made publicly between the participant and the data gathered (Cohen et al., 2007) as names of participants were not published or made known in any way. I respected the rights and confidentiality of the participants as outlined in the AUTEC (2014) guidelines. These included keeping information (including the identity of participants) confidential and secure from interception or appropriation by unauthorised persons, or for purposes other than the approved research, acknowledging that anonymity is not always assured when this is done. I also ensured the safekeeping and confidentiality of signed consent forms, which were stored separately from the data. Tolich and Davidson (2011) highlight that for many researchers promising confidentiality can be a dangerous thing as this is virtually impossible. This is more evident in a focus-group scenario and my choice of semi-structured interviews made it less problematic for my research. All paper

documentation was stored in a locked filing cabinet in my office and all electronic files stored in a folder on my computer that is password protected.

I highly valued and respected the trust that others placed in me by ensuring that I respected the perspectives and opinions of all participants throughout the entire research process, and at every stage aimed to conduct myself in an ethical manner, showing genuine appreciation to those involved. At no stage did the information provided by the participants reveal their identity (Cohen et al., 2007). Rapport with the participants was established by treating each participant with respect, thinking carefully about my appearance, considering my body language and maintaining eye contact with participants (Dawson, 2010).

Summary

This chapter has presented an overview of the research methodology and outlined the reasoning behind choosing an interpretive epistemology for this research. The rationale for participant selection in three large composite schools was discussed. I have justified the choice of semi-structured interviews to gather data and explained the process of data analysis including a summary of coding techniques used. I have also explained the way in which I was able to ensure validity and trustworthiness throughout the research. To conclude the chapter ethical considerations were discussed. The following chapter presents the findings of this research.

Chapter 4 Findings

Introduction

This chapter presents the findings from research conducted in three composite schools throughout New Zealand. The data from six semi-structured interviews are summarised under the following three headings: core roles and responsibilities, the key challenges middle leaders face and the professional development support available. To conclude the chapter, reference is made, wherever possible, to the differences between non-composite and composite schools.

Participants

Purposive sampling was used in this research study as it ensured that I did not generalise to a population (Bryman, 2008). It was also used with the intention of having participants who could help in answering the research questions. This approach recognised a focus on guidelines rather than strict rules (Tolich & Davidson, 2011) which was very beneficial considering I was conducting semi-structured interviews. Six middle leaders who have had some experience in middle leadership in a primary, intermediate or secondary school prior to their current leadership role in a composite school, were involved in this research. The idea that each was involved in a leadership role in a previous non-composite school was critical to my research as this allowed for a comparison to be made between the two contexts. One of the six participants is currently in a pastoral care leadership role, two are in areas of responsibility involving curriculum and pastoral care responsibilities and two have curriculum responsibility only. The final participant has a role overseeing information technology across the whole school. Five of the participants worked in a Year 1-13 school with one participant (Participant 4) working in a Year 1-10 school. Table 4.1 indicates the current role that each participant holds. All six participants had been in their current middle leadership position for at least two years. Four of the participants were female and two were male.

Table 4.1: Participant role in current school

Participant 1 (P1)	Head of Intermediate (Years 7-8)	Year 1-13 School
Participant 2 (P2)	Year 11 Dean	Year 1-13 School
Participant 3 (P3)	Head of Information Technology (Years 1-13)	Year 1-13 School
Participant 4 (P4)	Head of Middle School, Years 7-10	Year 1-10 School
Participant 5 (P5)	Head of Year 7-13 English	Year 1-13 School
Participant 6 (P6)	Teacher in Charge English Years 7-9 and e-learning coordinator Years 7-9	Year 1-13 School

Presentation of findings

The aim of this research was to identify key similarities and/or differences of middle leadership positions in a composite school as opposed to a non-composite school. The findings of the research are presented in four sections: Section 1 presents findings regarding the core roles and responsibilities of the middle leader role; Section 2 presents the findings associated with the key challenges middle leaders face; and Section 3 presents findings regarding the professional development available for middle leaders along with support from senior leadership. Each section begins by stating the key questions used in the interviews. The key findings are then presented, with participant comments included to support the findings. The final section includes commentary from participants highlighting the key differences they noted when comparing their current role to their previous role.

Section 1 - Core roles and responsibilities

The first series of questions asked about the core roles and responsibilities of the middle leader job description. The following questions were used as a guide to determine these core roles and responsibilities of the middle leadership role in a composite school:

1. What are the key aspects of your current job description?
2. How do you determine the priorities in your role?
3. How complex is the role of a middle leader in a composite school compared to a primary or secondary school?

4. What are the key differences with your role when compared with a similar role in a secondary school or primary school?

These questions were designed to draw out the responsibilities that each participant considered to be the key components of their job description and encourage dialogue with each participant regarding the key tasks, function and complexity of the position. Table 4.2 shows a summary of the key roles and responsibilities of the job description that the participants mentioned. The number of responses indicates how many middle leaders raised that particular responsibility in the conversation.

Table 4.2: Key roles and responsibilities of a middle leadership job description

Role/Responsibility	Number of Responses
Appraisal	4
Discipline	3
Unit planning	3
Moderation	4
Marking	4
Annual plan	5
Data analysis	3
Review of curriculum	5
Administration	6
Pastoral care of staff	6
Pastoral care of students	6
Meeting leaders in other areas	5
Setting vision	3
Mentoring	3
Teaching	6
Writing assessment	6
Teacher guidance and support	5
Extra-curricular	4
Representation on committees	2

The participants were all able to clearly articulate the core aspects of their role. The responses from all participants highlighted the diversity and complexity of the roles that middle leaders play in composite schools. Each participant indicated that their role was broad, and it often encompassed involvement in the whole school rather than just the department or year level in which they worked. This was the difference identified by participants when comparing their current role to previous roles in non-composite schools. All participants indicated that they are involved in 'across school' meetings with other leaders in some capacity. This element was identified in the following participant quotes:

I think my primary role is overseeing the delivery and content of my senior classes. That's my bread and butter. If there is a crisis elsewhere in the school though I must leave my class and deal with it. My senior classes must manage themselves if this happens (P2)

There are three key areas of my role. I manage the school leadership activities delegated to me by the Principal and Deputy Principal. There's the curriculum leadership within the Year 7-10 team which includes both primary (7-8) and secondary (9-10) and then there is the management and pastoral care of the students (P4)

You have to start thinking about how everyone else is perceiving what you are doing in a composite school compared to a primary school. Also, how you are representing the vision of others. You have to balance between representing the leaders and also the teachers and students (P6)

This complexity was particularly emphasised by comments from the two participants who were in leadership roles in intermediate areas:

When I was a team leader in a primary school it was really easy to just be in your own little window. I kind of just dealt with what I was doing. Whereas in this role, you know, I'm constantly in meetings with high school teachers as well as primary teachers (P1)

I do a lot of administration, paperwork, subject section, staffing, data analysis and learning area reviews. I oversee eight teachers and take care of their concerns and needs as well. I meet with people from all over the school, not just my area (P4)

These comments illustrate the perceptions of the participants that they are juggling a myriad of roles and responsibilities and that the job is often undefined and lacking clarity. Four of the participants (P1, P4, P5 and P6) talked about the importance of clarity, with a few mentioning that they have a complete lack of clarity in their current middle leadership role. Some eluded to having aspects of clarity in certain parts of their job but not in others:

I have real clarity with part of my role as it's based around national standards, but, in other areas there are not set criteria so I tend to do more than what's required I think. My understanding is that because there's no clarity and I'm uncertain I don't want to underperform so I kind of overperform (P1)

I do for English. It's based around creating clear OTJs, but for e-learning, because we have had a major upheaval of our technology it's harder to define because it's not a measurable thing (P6)

One participant (P4) endorsed the lack of clarity and commented further that she felt she was working harder than others on staff and needed clarity to ensure she was not doing more than they were. Interestingly, no other participants made comparative reference to middle leaders in their schools:

That's just the nature of who I am. You know you do it once, you do a really good job. But when you compare with other leaders in other parts of the school, you realise maybe you are going above and beyond your time release and management unit (P4)

Another participant (P5) discussed the lack of clarity regarding the personnel she oversees and where her responsibilities start and finish. She expressed this sentiment by saying:

I have oversight for staff teaching Years 10-13 as well as Years 7-9 but they (Year 7-9) predominantly fall under another person. This a blurry area as I am not checking on her teaching or appraisal as she has a few different people she is responsible to. I do follow up on her learning area reviews though. It's a little vague at times (P5)

Not all the participants, however, felt that they lacked clarity regarding their job description. Two participants (P3, P2) confidently expressed that they felt they had clarity in their respective roles and indicated that each subsequent year they were in the role they were able to gain greater clarity as to what was required and expected by senior leaders:

Part of gaining [clarity] is defining the role early on when you start. I ran a running total of the key management tasks in my first year and have even shared this list with others who have asked for it. I stick to this list each year to help me define the role (P3)

I'm responsible for pastoral care of the students and teachers as well as conducting appraisals for staff, discipline and behaviour issues for students, day to day running of the department, signing off trip forms ...

I've been privileged in that I've been able to have these conversations with my Principal. He has helped to try and create clarity for me in my position (P2)

These data suggest that staff may struggle to manage their time appropriately. Some participants discussed strategies that their schools employ to help ensure there is some clarity for middle leaders who operate across the whole school. The following comments reflect this idea:

We meet together with senior secondary (Year 10-13) and junior secondary (Year 7-9) to try and make the transitions for students a bit easier (P6)

HOD meetings are run by the AP (Associate Principal) once a month and we action the emails that come through to all the heads of departments (P5)

Almost all of the strategies mentioned involved the idea of bringing people together at the same time:

We have a weekly meeting with IT services and pull in the e-learning people too (P3)

Several participants (P2, P3, P4 and P6) remarked that their job is much broader than what is written on their job description and that often the boundaries of the role can be somewhat blurred. This was not presented in a negative way; however, participants were keen to note that role clarity is often not defined by the formal job description:

My role is Year 11 Dean but sometimes I get asked to be involved with some Year 7 and 8 students. Some boys who may be having issues and intermediate teachers will ask me as a male dean to speak to those students (P2)

This was expressed by another participant who mentioned that he felt torn between his responsibilities that fall over two campuses and that some staff felt he wasn't supporting them enough:

Some staff tell me they feel isolated because I am working mainly from one campus and not based on their site. I had assumed that they had certain skills with IT that maybe they don't and therefore didn't require as much support (P3)

Summary

All the participants commented on the key components of their job description. Whilst they were aware of the key components of the role, participants all noted that the role is diverse and complex and agreed that it is important to have clarity in their respective roles. P1, P4, P5 and P6, however, indicated that this clarity is missing and that the responsibilities they have can be somewhat fluid from year to year. Participants indicated this lack of clarity can be caused by changes of personnel in senior leadership or by a change in strategic focus for the school. P2, P3, P4 and P6, also talked openly about the broad nature of their role in a composite school. This was not expressed in a negative way but more to raise awareness of this aspect of the role.

Section 2 - Key challenges in the role

The second set of questions in the semi-structured interviews were designed to facilitate conversation around the key challenges that middle leaders face. These questions were:

1. What are the key challenges that you face in your role?
2. How do you feel supported to overcome these challenges?

The six key challenges raised by participants were:

complexity of the role; lack of knowledge specific to a composite school setting; tension of being “between” senior leadership and their team; dealing with conflict; teacher’s perception of their leadership and the lack of time. Table 4.3 shows the challenges that participants identified in ranked order based on the frequency each challenge was mentioned. The table also indicates the key challenges in their previous middle leadership roles at a primary, intermediate or secondary school. For example; all six participants mentioned that role complexity is a challenge in their current position. Only one participant (P4) indicated that this was the case in the previous role in a non-composite school. P2 and P5 indicated that managing student behaviour was a challenge for them in their current role, whereas, five participants highlighted this to be a challenge in the leadership role in a prior school.

Table 4.3: Six key challenges middle leaders experience in a composite school

Challenge faced in a composite school	Current role		Previous role	
	No of participants	%	No of participants	%
Role complexity	6	100	1	17
Lack of specific knowledge to composite school	6	100	0	0
Sitting in the “middle”	5	83	1	17
Dealing with conflict	4	67	4	67
Perception of their role	4	67	2	33
Not enough time	4	67	5	83

Figure 4.1 shows the data from Table 4.3 in graphical form. This provides a pictorial representation, highlighting the percentage of middle leaders mentioning challenges faced in a composite school in comparison to those challenges faced in a non-composite school. This graph explicitly shows the key differences between composite and non-composite schools.

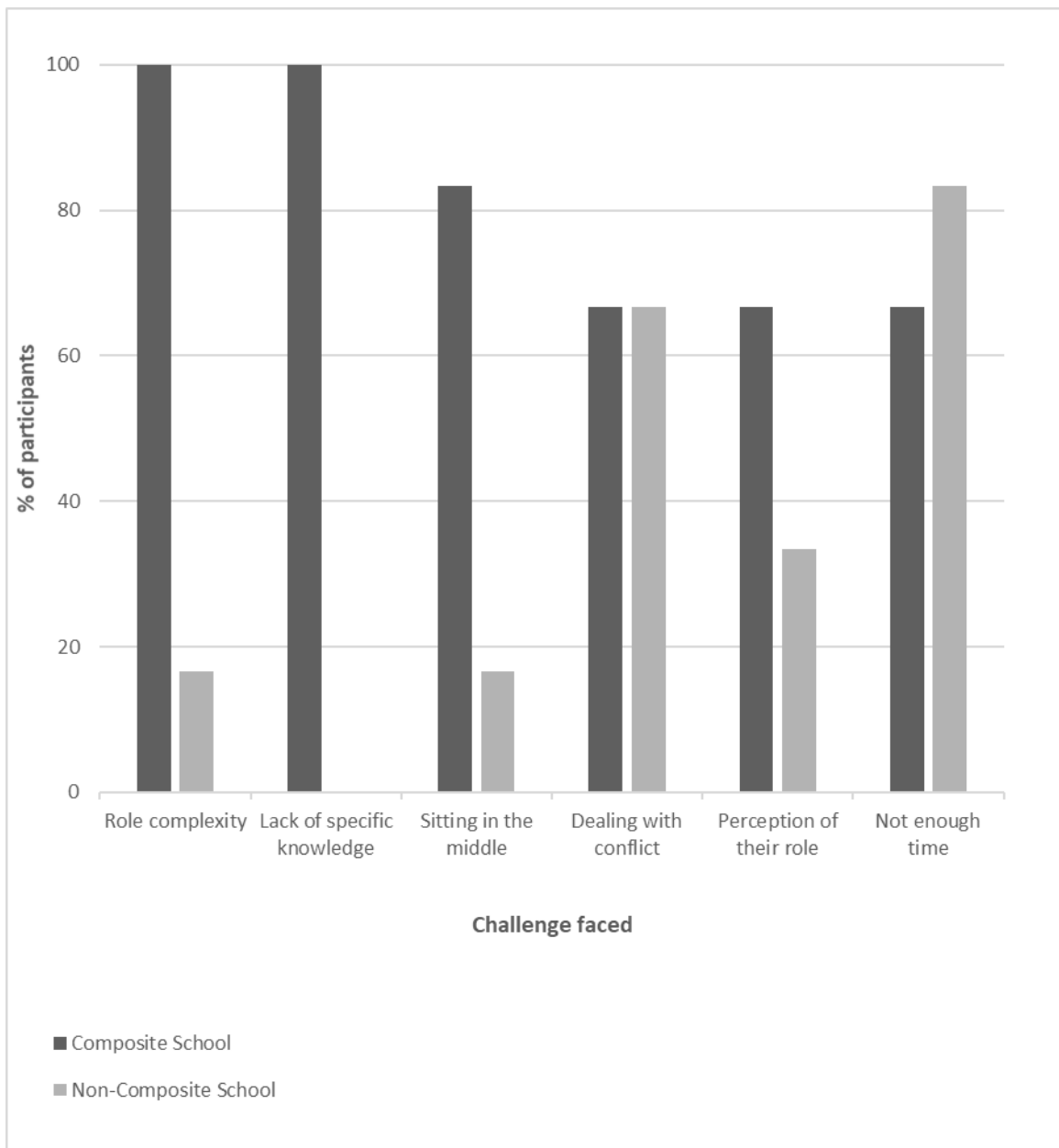


Figure 4.1: Challenges faced by middle leaders in composite school versus non-composite school.

Participants identified the complexity of the role, a lack of specific knowledge related to a composite school environment and sitting in the ‘middle’ between senior leaders and teaching staff as the most commonly faced challenges they experienced in their current roles. In previous roles in non-composite schools, the most frequently raised challenges were, not enough time and dealing with conflict. These findings are described in more detail in the following sections.

Complexity of the role in a composite school

The most common challenge that all six participants experience as middle leaders in composite schools was the complex nature of the position. By comparison, only one participant (P3) indicated this was a challenge in their previous school as Head of Information Technology. This is not surprising considering the role description at the composite school involved input at all multiple year levels of that secondary school. All the participants identified that the complexity of their role can be very challenging, and a variety of comments were made that indicated many felt somewhat confused at times as to what their role entailed:

I find it very difficult at times as my role is so broad (P6)

In a small composite school there's so many needs. We get asked to do many different things that are outside of our areas of responsibility. And kind of having a sense of community, I think, that that means that we'll do more than we should. Which comes at a cost (P4)

Often, I think I look at what needs to be done, and it kind of, I don't know; I learnt once that whole thing of what's urgent and what's important. And so, you do the urgent and important first and then you do the urgent and then the important after that (P1)

For several participants the complexity of the role raised issues as to how they should prioritise their time:

So, your pie's only as big as it is and when you look at your pie, and there's nothing left; it's a problem. So, I think the idea of having some boundary time of this is my priority. This is what I get paid for mainly' (P2)

One participant (P6) emphasised the issue regarding the complex nature of their role at times by highlighting the point that sometimes this could potentially mean they step on other leaders' toes:

But it's hard; it's hard to... you know, where do you draw the line as a middle manager for your set area? I know you would probably have a right to see, you know, the programmes for other areas in the school, but you then suddenly take your role, and it's almost like you're adopting part of the primary role to try and oversee what they're doing (P6)

One of the participants (P1) felt that the complex nature of the school, and therefore the role, created pressure to ensure that staff across the whole school were happy. This was in response to a question related to current role versus previous role:

I think being in the intermediate part of the school, you've also got to think about where the high school staff are coming from. You have to balance both primary and secondary and there's a challenge to keep both parties happy (P1)

Lack of knowledge specific to a composite school setting

Another commonly mentioned challenge for middle leaders in this study is the quantity of specific knowledge required when working in a composite school. None of the participants indicated this was a challenge in their previous school, whereas all six of the middle leaders felt they lacked the specific knowledge and expertise appropriate for a middle leadership role in their current school. Three participants (P1, P5 and P6) expressed concerns that they were not trained to work in a school that catered for Year 1-13 students and, whilst for many their area of responsibility was a subset within the school, their current role required a broader knowledge of the curriculum and child development. These sentiments were reflected in the following comments:

You must have a wider knowledge of where the curriculum is going. In a primary school you don't need any knowledge of NCEA for example, but I need to have a basic knowledge in the composite school as we are "bridging the gap" (P1)

We [middle leaders] require a much broader knowledge as you have to know where you are coming from and where you are going to be effective. You have to have a foot in a lot of different camps (P6)

You have to think through what the impact will be on primary. I have to be more aware of the pathways for students in the whole school (P5)

One of the participants felt that the best teachers and leaders in composite schools should have had prior experience in a primary school and a secondary school to be the most effective in their position:

The best teachers and leaders have had experience at both ends eg primary and secondary. I think middle leader roles are all important but it's particularly vital in the intermediate section of a composite school role because you are basically in more ways than one, the middle. So, you've got the primary school feeding in ... and then those three years are crucial in a child's development, those preteen years ... finally the secondary part too (P4)

Sitting 'in the middle'

The third most challenging aspect of their role for middle leaders was the tension of being 'in the middle'. Five of the six participants commented that they found it challenging to 'sit in the middle' between the senior leadership team and the teaching staff. Only one (P5) of the participants indicated this was a challenge in her previous school.

The challenge of being hierarchically positioned under the authority of the Principal and other senior leaders, whilst at the same time responsible for managing a team of people and listening and respecting their viewpoints and arguments, cannot be underestimated according to the participants in this research. The views of middle leaders can often be in direct conflict with the senior leadership. The middle leaders in this research talked in depth as to how challenging and difficult this aspect of the role can be:

I am often caught in the middle and I feel the pressure as it can affect staff and students if both groups don't agree (P3)

You are the little in between person and expected to do what you are asked by the Principal in a way that engages your team (P2)

As a middle leader you are not seen as the authority, so it adds complexity as you don't carry the weight so you need support from the senior leader (P1)

One middle leader in the research indicated that being new in the role created added pressure until the senior leaders and staff became more familiar with her leadership style:

When you are new it is harder because staff may not be keen to follow you until they get to know you (P4)

The data suggest that the positioning of a middle leader within a school requires an ability to implement school wide goals, support the strategic direction of the school and to share the vision with their staff and students. The role necessitates a healthy respect and professional attitude towards senior leadership and ability to operate with integrity. Middle leaders can also use this line of authority to support getting the task completed when staff feel under pressure to deliver. Participants commented:

Sometimes you invoke their name. Look, such and such is on my case about this; I need this. And that kind of softens it a little bit. I guess the strength of being middle leadership is that you can be like, we're all in this together (P6)

And probably, you know, I try to soften the blow sometimes. I have little emergency packs of lollies. I say, I know this is a tough time, this is a push. And perhaps in that way you're on the ground a little bit, running with it. Because you're under the same pressure (P1)

I think you are kind of responsible in middle leadership to catch the vision of what needs to be done. So, it's not that you're saying, look, this useless thing has been asked of us again. It's, we need to get to this done. So, if the senior leadership has conveyed vision of what needs to be done well enough, then that's kind of my job to pass on that as well (P3)

The importance of not slandering or undermining the senior leadership, along with having integrity and honesty, was important to several people. Another participant highlighted the need for regular dialogue and discussion between middle and senior leaders across the whole school to encourage unity and identify the key issues that need addressing:

But you know, if you are concerned, rather than complaining down and amongst my people, I complain up, if that makes sense (P5)

Often you can be the carrier of bad news or negative things, and it's hard not to stuck in the middle as just the messenger. Loyalty is a hard one. We can be honest in the room but when we leave we need to be united (P1)

We have a leadership meeting where all the middle leaders from the senior campus and all the leaders from the junior campus meet. We talk about what's on top, what's happening, what's going on. I think the personalities that you have, and the mix of those personalities I think does somehow lubricate that process and it's interesting seeing the strengths of different people come through and kind of pull it all together (P2)

Two of the middle leaders indicated there can be a tension between maintaining a professional relationship and personal friendship with senior leaders at their school. They eluded to the fact that it is very important to separate the two and that at times it has an impact on their ability to lead:

Choose your friends wisely – your best friend that you share with can't be in a middle role or higher in your school – they can't know information – very unprofessional – be very careful (P4)

Middle leadership can be very lonely – you walk into a room and the conversation will stop. It's hard as you are not in the networks with principals and that but then left in the middle which can be lonely (P1)

Dealing with conflict

Four of the six participants identified that dealing with conflict is something they find challenging. This conflict can be between students, students and staff and staff members. The conflict may also involve parents in the school community. Some of the key causes for this conflict were identified by the participants:

It happens when there is a misjudgement of your role or authority (P5)

People aren't good at coming to say sorry, so this can inflame a situation and cause extreme stress and then lead to major conflict (P2)

Strategies for managing the challenges of conflict resolution were varied and middle leaders expressed several key lessons they learnt to use when dealing with a potential conflict situation in the future. The potential for a difficult conversation to impact the working relationship between middle leaders and their staff was discussed by some participants. The importance of utilising a restorative style rather than a confrontational methodology was emphasised:

Sometimes you have to just let it go and come humbly into the situation (P3)

The way to deal with it sometimes is going to senior leadership for support and ask for a restorative conversation to take place (P1)

One leader (P3) expressed how emotive these conversations can become especially if you were to use the wrong approach:

I faced tears, projectile tears, and accusations. I was like, "Oh my goodness, what have I done?" Luckily that has never repeated because I've learned a few keys about how you approach people and the information to take to people and what the result should be and that sort of restorative kind of thing (P4)

When working with students the behaviour management needs to be consistent to get the best outcome according to the participants in the research. Participants identified that having mana helps when dealing with conflict. They also suggested that being completely transparent, honest and willing to apologise when necessary are keys to resolving conflict. The following comments emphasised the importance of these tools and strategies for middle leaders:

If a staff member has respect for you and your leadership, it's easier to work alongside them (P5)

I think just being as upfront and as clear as you can be. And just if, if someone does have, you know, an issue that needs to be resolved then it has to be above board and talked about. So, it doesn't seem to necessarily be an ongoing stress but that, I know, in the past has been those stressful (P6)

Participants identified and highlighted the pressure some middle leaders feel comes with the role. They talked about the balance of personal and professional relationships and the potential to avoid a difficult situation arising:

Drawing a line in the sand sometime and not allowing a personal issue with a staff member to continue to fester (P4)

There is lots of overlap because your professional life does overlap with your personal. That is challenging. Luckily, I'm not put in this position very often, but you just have to approach it as a professional conversation. And I've learnt sometimes the hard way (P1)

Middle leaders also reflected on the challenge teacher's face when parents in the school community contest their professional judgement. A number of participants emphasised the challenge this presents for them as a middle leader and being called to intervene in such a situation:

I have had parents who've questioned the teacher and the marks that their child has received. When that happens, I prefer to get the parent in and sit down with them so that they can express their concerns in person (P4)

It can be very stressful meeting with parents, but before I see a parent I will also meet with the teacher and say, "can you just give me a brief overview". I find this can often diffuse the situation (P6)

The data suggest that conflict can arise when middle leaders identify a particular strategy they are keen to implement or change a current practice or procedure. Three (P5, P4 and P1) identified that managing change often creates conflict and can be a real challenge to address with staff:

I've had a situation where I've wanted to implement something for the greater good of the year 7 and 8 teachers, and I've had a team leader that's said, 'No'. I've seen the greater good but they haven't (P1)

We've come at loggerheads on some things (P5)

*My biggest challenge was when teachers say "No - I've done this for five years"
(P4)*

Middle leaders find dealing with conflict incredibly difficult at times, however, a number mentioned that they find other middle leadership staff and senior leaders open and willing to discuss appropriate strategies. They realise that the experience of others can be invaluable in providing that support:

I am making sure I have great mentors, inside and out of school, to help me grow as a leader (P2)

I have others who help me to make sure I am not constantly carrying the negative stuff on my own (P3)

Some people have been so happy to offer me guidance and support in my role.

This has been so helpful (P1)

Perception

Four of the six participants in the research study indicated that they felt that a pressure to perform in their role based on perception from other staff within the school. They intimated that perception of doing a good job or otherwise was always there, in the background:

*One of the challenges I face is the perception from other teachers of me as a leader. It can make me second guess myself, am I doing a good job or not?
(P4)*

You're never going to please everybody, regardless of what they think of you – good or bad, but it sits in the background for me (P1)

This perception seemed to be deeply personal for some of the participants, noting a need to be well liked and respected:

Sometimes I wonder if I am doing a good job. What do people think? Are they thinking I am useless and they could do better? (P3)

Lack of time

Four of the six participants in the study emphasised that a lack of time is a major barrier when attempting to complete their job at a high level. Participants noted that middle leaders must look beyond these barriers for success within the job. They also

described their frustration when additional responsibilities are thrown at them from time to time. One participant (P2) also indicated that a lack of time was a rationale for them to potentially look at another position within the school.

The more you take on the more you notice that you don't have enough time (P2)

Everybody says there isn't enough time and that time or money doesn't make the job worth it! There must be more than that as an incentive (P6)

That scale A position looks quite attractive at times as wouldn't be so much pressure, with so little time (P3)

One participant (P5) was quite vociferous about the level of expectation placed on middle leaders from those in senior positions. They noted that there can be a double up of workload due to a lack of communication from these senior staff:

"Where do I find the time to do this?" (P5)

This idea of doubling up and a lack of communication was reinforced by participant 2 and 3:

The demands on staff are sometimes overwhelming. Deputy Principal's request meetings, team leaders request meetings and everyone has their own priorities. Sometimes I feel like I am doing things twice, as different people are asking for the same things (P2)

Regular communication is essential amongst senior leaders to ensure that middle leaders and teachers are not replicating the same thing for multiple people eg Principal, Associate Principal and Board of Trustees.

Report for the board? – I did that last week didn't I? (P6)

It is important that senior leaders encourage efficiency and streamlining of activities and administrative tasks to save time for others. Another participant (P4) added that although she feels inadequate in her role at times and doesn't have enough time to complete everything in her job description she feels she has a responsibility to do her best at all times:

I feel like a small fish in a big pond – but when you break it down each part plays a vital role and I owe it to the school, to do my best for the students (P4)

Summary

Middle leaders in this study identified six key challenges they face in their current role in a composite school. Most participants noted that the challenges they experience are different to those experienced in a non-composite school. The three most commonly mentioned aspects of their current role that middle leaders find challenging are the complexity of the role, sitting 'in the middle', and a lack of specific knowledge required for a composite school position. Participants most commonly mentioned that managing student behavior, a lack of time and dealing with conflict as the three greatest challenges they faced in a previous role.

Section 3 - Professional development

The third series of questions in the semi-structured interviews focused on the availability and suitability of professional development for middle leaders.

1. How are you equipped with the necessary skills to be effective in your role?
2. What professional development are you involved in this year?
3. To what degree has professional development helped equip you in your role in a composite school?

Middle leaders in this study indicated that there are a number of professional development opportunities available and that they can sometimes be extremely valuable and beneficial:

I make the most of seminars and conferences. I like these as you are away from everything and can concentrate (P1)

One participant highlighted that the school they are in provides opportunities for the middle leaders independently from other teaching staff:

They have middle leader retreat-type things that I'll go on sometimes with some of the senior management staff. Which is a day out to refocus goals and things like that (P4)

A series of questions, however, regarding the availability of targeted professional development for middle leaders in composite schools raised concern:

I have never had professional development specific to my role in a composite school (P6)

One participant (P4) suggested that it would be incredibly beneficial in her position should that be an option:

I would love to but I am not aware of anything that is specially related to composite schools - nothing available I don't think? (P4)

Two other participants emphasised that if there was targeted, specific professional development for them in a composite school setting it could be of significant benefit:

People in similar roles are your biggest asset so would be great to connect and learn together and focus on specific needs for our type of schools (P2)

Would be really valuable if we could meet with other middle leaders in similar types of schools to share our frustrations and concerns as well as strategies for success (P5)

Another participant highlighted the differences between her previous role and current role suggesting that specific professional development would be ideal:

It's really different in my current school (composite) than my previous position (primary) so would be amazing to have exposure to professional development that was relevant and topical (P1)

Other responses from participants stressed the need for ongoing, quality professional development. Participants in communities of learning (COLs) indicated how important it is to meet with other schools and the rich, collaborative learning experiences:

It is vital we work really well with colleagues so the learning times with other schools are so valuable and essential (P3)

The COL (Community of Learning) times are fantastic as we get time available to learn and grow and meet and share (P4)

Another participant experienced some frustration with professional development that was of low quality and somewhat of a disappointment:

I find a lot of professional development is frustrating though as you don't always get to implement what you learn (P6)

One of the most successful approaches to personal growth and professional development for middle leaders in this study was the one to one relationship they have with a senior leader. All six participants indicated that at times within their career where they had someone functioning in this mentoring and guidance role, they felt they grew significantly in their leadership:

I think I actually got that from my Deputy Principal who's done that with me ...the conversations that we had along the lines with discipline, and a dean who's working these things out (P2)

Participants also mentioned how this subsequently encouraged them to become a mentor, coach and guide to other staff:

I suppose I did learn a whole lot of things working with him as he spoke through some things and guided me as a mentor (P6)

Coaching others – it's been a great way to develop my own leadership (P5)

Two participants were particularly complimentary of the senior leaders within their respective schools. The senior leaders were proactive, helpful and committed to supporting the middle leaders. They realised the difficulty for middle leaders in navigating a role that covers such a broad range of responsibilities and were very supportive:

Yeah, I've got a lot of support there. So, when I go to set my goals. We set goals twice a year around National Standards, around our practice. And they're really good at meeting; they're really onto it, very supportive (P1)

Sometimes at a meeting they'll come in and give me the freedom and say. 'Look, how are you going to do that? How are you going to implement this? What ideas do you have?' And we'll bounce ideas around the table, which is really great. I so appreciate that support (P4)

Summary

Middle leaders indicate that opportunities for professional development exist through a range of courses, workshops and conferences. Some participants highlighted that sometimes professional development can be low in quality and a waste of time and money. Middle leaders also emphasised the necessity for professional development that is pertinent to their role in a composite school. It needs to be targeted and specific, led by experienced personnel who have worked in composite schools. Finally, middle leaders indicated how valuable it is to have a senior leader who operates as a mentor.

Section 4 - Comparison to previous role in non-composite school

Towards the end of each interview participants were asked for general observation regarding middle leadership in a composite school. All the candidates chose to comment on their current role versus previous role. Each participant mentioned there

were several similarities as well as many differences in a non-composite school (primary, intermediate or secondary) when compared to their current position. Participants were asked to give their view as to whether the middle leadership role in a composite school was more complex and challenging than in a non-composite school by selecting a response of either; strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, or strongly disagree. The responses are summarised as follows in Table 4.4 and in Figure 4.2.

Table 4.4: Participant responses when comparing complex nature of composite school versus non-composite school

Participant 1 (P1)	Head of Intermediate (Years 7-8)	Agree
Participant 2 (P2)	Year 11 Dean	Neutral
Participant 3 (P3)	Head of Information Technology (Yr 1-13)	Strongly agree
Participant 4 (P4)	Head of Middle School, Years 7-10	Strongly agree
Participant 5 (P5)	Head of Year 7-13 English	Strongly agree
Participant 6 (P6)	Teacher in Charge English Years 7-9 and e-learning coordinator Years 7-9	Strongly agree

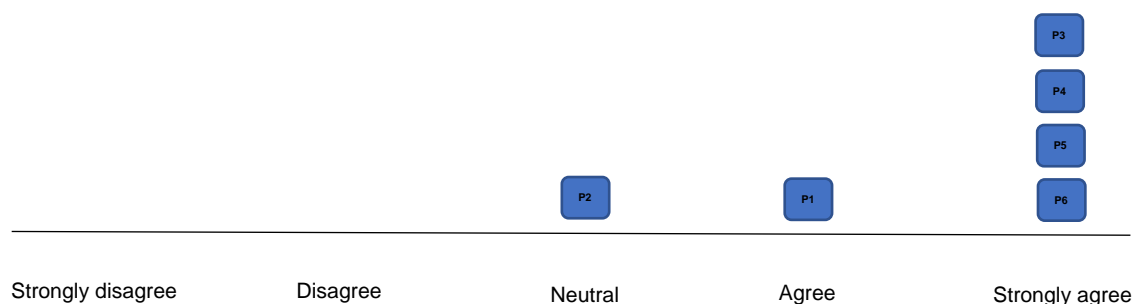


Figure 4.2: Continuum showing responses from participants when comparing the complex nature of a composite school versus a non-composite school

The responses shown in Table 4.4 and Figure 4.2 show that five participants who have roles that encompass a wide range of year levels and cross the traditional boundaries of secondary, intermediate and primary, agree or strongly agree that the role is more complex and challenging in a composite school than a non-composite school. The exception to this trend was participant 2 who indicated the role is no more complex and challenging than previous experience in a non-composite school. This participant mentioned that as his current role involves working closely with pupils and staff in a single year level there is little difference to his previous experience in a secondary school. The discussion in this section of the interview with each participant was rich and insightful. An example of this includes the comments from one participant who articulated that composite schools do not take advantage of the opportunities available to them because of their distinctiveness:

I think that the complexity is less in say a high school or an intermediate school or a primary school because it's more focused. And so, the demands are more defined. So, I guess we have the opportunity to do transitions better than other schools. I don't know if we always take advantage of that, but certainly there's potential for transitions (P6)

A further example of the depth of conversation was indicated by two of the participants who suggested that they felt a responsibility to take advantage of the composite school environment:

But I think I also owe it to the school, you know, to feed through because you've got that opportunity of the students going through (P3)

I think there's the responsibility because we're the area school, 0 to 13, there is that set progression. We have the ability to monitor our students well because many of them transition from new entrants all the way to year 13 (P5)

Summary

This chapter presented the findings from the research conducted with participants through semi-structured interviews. The findings highlight the complex nature of middle leadership along with the key challenges middle leaders face. Discussion regarding professional development with participants indicated that middle leaders all suggest more targeted and focussed support in their respective roles is required.

The following chapter discusses these findings and identifies the key themes that have emerged from them. Links to literature are made to demonstrate the complexities of the role of a middle leader in a composite school.

Chapter 5 Discussion of findings

Introduction

This chapter provides a discussion of the key findings from Chapter Four and links these findings to the supporting literature. The findings provide important insights into middle leadership in composite schools in New Zealand. This is an area of research that appears to not be considered in current educational literature. It would be incorrect to assume that the findings can be generalised to all middle leaders in composite schools throughout New Zealand or globally. What these findings pose, however, is a series of questions that should encourage further investigation and research.

The intention of this study was to gather a rich data set that utilised a qualitative approach within an interpretive paradigm. The semi-structured interviews provided a platform for conversation and discussion regarding the nature of the middle leadership role.

The discussion focuses on the key themes that arise from these three research questions:

1. Do middle leaders see their core roles and responsibilities in a composite school as different to those in a primary, intermediate or secondary school?
2. What key challenges do middle leaders face in a composite school as compared to a primary, intermediate or secondary school?
3. In what ways do middle leaders in composite schools feel equipped to manage and lead and how they are supported by senior leadership and professional development opportunities to do so?

Table 5.1 summarises the key themes that have emerged from the findings in Chapter Four.

Table 5.1: Key themes emerging from research findings

Research question	Themes
Do middle leaders see their core roles and responsibilities in a composite school as different to those in a primary, intermediate or secondary school?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The middle leadership job description is similar to non-composite schools. ▪ The role is broader than in a non-composite school. ▪ Role clarity is an issue for middle leaders in composite schools.
What key challenges do middle leaders face in a composite school as compared to a primary, intermediate or secondary school?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Many challenges faced are similar to non-composite schools. ▪ Some challenges are different due to the context of a composite school.
In what ways do middle leaders in composite schools feel equipped to manage and lead and how they are supported by senior leadership and professional development opportunities to do so?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Professional development is widely available for middle leaders. ▪ There is a lack of specific professional development for a composite school setting. ▪ Middle leaders value mentoring from senior leaders.

This discussion provides a critical analysis of the participants perceptions, thoughts and suggestions regarding the themes identified above.

Core roles and responsibilities of middle leaders

The first research question focused on the core roles and responsibilities of middle leaders in a composite school. Three key themes emerged: the job description of a middle leader in a composite and non-composite school is similar, aspects of the role for middle leaders in composite schools are broader and there is a lack of clarity for middle leaders in composite schools.

Job description - Similarities to non-composite schools

Middle leaders in composite schools share many of the same responsibilities as those in non-composite schools. This finding indicates that middle leaders in non-composite schools could easily transfer to a composite school environment and vice versa. Findings of this study indicate that as the roles in both contexts are very similar the skills are highly transferable. The findings of this research also suggest that middle leaders fulfil a very similar role and function in both a composite and non-composite school regarding the balance of leadership and management. Vilkinas (2014) notes that the middle leadership position is of such importance that it warrants the title leader rather than manager. The leadership title also emphasises that middle leaders are leaders of learning according to Grootenboer et al. (2015). The findings of this study concur with the literature in respect that middle leaders identified themselves as 'leaders', however, they reinforced on several occasions how much administration and management involved in the role. Crane and De Nobile (2014) and Fleming (2014) write that successful middle leaders have an ability to balance the management and leadership tasks within their job description.

In addition to the day to day aspects of the job, middle leaders in the study emphasised the notion that leadership forms a key part of the job in addition to management. The importance of the leadership function is supported by Searby and Armstrong (2016) who indicate that middle leaders must be intentional in their leadership and expect high standards from their staff and students. This finding indicates that middle leaders must be equipped with the tools and strategies to function as high performing leaders in their school and armed with time and professional capability.

Breadth of the role

Five of the six participants in this research study specified that whilst the job description was very similar, the depth and breadth of their current role was greater than that of their previous role in a non-composite school. Findings suggested that middle leaders must be more aware of what is happening elsewhere in the school and not just in their own little niche. Participants talked about the need for greater understanding across the whole school, specifically in child development and pedagogical knowledge and understanding. The rationale presented for this requirement for professional development is that middle leaders are often required to lead across a wide range of year levels in composite schools. A number of meetings are held with staff who work across the whole school rather than one specific curriculum department. These meetings consist of curriculum planning or mapping,

whole school strategic discussion and meetings with senior leadership. Whilst some of these may appear familiar to those in non-composite schools, participants noted that some middle leaders may have responsibilities for all thirteen year levels within the one school. These responsibilities can incorporate responsibility for the curriculum, pastoral care, management of staff or other key tasks. Two of the participants (P3 and P4) work closely with staff who are working across the whole school. The challenge for the three schools involved in this study is to provide opportunities for middle leaders to feel equipped with the skills required to fulfil this aspect of their role. Senior leaders take the lead in this process and create time and opportunity for middle leaders to collaborate and share experiences.

Within this research, middle leaders identified that another factor that added to the increased depth of the middle leadership role was that composite schools often operate over multiple campuses. Findings in this study indicate that this creates a range of practical issues such as timetabling and accessibility for middle leaders. It can also create further uncertainty of the role and varying expectations dependant on the context (Wise & Bennett, 2003). One participant discussed the multiple campus issue, particularly regarding the expectation from senior leadership. The participant felt he was potentially letting some staff down as he didn't frequent one campus as often as he would like in his role overseeing information technology and was unsure as to the full extent of his role. This participant data is supported by literature that reinforces the need to have clear expectations from senior leaders to enable middle leaders to excel (Fleming, 2014; Harris & Jones, 2017). The complicated nature of a multi-campus school creates further confusion and ambiguity for middle leaders. Opportunities exist to redefine job descriptions to suit the changing environment and complexity of the physical space. This could even include a restructure process where middle leadership positions are evaluated and redefined to assist with creating a clear and transparent leadership model.

The importance of clarity

The data from all six of the middle leaders in the study expressed concern about a lack of clarity regarding their role at times. Middle leaders are expected to fulfil a vital role yet very little attention is given to providing clarity for them (Crane & De Nobile, 2014; Dinham, 2007; Robinson et al., 2009). Several of the middle leaders laboured this point, reiterating how vital it is that role descriptions are clear and exact. Their rationale for this request is that clarity removes any ambiguity, which according to Fleming (2014), is vitally important as this prevents the possibility of role conflict, or even confusion. The findings in the research indicated that several middle leaders felt they

had clarity in some aspects of the role but not in others. The common denominator in this situation was that a lack of clarity existed in components of the role that overlapped multiple areas and year levels within the school. Participant 3 (Head of Information Technology) and Participant 5 (Head of English Year 7-13) emphasised this point, stressing that often the expanse of the role is unclear, particularly with the oversight of personnel. These participants clearly articulated that they did not experience this lack of clarity in their previous role in a non-composite school. The reasoning behind that notion was because their role did not overlap another person's area of responsibility or oversight. The role was clearly defined and obvious rather than indistinct and ambiguous. Both participants also indicated the important role senior leaders play in providing the clarity they require. Crane & De Nobile (2014) support this idea, suggesting that middle leaders need to have regular discussion and negotiation with a senior leader. Findings highlight that not all the participants experience a lack of clarity in their job. Two participants expressed that they felt a clear sense of what the job description entailed and how they gained in confidence each year. Their reasoning and justification for this statement was due to the support of a senior leader who gave freely of their time to work closely with them to ensure there was no lack of clarity. The support of and dialogue with other middle leaders was another mode in which this participant felt they had clarity within their role.

Clarity is essential for middle leaders for several reasons. Firstly, clarity helps to create a healthy school and with clarity comes understanding and continuity. Secondly, clarity removes any potential for confusion, disorder and infighting (Lencioni, 2012). As previously suggested the senior leaders in any school environment are responsible for preventing an egregious situation where middle leaders feel a lack of empowerment in their leadership position. The challenge that composite schools face is to identify when a lack of clarity becomes an issue and then create opportunities to remove the ambiguity and reinforce the clarity that is absent. Senior leaders play a key role in helping to provide this clarity for middle leadership staff.

Key challenges facing middle leaders in composite schools

The second research question focused on the key challenges facing middle leaders in a composite school. Two key themes emerged: middle leaders in composite schools face many challenges, some of which are similar to those in non-composite schools; and, secondly, some of the challenges middle leaders face in a composite school differ due to the nature of the setting.

The research findings show that; the complexity of the role, a lack of specific knowledge related to a composite school environment and sitting 'in the middle' are the most commonly experienced challenges middle leaders face. In previous roles in non-composite schools, the most mentioned challenges for participants were; not enough time and dealing with conflict. All the participants acknowledged the challenges within their current role and made comparison with their previous role. This acknowledgment relates to the literature that suggests all middle leaders will face challenges, even at times feeling frustrated and demoralised (Fleming, 2014). Participants emphasised, however, how rewarding it can be when challenges are overcome. The participants talked openly about the similarities and differences, regarding the challenges they experience, of a middle leadership position in a composite school and a non-composite school. This reinforces the notion that there are a number of challenges faced by middle leaders in composite schools that are similar to those in non-composite schools. This implies, therefore, that in both environments middle leaders experience a number of trials that require the support of a mentor and guide along with professional development to become equipped to cope with the respective issue or challenge. Schools are faced with the responsibility to provide this support and mentoring to all those in a middle leadership capacity.

Challenges that are similar in a non-composite school

The two challenges that participants indicated are most commonly experienced in a composite school and in a non-composite school setting were, dealing with conflict and the lack of time available for the role. The findings from the research specified that four of the participants found dealing with conflict to be a challenge in both settings. Four of the participants found lack of time was a challenge in their composite school role, whereas, five stated this to be true in a non-composite school. These findings indicate that several of the challenges faced by middle leaders in composite schools are the same challenges they experienced in non-composite schools. This is not surprising considering the previous findings that indicate the job descriptions are very similar in both settings. Most of the tasks in the job description do not differ according to the participants. Figure 4.1 highlights this concept in graphical form. We can see that for some challenges there is a significant difference between composite schools and non-composite schools, whereas, for other challenges there are similarities when comparing the two contexts. This finding suggests that schools must be cognisant of these differences. Induction programmes in composite schools, for new staff in particular, should provide guidance and an awareness of the key challenges middle leaders will expect to face. Schools should be proactive rather than reactive, again with senior leaders providing the leadership and mentoring.

Dealing with conflict

The data from the findings are supported by the literature that suggests conflict is a significant problem that often arises in schools (Cronk, 2017; Drewery, 2016; Saiti, 2015). Participants confirm that dealing with conflict is a challenge for middle leaders, regardless of the type of school (composite or non-composite) in which they work. The findings also suggest that conflict in any organisation will have a negative influence on the school climate. Saiti (2015) adds that the majority of conflict in schools is attributed to interpersonal factors (p. 599). Four of the six participants indicated that the most common type of conflict they deal with is between staff and students and how important they felt it was to have the respect of teaching staff when dealing with such situations. In the absence of this respect, middle leaders implied that task was somewhat impossible. As Cronk (2017) also suggests, it is incredibly important that middle leaders do not approach such situations with the naïve hope that if two parties are nice to each other the issues will disappear. Participants spoke freely concerning situations involving tension between two people and indicated that conflict scenarios did not always work out as they would have desired. They also recognised that managing conflict between two parties requires a careful and considered approach as they can be extremely delicate and difficult. Honesty, transparency and a willingness to apologise were all acknowledged as important factors by participants when navigating these conflict situations. Several participants also identified the value in utilising a restorative practice model to resolve a conflict situation. This methodology is supported by the literature that suggests a restorative approach, where leaders do things *with* others rather than *to* them is more likely to produce a positive outcome (Drewery, 2016). Findings identified that participants highly value the expertise that a senior leader brings to the situation. Discussion with senior members of staff highlighted key strategies and approaches participants can utilise when addressing conflict with staff, parents and students. One such strategy involved parents as active participants in the conflict resolution process. This engaged a model of parent partnership that strengthened the opportunity for efficacious outcomes.

Dealing with conflict is not unique to composite schools. The challenge for both composite and non-composite schools is to facilitate training for middle leaders in areas such as restorative practice, approaches to discipline and conflict resolution. Preparing middle leaders with these tools empowers and equips them in their leadership and supports a delegated model.

Lack of time

The findings of the research also indicate that middle leaders require more time to be effective in their role. The data highlights that this is the case regardless of whether the middle leader works in a composite or non-composite school. All of the participants who indicated that a lack of time was a challenge, mentioned that they felt they could be more effective in their role with an increase in time allowance. Carter (2016) and Fitzgerald (2007) both indicate that for middle leaders to perform to a high level they require additional time. Further research suggests that whilst middle leaders receive an allocation of time and remuneration for their role, this is often not adequate for middle leaders to be effective in their role (Edwards-Groves et al., 2016; Koh et al., 2011; LaPointe-McEwan et al., 2017). The findings also indicate that middle leaders in composite and non-composite schools find it extremely challenging when senior leaders pass down workload without providing additional time to complete the task. For some this created a sense of feeling unappreciated. Crane and De Nobile (2014) note that middle leaders can feel undervalued and under resourced should they be given insufficient time for their work.

Participant responses stressed the notion that often senior leaders do not appear to communicate with each other thus creating additional work for middle leaders. Findings emphasised how vital it is that senior leaders utilise the school wide strategic plan to determine priorities and therefore workload for middle leaders. Fitzgerald (2007) supports this finding, suggesting that middle leaders should take on additional responsibilities as delegated by senior leaders, however, additional time must be factored in. Further findings suggest that despite the lack of time for the role there was significant pressure to achieve highly and to ensure the school operated at a very high level. It is essential that senior leaders are realistic in their delegation of responsibilities and be completely cognisant of the amount of time middle leaders have available in their respective roles. The implications are significant should senior leaders lack a structured and organised approach to delegation. Middle leaders may become frustrated, disenfranchised and even consider resigning from their position of authority should this not be the modus operandi for senior leaders. The loss of staff poses significant challenges for composite schools, particularly those in rural environments. Current statistics from the Ministry of Education in New Zealand (2017) indicate that applications for middle leadership positions are lower than ever. Research from the Post Primary Teachers Association indicated that 40% of teachers suggest the key reasons for this are “excessive workload, lack of time and remuneration levels that fail to adequately recognise the workload and levels of responsibility” (PPTA, 2016, p.1).

Composite schools are therefore charged with creating an 'attractive package for potential middle leaders to ensure the schools are fully resourced at a personnel level.

Challenges that are different from a non-composite school

The challenges that participants indicated are most different between a composite school and in a non-composite school setting were: role complexity; the lack of specific knowledge for composite school; sitting in the middle; and perception of the role. The findings from the research established that six of the participants found the complexity of the role to be a challenge in a composite school, whereas one of the participants mentioned this as a challenge in a non-composite school. All of the participants found lack of specific knowledge was a challenge in their composite school role, whereas, none stated this to be true in a non-composite school. Five of the participants noted that sitting in the middle space (between teaching staff and senior leadership) was an issue in a composite school, however, one suggested this to be the case in a non-composite school. Finally, four of the participants found coping with people's perception of their role was a challenge in middle leadership roles in a composite school, however, only two suggested this was an issue in a non-composite setting. These findings indicate that several of the challenges faced by middle leaders in composite schools are not challenges they experienced in non-composite schools. We can clearly see in figure 4.1 these challenges and the relative variance between composite and non-composite schools. The reasoning for the variation indicated above resides around the complexity of the role in a composite school. Findings suggest a range of reasons for this complexity.

Role complexity

The findings of this study show that all six participants find the complexity of their role in a composite school to be more of a challenge than in their previous role. The finding that middle leadership is a complex role is supported by several writers (Busher, 2005; Edwards-Groves et al., 2016; Harris & Jones, 2017; Irvine & Brundrett, 2016). One participant (P3) mentioned this was also the case in his previous experience in a non-composite school. This participant was responsible for information technology at a large secondary school which he implied was complex and varied in nature. This perspective is supported by literature that suggests that regardless of the type of school middle leaders work in, the role is complex (Irvine & Brundrett, 2016). The participants mentioned that the actual nature and composition of a composite school created greater complexity for them than a non-composite school. Five of the participants worked in Year 1-13 schools. This determined that each was involved either actively or passively in the whole school to some degree. Meetings with staff in

areas unrelated to their year level or faculty were reasonably common. Participants talked about the increased workload this created in comparison to a previous role.

Expectations for the three participants who were focussed predominantly on the middle years were that they were engaged with staff in the primary and the secondary parts of the school. This had not been their experience in previous roles at non-composite schools, implying that there was little, if any connection between local contributing schools or schools their students were transitioning to. It was noted particularly by participants 1 and 4 that they found this aspect of the role extremely challenging, expressing a concern that they felt responsible to ensure wellbeing of staff outside their key area of responsibility. Participant 4 stressed that in addition to the added complexity of working with the primary staff within the Year 1-10 school, the complex nature of her role was exacerbated by the small scale of the school. The size of the school created a challenge as there were fewer staff to share the load. Participant 4 intimates that this finding is most probable in any small school with limited resources, however, in her opinion more so in a small composite school. Middle leaders in composite schools with complex roles require a large degree of resilience and perseverance. Their commitment to the task is often unwavering and it needs to be. Their focus is on quality teaching and learning, along with excellent student outcomes. The complexities of the position, however, could potentially encourage an attitude of disillusionment and discouragement. The implications for composite schools are that they must focus on taking away the uncertainties that middle leaders experience. Middle leaders play a vital part in any school (Koh et al., 2011; Thorpe & Bennett-Powell, 2014). The challenge for composite schools is to address the complexities of the middle leadership space and to allow middle leaders to thrive, releasing them to focus on affect the quality of the teaching and learning in a positive manner (Grootenboer et al., 2015).

Sitting in the middle

Overall the findings suggested that middle leaders in composite schools find it a really challenging aspect of their leadership to sit in the middle space between senior leaders and teaching staff. Five of the participants agree with writers that suggest that 'sitting in the middle' is a difficult assignment in a school as middle leaders can feel torn between departmental responsibilities and mandates from senior leaders (Feist, 2008; Fitzgerald, 2009; Fleming, 2014). This tension was expressed by five participants as one of the most difficult aspects of their role. Findings suggest that participants identified that sitting in the middle can be a challenge for a range of reasons. One of these reasons is maintaining loyalty to senior leaders when teaching staff appear to

not support the initiative to be implemented. Two participants found this very challenging suggesting that as a middle leader you are required to catch the vision and then portray that to your departmental staff. Participants propose that a collaborative approach is always the best way to proceed in this scenario. This tactic is also supported by Crane and De Nobile (2014) and Grootenboer et al. (2015) who add that this is a strength for effective middle leaders. Participants also expressed that working collaboratively was in the best interests of the students. This idea is reinforced by writers who illustrate that a collaborative approach will most likely result in positive student achievement (Brown, Boyle & Boyle, 2000; Fleming, 2014; Harris & Jones, 2017). A second reason that participants identified why sitting in the middle is a challenge is that they are required to maintain a high level of professionalism and not be seen to slander or undermine the senior leadership in front of their team. Findings suggest that middle leaders maintain this level of professionalism through regular, robust dialogue to achieve clarity. Participants argue this helps to avoid confusion and betrayal of trust. This process must be well managed to avoid a disillusionment of the relationship (DeNobile & Ridden, 2014) or a complete state of confusion with conflicting priorities and understanding (Irvine & Brundrett, 2016).

The final key finding from the research concerning the challenge of 'sitting in the middle' correlated to the personal and professional relationship that middle leaders have with senior leaders. Participants talked about the difficulty when managing a personal friendship with one or more senior leaders within the school. They identified the importance of being able to separate the personal friendship and professional working relationship. One participant (P4) also cited the added complication when the Principal is in a relationship with one of the middle leaders in a small school and the added complexity this creates. The health and wellbeing of middle leaders is at risk should there be a breakdown of with personal and/or professional relationship within a school. The negative impact on school culture and climate could be immensely significant should this be the case, particularly in a small composite school. Often in such instances everybody knows everybody and the micropolitics are well and truly at play. Schools must work hard to ensure this breakdown in relationship is avoided where possible.

Knowledge specific to a composite school

A critical finding of this research found that middle leaders lack specific knowledge they indicate would enhance their leadership in a composite school. Whilst participants propose they have expertise and experience, skills and abilities, they all felt they lack knowledge in certain areas. Findings suggested that it would be an advantage if

participants had had exposure working in a primary and intermediate school or in an intermediate and secondary school. This would fashion, according to the participants, a broad working knowledge of child development and visibility of large components of the curriculum that would only be of significant benefit to their current role. Most participants realised that this is highly impractical and unrealistic and therefore, if not an option, accessibility to resources and provision of time to support the growth and development of their leadership must be available. Findings from the study also distinguished that middle leaders in composite schools cannot be purely specialists in their area of expertise. The recognition that an effective leader in a composite school has a depth of knowledge, an understanding of the whole curriculum and an appreciation for all levels of the school was acknowledged, emphasised and overstated by participants. These findings place composite schools in an interesting position. The implication is that composite schools should take great care when selecting staff to fill middle leadership roles. Principals can assume that applicants who have had experience in multiple settings would be at an advantage to those who have not. These staff would bring a range of experience and expertise that would be of significant benefit to the school community. This expertise would include the ability to mentor other middle leaders who are new to middle leadership.

Perception of the middle leadership role

Findings indicate that middle leaders struggle with the perception teaching staff may have of them and their leadership. The expectation and pressure to perform at the highest level every day was an issue for four of the participants. In addition, the notion that teaching staff see middle leaders as the 'voice of reason' in an organisation (Fleming, 2014) was at times overwhelming for participants as this created an even greater burden of responsibility for some. Fullan (2010) suggests that pressure can come from both the top and the bottom of the organisation. Participants perceived that at times the watchful eye of teaching staff and senior leaders was upon them, indicating that this may encourage them to second guess their own ability. Koh et al. (2011) highlight how important it is, however, for Principals to keep this observant eye on middle leaders as the Principal is the 'ultimate school leader' (p. 609). Participants recognised this accountability is inevitable. One participant even suggested that this perceived fear of what others do or don't think determined her leadership style to some degree. She mentioned that a quiet, approachable methodology of leadership helped her to garner support and respect from her team and quell the anxiety around the perception of others. Literature supports this approach to leadership indicating that if your relationship and rapport with teachers is good they will go with you (Koh et al., 2011). Positive feedback from teaching staff also added further support to this choice

of leadership practice. Several of the participants noted that this fear of what others may think may be speculative rather than real and subjective rather than objective. The findings also suggested that two participants did not experience the perception of others to be a challenge in their leadership. These participants suggested that a great working relationship amongst their team, within a high trust environment as the rationale behind their comments. Literature supports this notion, describing the development of a culture of relational trust as a key aspect of middle leadership (Edwards-Groves et al., 2016). Composite schools face the challenge of ensuring that the school is enveloped in a 'culture of trust'. This releases middle leaders to critique and comment on issues as they arise without a fear of retribution. Principals and senior leaders are once again, charged with the responsibility of establishing relational trust within the organisation, as are middle leaders within their teams. Once a high trust model is in place and well established, the focus becomes the learner and their progress and achievement.

Summary

Findings indicate that participants manage several challenges within their role. These participants realise that successfully navigating these challenges is critical to the success of not only their own leadership but also the school. Schools must unconditionally support their middle tier leaders to solve the variety of challenges they experience, as these leaders more than any other, are critical to school improvement and organisational success (Koh et al., 2011). Participants also recognise that middle leaders understand the pivotal function they play in the life of the school, or as Fleming (2014) states, "the voice of reason in the school" (p. 21). The tension for many middle leaders is juggling the myriad of tasks and coping with the range of challenges, whilst simultaneously prioritising a focus on teaching and learning. After all, that is the key prerogative of their position.

Professional development and mentoring

The third research question focused on the professional development opportunities available to middle leaders and support provided by senior leaders. Three key themes emerged from the research questions: professional development is widely available, there is an absence of specific professional development for a composite setting, and middle leaders highly value a mentoring relationship with senior leaders.

Overall the findings highlighted that middle leaders require and expect the provision of high quality professional development to be effective in their respective roles. If we recognise that middle leaders are taking on the responsibility as critical leaders of

learning then they must be well prepared for that role through accessibility of high quality professional development (Fluckiger et al., 2015). Findings in the study indicated that professional development must occur on a regular basis. Literature supports this conception, noting that education is fluid and evolving and requires constant learning (Koh et al., 2011; Mampane, 2017). Findings also specified how much middle leaders value a mentoring relationship with a senior leader. The findings support the work of Searby and Armstrong (2016) who identify that middle leaders have unique mentoring needs, so it is vital that senior leaders provide this layer of support. All three schools appreciate the value of mentoring but currently do not have a formal programme in operation. This appreciation is supported by the work of Searby and Armstrong (2016) who state that having a mentor is one of the most powerful things a leader can do to enhance their effectiveness.

Professional development widely available

Participants discussed the wide range of professional development available. The findings note that middle leaders attend conferences along with seminars and in-school workshops. The quality of the various events attended was mixed according to the participants. Mampane (2017) emphasises the importance of high quality professional development, stating that the results of quality professional development are middle leaders who are highly qualified, knowledgeable and capable. Participants acknowledged that in addition to their own growth and development as leaders it is important to be seen role modelling the idea of life-long learning to teaching staff within the organisation. Investing in their own professional development encourages middle leaders to become aware of any gaps in their armoury, enhance their curriculum and content knowledge, and build on their expertise. The desire to 'continue to learn' by middle leaders suggests to teaching staff that middle leaders are open to new learning, willing to try new methodology and improve their own practice.

Absence of professional development for composite school context

The findings indicated that there is no specific or targeted professional development for middle leaders in composite schools. The focus of the findings from participants hinged around the key differences they see in a composite school. Whilst most of the core components of the middle leader's position in a composite school are similar to those in a non-composite (of which there is ample professional development), there are some aspects of the role that would benefit from professional development that focussed on composite schools. The findings highlight that several participants would profit from such professional development. The most frequently suggested idea was fixated around professional development with other middle leaders in composite

schools. Participant 4 discussed an initiative in their Community of Learning (COL) that focuses on middle leaders. All the schools in their respective COL happen to be composite schools so this has been an extremely beneficial practice for their growth and development to date. The professional development is directed towards the role of a middle leader in a composite school. Participants mentioned the benefit of meeting together with other leaders in a similar context would be professional development that is relevant and topical rather than limited and ineffective as writers suggest it may be (Adey, 2000; Brown, Boyle & Boyle, 2002; Searby & Armstrong, 2016). The collaborative learning, where learning takes place in groups such as a COL, was mentioned by all the participants as being advantageous. Findings emphasised a desire to gain access to this targeted professional development for a composite school setting. This targeted professional development provides opportunities to focus on issues that are unique to a composite school setting. Workshops and forums provide the opportunity for middle leaders to share experiences and learn from each other. The findings of this research concur with Hawes (2015) in respect that high levels of collaboration and a willingness to accept constructive criticism are learning opportunities for middle leaders to improve their practice.

Mentoring from senior leaders

The findings of the research indicate that the support and guidance from a senior leader is highly valuable and beneficial. Literature from several writers supports the importance of this mentoring relationship (Cardno, 2005; Harris & Jones, 2017; Koh et al., 2011). The data from participants supported the literature which indicates that an effective and successful mentoring relationship is the most suitable and successful form of professional development (Koh et al., 2011). Several middle leaders in this study were overtly complimentary of the senior leader currently mentoring them in their role. They suggested this had encouraged them to be a better mentor and coach themselves. Findings also noted that the senior leaders who had worked as middle leaders in composite schools at some point in their career were a great support. This was because they shared a similar experience and could relate more closely to the specific aspects of the middle leadership position. Findings noted that these senior leaders in particular, understood the depth and breadth of the role, the complex nature and the challenges often associated with working in such a setting. The implications of this shared experience and depth of understanding by senior leaders are significant. These findings concur with the literature by providing evidence as to the importance of a coaching and mentoring relationship between senior leaders and middle leaders. Thorpe and Bennett-Powell (2014) found that coaching and mentoring are components of the most popular approach to leadership development. The value of a wise and

trusted guide or advisor is immense to middle leaders. With this support and guidance, middle leaders can: share experiences, learn from someone wiser, and try new things, all with the desire to improve their practice and the outcomes for students under their care.

Summary

Overall the findings suggest that middle leaders in composite schools find the role more complex and challenging than in a primary, intermediate or secondary school. As we can see in table 4.3, four of the participants strongly agreed that this is their current experience. One participant agreed, whilst one participant was neutral. All six participants felt that whilst the roles were similar in many ways there are also a few key differences when making a comparison. The findings note that participants who have roles that involve some responsibility that cross between traditional school boundaries such as Year 6 and Year 7 or Year 8 and Year 9 find the role more complex and challenging. In the case of this study five of the participants fall into that category. The rationale for these comments focussed predominantly around the requirement for greater knowledge of the curriculum. Participants stressed that they are required to have some knowledge of the whole curriculum rather than just in their subject area or year level. As discussion continued along this line of thinking participants emphasised both the challenge this created and the opportunity this presented. One participant expressed it effectively, commenting that whilst the burden of responsibility felt greater the ability to provide greater continuity for students was amazing. It was important to five of the participants that they have a general understanding of child development too as they are often working with students of all ages.

Middle leaders in a composite school are required to be skilled practitioners who are resilient, focussed and dedicated to teaching and learning. Equipping these leaders with the tools and strategies to flourish is essential should composite schools wish to be effective and successful. This dissertation argues that middle leaders are a core ingredient of any successful composite school. They are the heart of the organisation and “the importance of middle leaders in bringing about change and improvement is well recognised” (Thorpe & Bennett-Powell, 2014, p. 53). In the final chapter, which follows, conclusions and recommendations are made.

Chapter 6 Conclusion

Chapter Five discussed the findings of this research study with support from appropriate literature. To conclude this dissertation, Chapter Six recognises several conclusions and reviews the strengths and limitations of the study. Recommendations on how the findings can be applied in relation to a composite school context along with suggestions for further research in this area are discussed.

Overview

The aim of this research was to examine the role of a middle leader in a composite school setting and explore the key challenges middle leaders face. The research examined the quality of professional development available and support of senior leadership for middle leaders. Of particular focus and interest has been the role of a middle leader within a composite school setting in comparison to non-composite schools. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with six middle leaders from composite schools within New Zealand. The following section outlines the conclusions of this research study.

Conclusions

The research conducted in this study concludes that the role of a middle leader in a composite school is complex, challenging and often lacks clarity. The job description of a middle leader in a composite school has some similarities to that of a middle leader in a non-composite school and middle leaders in composite schools require targeted professional development to support some aspects of their role. This professional development currently does not exist.

This research has highlighted that middle leadership in a composite school is an incredibly complex and challenging role. The role is diverse, requires a broad skill set, and depth of knowledge. The findings in this research were supported by the fact that all the participants in the study had previously worked in a middle leadership role in a non-composite school. This enabled comparisons to be made between the two settings. This research concludes that the middle leadership role in a composite school is more complex and diverse than that in a non-composite school in some areas. Whilst the job descriptions in the two settings are very similar, the findings state that the complexity and depth of knowledge required for middle leadership in a composite school is different to that of a non-composite school. This conclusion is multi-layered, as it refers to both pedagogical knowledge and an understanding of child development.

Findings also conclude that middle leaders compare the complexities of middle leadership in a composite school with that of teaching a mixed ability class of diverse learners. Middle leadership in a composite school often involves working with teachers at many different levels. According to participants this is more prevalent in a Year 1-13 school as effectively it is three schools in one, but with the school trying to function as one large community. However, the needs, the desires, the expectations and the challenges are diverse and very real for each part of the school. Researchers on the international scene advocate for the development of a 'distinctive approach' for solving the challenges of multi-level teaching (Mulcahy, 2000). This is exactly what is required in the composite school environment – a distinctive approach. With the advent of many new 'types' of schools in New Zealand in recent times, including junior high schools, senior high schools, middle schools, and innovative learning environments the traditional models of teaching and learning have been reframed. The more traditional approaches to education and the delivery of curriculum have and are being challenged. A distinctive approach to traditional education in composite schools is also essential moving forward. This includes, recruitment of staff, revision of the traditional school structure and vision of the Boards of Trustees.

The middle leader also needs skill, strategies, discernment and wisdom to see how they manage their role and responsibilities when there are so many competing demands within the composite model. Priority must be given to reduce the workload, and/or increase the availability of time for middle leaders in composite schools. This study also found that middle leaders in composite schools experience a lack of clarity in their job. All the middle leaders understood the importance of having clarity, especially when referring to the professional relationship with their line manager. This notion is supported by Javadi et al. (2017) who indicate that a lack of clarity results in the development of arbitrary relationships and by Lencioni (2012) who suggests a lack of clarity creates frustration and ambiguity. This conclusion is not unique to composite schools only, however, requires urgency in addressing the ambiguity in order to improve outcomes for middle leaders and students.

The research findings also conclude that many core components of a middle leadership job description in a composite school are identical to that in a non-composite school. Participants highlighted a range of key tasks and responsibilities and made comparison to middle leadership responsibilities in current and previous positions of employment. This list of 'tasks' can appear somewhat exhaustive and impossible to achieve (Adey, 2000; Busher, 2005; Koh et al., 2011; Vilkinas, 2014). This research and related literature support this notion, highlighting that middle leaders

in composite and non-composite schools have a very high workload with limited time to complete many of these tasks and responsibilities. The findings also conclude that expectations of middle leader performance from senior leaders is tremendously high. The rationale for this synopsis is that senior leaders unequivocally realise that middle leaders are the leaders of learning in schools (Grootenboer et al., 2015) and carry the authority to generate positive change and improvement (Harris & Jones, 2017).

Finally, the findings conclude that middle leaders lack professional development opportunities that provide specific professional development for leadership in a composite school. "Middle leaders in all education sectors require a model of leadership development that is culturally appropriate to their context" (Highfield, 2012, p. 6). This leadership development must provide for the individual needs of each learner. These findings, along with relevant literature conclude that there are currently no professional development opportunities for middle leaders in composite schools that are specifically focused on that context. This lack of opportunity suggests that an appropriate programme such as the *QELi Programme* in Australia (Fluckiger et al., 2015) or the *Middle Leadership Development Programme* in the United Kingdom would be advantageous in the New Zealand situation.

Strengths and limitations of the research

Strengths

The choice to use semi-structured interviews as the appropriate instrument for data collection was a strength as it allowed me to gain rich insight from participants who volunteered to be involved in the study rather than any form of coercion. Another strength of the research was that five of the six participants were in similar sized schools. A final strength of the study was that all the participants had worked in middle leadership roles in non-composite schools in the past. This was very valuable when making comparisons to a composite school context.

Limitations

The relatively small sample size of the research was a weakness of this research study. Due to the small sample size there is the distinct possibility that the findings gathered may not be a true and fair reflection of all middle leaders in composite schools in New Zealand. However, the findings may be transferable to other composite school settings. Ideally it would have been advantageous to interview a much larger sample size of middle leaders in composite schools within New Zealand.

Another limitation of the study is that the comments made by participants are limited to their own experiences and, therefore, cannot be generalised as representative of those in middle leadership roles in composite schools. In addition, participants may not have mentioned everything at the interview that was applicable and relevant as often we may forget certain experiences that have taken place.

Recommendations

The findings of this study endorse several recommendations associated with middle leadership in composite schools in New Zealand, and on a global scale.

Recommendation One

That senior leaders in composite schools (and all schools) must provide clarity for middle leaders regarding the nuances of their job description. The absence of clarity creates confusion; therefore, a clearly articulated and documented job description is essential.

Recommendation Two

That senior leaders in composite schools establish a consistent and robust mentoring programme for all middle leaders. Schools that have successfully implemented mentoring programmes for middle leaders see excellent outcomes for both the leaders and the school. Senior leaders must embed into their own practice a culture of guidance and support for others as this is core function (Rhodes, Brundrett & Nevill, 2008). This can be in the form of a talent identification process as well as providing support for those in established roles and positions.

Recommendation Three

That a national professional development programme, such as the *Aspiring Principals programme* in New Zealand (which has proven to be successful), be established for middle leaders in composite schools. This is of critical importance, particularly with the advent of the Ministry of Education's model of communities of learning (COL). Many middle leaders are now in positions of responsibility within schools and across schools. These leaders require opportunities for collaborative, culturally responsive leadership development. It is also essential to acknowledge, that the needs of middle leaders are not identical. Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1980) identified five levels of proficiency for middle leaders. These are defined as 'novice', 'competent', 'proficient', 'expert' and 'master'. An awareness and understanding of this concept should be encouraged in any

leadership development programme and therefore not treat all middle leaders as a homogeneous group.

Recommendation Four

That a series of events at a nationwide level, such as conferences, workshops and networking opportunities are created for middle leaders in composite schools to come together for professional growth, discussion and support. Professional growth and development occurs best when it is conducted in an environment where it is valued and of a professional nature. Time and resourcing must be allocated towards this function.

Recommendations for further research

The findings emphasised how complex middle leadership in composite schools is and highlighted the necessity for professional development. My research has contributed to the current literature regarding middle leadership. It would be of significant benefit to conduct a further study with a larger sample size. This would be time consuming using a similar methodology, however, extremely beneficial to the understanding and further development of middle leadership in composite schools. Middle leaders in composite schools along with middle leaders in non-composite schools should be included in this study to gain greater understanding and awareness of the diversity between the two contexts. Senior leaders and teaching staff could also be included in the process as they would provide rich and valuable insight. Further research could also consider comparison between different scale of schools. Schools with student numbers under 300 could be compared with those over 300 for example. Every department and area within a school feels that they have greater needs or challenges than others. The middle leader must be able to manage their own area in a way that focuses on improving teaching and learning outcomes, but at the same time recognise that in a composite school there are many more competing demands because of the range of classes and activities. Managing this tension in a composite school would also be of interest to researchers.

Final conclusion

This study has explored the role of a middle leader in a composite school in New Zealand. Many of the findings from this study and the recommendations proposed, add to the current body of literature regarding middle leadership, as the focus is on an area with little or no exposure to date. This study provides the first research findings related to middle leadership in a composite school environment as far as I am aware. There is a need for Principals, senior leaders and national administrators to engage with these

findings, conclusions and recommendations to create an environment where middle leaders learn, grow and thrive in their own leadership.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Interview Schedule - Questions

<i>Project title:</i>	Middle leadership in a composite school: A complex and challenging role
<i>Project Supervisor:</i>	Alison Smith
<i>Researcher:</i>	Craig Utting

Role of a middle leader (job description).

Tell me about your current job description

How do you determine the priorities in your role?

How complex is the role of a middle leader in a composite school compared to a primary or secondary school?

What are the key differences with your role when compared with a similar role in a secondary school or primary school?

Challenges that middle leaders face.

What are the key challenges that you face in your role?

Tell me the ways in which you feel supported to overcome these challenges?

Professional development – available in your role.

How are you equipped with the necessary skills to be effective in your role?

What professional development are you involved in this year?

To what degree has professional development helped equip you in your role in a composite school?

General comment.

Is there anything more you can tell me about your role based on what we have discussed so far?

Is there anything you would like to add that may be useful to my research?

Appendix B

Participant information sheet

Hi, my name is Craig Utting and I am enrolled in the Master of Educational Leadership degree at Auckland University of Technology. This year I have been a recipient of a Ministry of Education study award granting 0.16 leave supporting me to work towards completing my degree.

My research focuses on gaining an in-depth understanding of the role of a middle leader in a composite school. It examines the key challenges that middle leaders face and investigates the level of support given by senior leaders as well as the professional development opportunities that allow middle leaders to excel in their respective positions. The data will be gathered through the use of semi-structured interviews. At the end of this research I have completed a Master of Educational Leadership qualification.

Purpose of this research

The aims of this study are:

- Define the role of a middle leader in a composite school
- Examine the professional development opportunities available to middle leaders in a composite school
- Explore the key challenges that middle leaders face in their roles.

Research questions

1. Do middle leaders see their core roles and responsibilities in a composite school as different to those in a primary or secondary school?
2. What key challenges do middle leaders face in a composite school and how they are supported by senior leadership to overcome these challenges?
3. In what ways do middle leaders in composite schools feel equipped to manage and lead a team of people?

How was I identified and why am I being invited to participate in this research?

You were identified by the researcher who looked at your school website and emailed all middle leaders in the school to request their participation in the research.

How do I agree to participate in this research?

Email me at the address indicated at the end of this document. I am very happy to answer any queries you may have.

What will happen in this research?

You will receive an email from me confirming your participation in the research. Following this you will be asked to complete a consent form immediately prior to participating in a semi-structured interview. This interview will take approximately 60 minutes and will be in a room at your school if you are comfortable with that venue. During the semi-structured interview you will be asked to engage in dialogue about your role as a middle leader, the challenges you face in this role, and how well you are equipped to carry out this role effectively. This process will allow an opportunity for sharing of thoughts, ideas and personal reflections.

What are the discomforts and risks, and how will these be alleviated?

It is unlikely that you will experience any discomfort or be at any risk as a result of taking part in this research. This interview will follow appropriate protocol and will be conducted in a professional manner. You do not have to answer any questions that make you feel uncomfortable.

What are the benefits?

I hope that the process will also benefit you personally, as you reflect on your own practice. There will be the opportunity to share the findings of the research with a variety of professional learning groups, schools and networks. The recommendations from the research may be of benefit to other composite schools. The findings will also be able to be shared in the Community of Learning that the researcher is connected with. This research will also contribute to the researcher achieving a Master's degree in Education Leadership.

How will my privacy be protected?

Your identity, including your name, the name of your school, and the names of any other people and organisations to whom you might refer will be protected by the use of pseudonyms in the final dissertation. Although every effort will be made by me to protect the confidentiality of your participation in this research, it may be possible that other people in your workplace may see me interviewing you. If this is of concern, the interview could take place at a location away from your workplace such as a cafe meeting room. As the researcher, I am not permitted to interview you in your home.

What are the costs of participating in this research?

If you are selected to participate in a semi-structured interview this will take approximately 60 minutes. There will also be an opportunity for you to review the transcript of your interview which may take you 30 minutes. I will travel to meet with you at your school or at a mutually agreed location.

What opportunity do I have to consider this invitation?

If you would like to be considered for the interview, you will have 10 days to inform the researcher of your willingness to participate. Once you have registered your interest, your participation will be confirmed by e-mail. Your interview will be audio-taped and transcribed.

Will I receive feedback on the results of this research?

Yes. I will send a 1-2 page summary of findings to all participants once the dissertation is completed.

What do I do if I have concerns about this research?

- Any concerns regarding the nature of this project should be notified in the first instance to the Project Supervisor, Craig Utting, craig.utting@kingsway.school.nz
- Any concerns regarding the nature of this project should be notified in the first instance to my Principal Supervisor, Alison Smith, email alsmith@aut.ac.nz or phone 921 9999 ext. 7363
- Concerns regarding the conduct of the research should be notified to the Executive Secretary of AUTEK (the AUT Ethics Committee), Kate O'Connor, ethics@aut.ac.nz 921 9999 ext 6038.

Whom do I contact for further information about this research?

Please keep this Information Sheet and a copy of the Consent Form for your future reference. You are also able to contact the research team as follows:

Researcher Contact Details: Craig Utting

craig.utting@kingsway.school.nz

Project Supervisor Contact Details: Alison Smith

alsmith@aut.ac.nz

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 5th December 2017, AUTEK Reference number 17/397.

Appendix C

Participant consent form

Project title: Middle leadership in a composite school: A complex and challenging role

Project Supervisor: Alison Smith

Researcher: Craig Utting

- I have read and understood the information provided about this research project in the Information Sheet dated '7th December, 2017'
- I have had an opportunity to ask questions and to have them answered.
- I understand that my identity and the discussions in the interview are confidential to the interviewer and myself and I agree to keep this information confidential.
- I understand that notes will be taken during the interview and that the audio will be recorded and transcribed.
- I understand that taking part in this study is voluntary (my choice) and that I may withdraw from the study at any time (up to a date 14 days after the receipt of my transcript for review) without being disadvantaged in any way.
- I understand that if I withdraw from the study then, while it may not be possible to destroy all records of the interview, I will be offered the choice between having any data that is identifiable as belonging to me removed or allowing it to continue to be used. However, once the findings have been produced, removal of my data may not be possible.
- I agree to take part in this research.
- I wish to receive a summary of the research findings (please circle one): Yes / No

Participant's signature _____

Participant's name _____

Participant's Contact Details (if appropriate):

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on **5th December 2017**, AUTEK Reference number **17/397**.

