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**The impact of middle leaders' practices on English language learning  
for ESOL students new to New Zealand**

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## **Abstract**

Middle leaders represent a fundamental part in shaping the school context. This is because middle leaders are the link between government's plans and teacher practice in terms of supporting ESOL (English for speakers of other languages) students in their needs to learn English effectively. This research critically examines the impact of middle leadership practices on the English learning of ESOL students new to New Zealand. The three research questions highlighting this study were:

1. How do primary school middle leaders support ESOL students who are new to New Zealand to learn English?
2. How do primary school middle leaders build classroom teachers' capacity and capability to support ESOL students who are new to New Zealand to learn English?
3. How do primary school middle leaders collaborate with the families/whānau of these ESOL students to support their English language learning?

This thesis adapts a qualitative study to investigating nine middle leaders in five different primary schools across Auckland. This research used semi-structured interviews to gather thorough data from three ESOL teachers with leadership roles and six middle leaders. The research found that middle leaders have a distinctive role to other school leaders. They were instructional and distributed leaders, performing their roles as role models and enthusiastic towards school goals. Their responsibilities for students' learning support ESOL students and their teachers, even when not specifically targeted at their particular needs. The research, however, raised issues about the importance for middle leaders to increase their knowledge in ESOL area so their practices might have a better impact on the teaching and learning practices for ESOL students and for their teachers. This, in turn, increase ESOL students' capabilities and achievements in learning English.

*This research was approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 20 October 2020, AUTEK Reference number 19/329.*

## **Attestation of authorship**

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material 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 of other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_Lana Al Jazmaty\_\_\_\_\_

Signature:

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## **Chapter One: Introduction**

### **Introduction**

Students are faced with a variety of challenges when they migrate to countries where English is the official language, but their language is not English, for example in Australia, New Zealand, Britain, Canada, and the United States. In New Zealand, these students are called 'ESOL' students. This term stands for English for speakers of other languages. This thesis investigates the impact middle leaders have on the teaching and learning of English by ESOL students enrolled in five Auckland primary schools. Primarily, this chapter outlines the nature of ESOL students in the New Zealand context. It then provides an overview of middle leaders in this context. Finally, it concludes with a specification of the research aims and methodology, and an analysis of my position as a researcher in this project.

### **An overview of ESOL students in the New Zealand context**

The research which informs this study has emerged from studies of the increasing number of students who came to New Zealand as immigrants or refugees and entered schools with very low English proficiency (McGee et al., 2015). New Zealand has attracted immigrants from non-English speaking backgrounds throughout its history. Until recently little assistance was provided with English language learning (McGee et al., 2015). Previously, teaching these students English was a significant challenge to both leaders and teachers because there was no actual curriculum and no dedicated ESOL teachers. The struggle is ongoing.

In New Zealand schools, these children are categorised as 'ESOL' which is an acronym for English for speakers of other languages. Currently, schools receive support for these students by means of extra funding from the Ministry of Education (Ministry of Education, 2020). This funding has enabled school leaders to provide ESOL students with various resources to learn English, including specific language learning programmes (Ministry of Education, 2020). Schools

typically also hire qualified classroom teachers and teacher aides to assist students to learn English.

Experts of the New Zealand education system consider the success of ESOL students in learning English to be dependent on how effective leadership is in meeting and fulfilling ESOL students' needs (McGee et al., 2015). Studies report that most schools consider the instructional leadership style to be the most effective way to improve the quality of school outcomes because it is based on establishing the best environment and providing the students with the best conditions to increase their academic outcomes (Ascenzi-Moreno et al., 2016; Baecher et al., 2016; Cardno et al., 2018; McGee et al., 2015).

However, ESOL students have a particular need for effective teaching and learning with respect to acquiring English language skills. For this reason, school leaders need to respond to this call and adjust their beliefs about leadership practices. In response, education leaders have started to share their power with other leaders, who are 'middle leaders', in order to fulfil ESOL students' needs and assist them to learn English (Ascenzi-Moreno et al., 2016; Baecher et al., 2016; McGee et al., 2015).

### **An overview of middle leadership in the New Zealand context**

Middle leaders are those who, whilst still practicing their teaching role, hold leadership positions such as team leader and a subject leader (Bassett & Shaw, 2018; Cardno et al., 2018; De Nobile, 2018; 2019). These are the people who have formal responsibilities and duties of leadership and management. They sit between senior leadership and teachers (Cardno et al., 2018; Gurr & Drysdale, 2013). In New Zealand specifically, middle leaders often balance different roles such as team leader, ESOL leader, Community of Learners (CoL) leadership, and academic supervision (De Nobile, 2019). Furthermore, middle leadership may include informal roles 'teacher leaders' who might not always occupy formal promotion positions, but who influence the work of other teachers, especially those new to the profession (Cardno et al., 2018; De Nobile, 2018).

In regard to their leadership role, studies show that middle leaders worked on establishing the best conditions and opportunities to support teaching and learning for ESOL students (Baecher et al.,

2016; McGee et al., 2015; Theoharis & O'Toole, 2011). This was evident in McGee et al.'s (2015) work where middle leaders built a number of systems and structures to support ESOL learning within their schools. Such conditions included monitoring school activities, assessment, planning, resources, establishing collaborative structures, and setting aside time for professional learning. The role of middle leaders also extends to setting goals to enhance ESOL students' learning. For example, in some schools, middle leaders asked teachers to include a specific plan for every English language learner within their short- or long-term plan. This teaching plan was based on assisting ESOL students to learn English and scaffold their language (McGee et al., 2015). Moreover, in some schools, middle leaders have worked on developing relationships with ESOL students' families as this kind of relationship is considered to be helpful for ESOL students in transitioning and learning English (Bull, 2014). An example of this was evident when middle leaders in NZ established a first speech festival for ESOL students' families to come and share their language (McGee et al., 2015).

Regarding the way that middle leadership impacts the teaching role, Baecher et al., (2016) state that middle leaders should have good knowledge about both ESOL's teaching and learning, in order to be able to influence teachers' practice, and assist ESOL students to learn English effectively. Middle leaders who are knowledgeable and have interpersonal skills are in a position to establish different learning opportunities, and therefore foster English language learning by ESOL students (McGee et al., 2015). This can be, for example, by sharing and distributing ESOL resources to both students and teachers, including providing bilingual dictionaries inside classrooms (Ascenzi-Moreno et al., 2016; Baecher et al., 2016). Also, middle leaders widened teachers' knowledge through influencing them to learn some words from the ESOL students' languages so that they could use these words inside the classroom, which has a positive impact on ESOL students' learning (McGee et al., 2015).

The New Zealand Ministry of Education (MoE) provides schools with extra funding to support ESOL students' teaching and learning (Ministry of Education, 2020). In some schools, middle leaders have not used this funding to provide ESOL students with designated ESOL teachers to help them to learn English (Baecher et al., 2016; Hopkins et al., 2019; McGee et al., 2015).

Instead, they have employed teacher aides to assist ESOL students within their classrooms and support them individually to learn English (McGee et al., 2015; Louie et al., 2019). One New Zealand study surveyed school staff regarding who they believed to be responsible for ESOL students in their school (McGee et al., 2015). The research highlighted staff confusion over whose role it was to attend or to meet the needs of these students, with most staff seeing it as the responsibility of an ESOL specialist teacher or middle leaders (McGee et al., 2015). Therefore, the role of middle leadership is considered an important and worthy area in need of further study in terms of how middle leaders influence the process of teaching and learning for ESOL students working to acquire English language skills. Despite the available literature concerned with middle leadership in schools, very little has focused on the significant challenge of ensuring quality learning and teaching for ESOL students. For this reason, the current research is focused on examining middle leaders' practices aimed at supporting new ESOL students in their learning journey.

### **Research aims**

The aim of this study is to critically examine middle leadership practices in primary schools that support the acquisition of English by ESOL students new to New Zealand.

### **Research questions:**

1. How do primary school middle leaders support ESOL students who are new to New Zealand to learn English?
2. How do primary school middle leaders build classroom teachers' capacity and capability to support ESOL students who are new to New Zealand to learn English?
3. How do primary school middle leaders collaborate with the families/whānau of these ESOL students to support their English language learning?

### **Theoretical perspectives**

Bearing in mind my research aim, the conceptual framework of my research project is based on both interpretivist and constructivist worldviews for the following reasons. Ontologically, the approach is interpretivist because this theory is based on describing and understanding human interactions and meanings and examines how common-sense meanings are created and used by members for practical purposes (Gephart, 2018). As a researcher, I focused on examining participants' interactions with ESOL students and understanding how middle leaders' practices supported ESOL students to learn English. Creswell (2013) claimed interpretivist theory is a world that is made of multiple realities based on having different views and meanings shared from people. Based on this, each participant has a personal worldview that helped me to understand middle leaders' practices and perspectives that could help ESOL students to acquire English. Epistemologically, Tolich and Davidson (2018) defined constructivist world as "the theory of knowledge. The branch of philosophy that deals with how we know what we know". Based on this theory, I developed new ideas that are related to middle leadership practices with ESOL students through participants' interpretations and perspectives. In short, these worldviews assisted me to have a clearer and better understanding of my research inquiries (Creswell, 2013; Gephart, 2018).

### **Research methodology**

This research takes a qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews, which are one of the most commonly used tools in qualitative research. Semi-structured interviews are defined as an open source that leads to a better-quality understanding of the social world through participants' experiences and perspectives (Cohen et al., 2018; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013; Wellington, 2015). As these kinds of interviews are based on open questions, they assisted me to explore freely different views and perceptions about middle leaders' practices in support of ESOL students learning English (Wellington, 2015). Moreover, these kinds of interviews facilitated the flow of conversation with participants since, by contrast with structured interviews, they are based on open questions which are not fixed in respect to either time or specific content. The flexibility of semi-structured interviews allowed me to define areas for my research that needed to be explored (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013; Wellington, 2015). In addition, this approach prompted participants

to reflect on their practices and consequently encouraged them to consider new ways to help ESOL students to learn English more effectively.

Non-probability purposive sampling is used in this research in order to recruit participants who can meet the specific goal of this study (Privitera & Ahlrin-Delzell, 2019). Therefore, six middle leaders and three ESOL teachers with leadership roles over the five schools were invited to participate in this study. Selecting these people in particular is based on two reasons. First, middle leaders and ESOL teachers play a major role in increasing the quality of students' learning. Secondly, they are the most people who can contribute meaningful conversations that can effectively provide relevant answers for my research inquiries. According to Baecher et al. (2014) and Cardno et al. (2018), middle leaders play a significant role in the school context. This is because they have the power to change and improve the quality of school learning to increase students' outcomes. Thus, middle leaders and ESOL teachers were the most appropriate choice as research participants.

### **Positioning myself as a researcher**

Four years ago, I was working as an English teacher in United Arab Emirates (UAE) in a primary school following the American curriculum. Throughout this journey, I was employed as a team leader. All duties were based on planning, documenting, and supporting my team, alongside managing my teaching role. From that time, I wanted to upgrade my qualification and skills through proceeding to complete a Master's degree in order to make progress towards my career ambition of holding a leadership position. After much research and consideration, my husband and I decided to migrate to New Zealand because of its high educational reputation, its multiculturalism, and the fact it is a safe and healthy country for my child to grow up in. After arriving in Wellington as a skilled, bilingual migrant, I have had a number of different experiences since settling in New Zealand. I communicated with KiwiClass which is an institute providing support services to both migrants and refugees with the aim of assisting them in the integration process into the New Zealand community. I gained employment in this organisation as an ESOL teacher aide and worked there for three months prior to my move to Auckland. At the same time,

I approached Te Aro School in Wellington, and joined them as an ESOL volunteer supporter to their international students. The goal was to consolidate foundation learning, so international students felt able to communicate effectively with English speakers. After working in these two roles, I realised the challenges ESOL students and their teachers face. These challenges drew my attention towards thinking about how the education leaders were helping ESOL students and their teachers to overcome challenges involved with learning English.

In January 2019, my husband obtained a job related to his field as an engineer. We relocated to Auckland, a bigger city with greater opportunity, both professionally and academically. Once my family were settled, I began to look for an opportunity to satisfy my ambition of continuing my education at a university in New Zealand. Fortunately, I was able to enrol in a course at AUT. During my studies, I worked as a teacher aide in a primary school where I encountered a little boy who had recently joined the school and whose English was very limited. I could see his challenges along with the support the school leaders gave in order to improve his English. All that was being done to support the boy fascinated me and motivated me to think seriously about investigating how middle leadership influences the pathway of ESOL students.

While working in this school, I noticed that some ESOL students, especially those new to New Zealand, were anxious and tended to isolate themselves from native English speakers due to their limited English. Since middle leaders are in a close contact with these students, they were the most appropriate people to help me understand how education leadership in New Zealand assists these students to learn English. Therefore, I began my investigation into middle leadership's practices with ESOL students. The studies that I found through a literature search were not sufficient and were very limited. From a thorough literature search concerning middle leaders' roles in New Zealand contexts, studies consistently defined middle leadership roles and described their jobs too broadly (Cardno et al., 2018; De Nobile, 2019; Lipscombe et al., 2020). However, there were very few discussions regarding middle leadership roles as it relates to ESOL students. There were no sufficient materials or documents that adequately clarified their practices and established whether or not they left an impact on the process of teaching and learning for ESOL students.

Hence, I expected that undertaking this project would improve my understanding of how education leaders, particularly middle leaders, influence English language learning on the part of ESOL students and how they improve the quality of their teachers' strategies to meet ESOL students' needs to learn English. Also, the data gathered from this project would provide educational leadership in Aotearoa New Zealand, with valuable knowledge concerning how middle leadership impacts the learning outcomes of ESOL students.

### **Outline of the thesis**

This thesis is organised into six chapters where each one of them stands for a different aspect of the research process. These are outlined below:

Chapter One presents the study topic along with the reasons for conducting this study. The rationale of the research is outlined including the research methodology, aim and questions.

Chapter Two is a review of literature. This chapter is divided into two main parts: ESOL students in New Zealand schools and the impact of middle leadership in the ESOL context. Gaps in literature that inform the significance of this study are included.

Chapter Three gives a rationale for adapting a qualitative, interpretive constructivist methodology for this study. Following this, an explanation of the data collection methods and recruitment steps taken for selecting participants for this study are given. At the end of the chapter, data analysis is briefly described including the trustworthiness criteria of the study and the ethical issues.

Chapter Four presents the findings aligned with the research questions. This chapter consists of three parts. The first part starts with an overview of research participants, reflecting their roles and their experiences in their own contexts. The second part presents how interview data has produced seven main categories that discuss the research findings. The third part highlights what these participants have said about their practices to support ESOL students to learn English.

Chapter Five presents and discusses the research findings with consideration of the literature reviewed studies. In this chapter, four main themes illustrate a model of middle leadership practices that impact on ESOL students' English learning.

Chapter Six brings the research outcomes altogether and presents the conclusions based on the research questions. Recommendations for further research are also outlined along with the research limitations.

## **Chapter Two: Literature review**

### **Introduction**

The aim of this research was to investigate the impact of middle leadership practices in supporting ESOL students who are new to New Zealand to learn English. The term ESOL students ‘new to New Zealand’ refers to students who come new to New Zealand, whether as a refugee or an immigrant, and their English background is limited. Those students who come from different backgrounds are in need of extra support to be able to adapt with the new language, in other words, to adapt with the new instructions of teaching and learning in their language needs. This view was ensured by published studies from New Zealand and around the world indicating that ESOL learners usually experience difficulty while understanding the new instructions (Ascenzi-Moreno et al., 2016; Baecher et al., 2014; McGee et al., 2015). This is because the majority of school programmes are not designated to meet the linguistic needs of ESOL students (Baecher et al., 2014; McGee et al., 2015).

As this study focuses on examining middle leaders in particular for being the closer leaders to students’ learning (Cardno et al., 2018), this chapter starts with an overview of ESOL students in New Zealand schools, and the factors that affect their learning of English. Then, the chapter provides a critical synthesis of the current knowledge on middle leadership impact in school context with respect to ESOL students. The literature included as well as the gaps are based on international and New Zealand contexts that both inform the importance of conducting this study.

### **ESOL students in the New Zealand context:**

New Zealand’s ethnic diversity has continued to grow rapidly in the last two decades to become a more multicultural land. The populations who come from Asia, the Pacific Islands, the Middle East, and Africa have occupied New Zealand schools. A report from the Ministry of Education states that the number of English language learners increased from 15% in 2001 to reach nearly 23% in 2020 (Ministry of Education, 2022a). This rapid growth gave New Zealand school leaders

an alarm to think of new ways and practices that might support ESOL students to learn English in a short time to keep their accountability (McGee et al., 2015).

According to the Ministry of Education (2022), New Zealand now contains 179 groups of diverse identities from 171 different countries with 134 different languages. Based on this, the Ministry of Education (Ministry of Education, 2015) created a number of online resources to help ESOL students to obtain the English skills needed inside their classrooms to be able to access the school curriculum effectively such as “the study-ladder ” (Studyladder, 2022). Moreover, the Ministry of Education allocated specific funds to all New Zealand schools to support school leaders to obtain resources and material to assist ESOL students. This fund could be put to use in various ways.

For instance, in some schools, the fund is used to provide ESOL students with special ESOL classes for a certain number of hours per week, with the remaining time spent in classes with English first language pupils (Edwards, 2012; McGee et al., 2015). In other schools, the funds are used to employ teacher aides to support ESOL students in their learning inside their home classrooms, and other schools have provided an individual learning plan for each English learner to support them to learn English (McGee et al., 2015).

The Ministry of Education provides school leaders with ESOL funds based on certain conditions (Ministry of Education, 2020). One of the main conditions is that every English language learner needs to meet specific standards to be eligible for support. To be more precise, school leaders can apply for funding for students if they are:

- New immigrants: students are eligible to get funding support to be able to learn English;
- New Zealand-born students: if at least one of the parents is an immigrant to New Zealand, the student is eligible for ESOL funding after completing two school terms; and
- Refugee students are eligible for ESOL funding.

If students meet these conditions, they are required to complete a National Assessment record called *English Language Learning Progression (ELLP)* (Van-Hees, 2022) that is based on

listening, speaking, reading, and writing as part of the application process (Ministry of Education, 2020a). School leaders need the assistance of ELLPs to identify ESOL students' academic level and to evaluate what kind of assistance they need. If ESOL students achieve low scores, this means that they are exceedingly in need of government funding to be able to acquire competence in English language.

Subsequently school principals are required to update the Ministry of Education on the students' progression every six months, using a checklist supplied with the ELLP form. If students do not show any progress over two terms, school leaders are required to check the students' functioning and achievement in their first language using the Bilingual Assessment Service (Ministry of Education, 2020). This kind of assessment, which is designed in students' first language, is provided by the Ministry of Education to help school leaders to identify whether ESOL students' slow progress relate to their cognitive function, or to their prior education background, or to the language itself. This will be discussed briefly in the following paragraph, as per the Ministry of Education (2022a), school leaders need to ensure that there are no other factors that affect ESOL students from progressing and learning English effectively.

### **Factors that affect ESOL students learning English**

Based on the Ministry of Education (2022a), ESOL students have many barriers that affect the process of learning English, whether caused by their home country or resulting from their new home, New Zealand. Generally, the common factors identified from a study done in New Zealand by McGee et al. (2015) relate to the following: experiencing wars back in their previous homeland, being poor economically, their personality, their age, their gender, or having been educated in poorly equipped schools in their home country.

Their study revealed that ESOL students who learned in impoverished schools back in their home country, which have a shortage of experienced staff and resources, impact negatively on their skills such that their academic progress became very limited in comparison to others. This caused them to feel anxious while trying to reach the same level as students who were educated in well-equipped schools (McGee et al., 2015). This is exemplified in the work undertaken by Taleni et

al. (2017), another New Zealand study, who found that students who are originally from Pacific Islands came to New Zealand with a very poor education background which impacted their abilities to progress academically and educationally, and to overcome the challenges in their new context.

Based on international studies, one of the main factors that studies identify as affecting ESOL students' ability to learn English is the environment which can either increase or decrease the self-confidence of students (Ascenzi-Moreno et al., 2016; Baecher et al., 2016; Téllez & Manthey, 2015; Theoharis & O'Toole, 2011). Based on these studies, the school environment can suppress the talent of students and can affect their results as well. Both refugees and migrants are found to be under stress if they are in an environment that lacks inclusion and an understanding of their prior life. Students in that situation are observed to be silent in classes, and unable to participate in class tasks. They became extremely anxious about attending school because of being unable to use English effectively and because they are afraid of getting comments from their peers about their English.

In New Zealand, the Ministry of Education (2016) found that refugees are more vulnerable to emotional, linguistic, cultural and academic complications than formal migrants because of the harsh situations they experienced back in their home country which might include family loss or war trauma. These factors decrease the self-esteem of ESOL students and cause them to avoid building relationships with their peers, and instead to isolate themselves at the back of the classroom to avoid any questions from the teacher.

Another significant factor that affects ESOL students to learn English is the school environment. According to Yuan (2018) in his study about language acquisition process by ESOL students, learning English is not an easy process, and students need to have an effective supportive environment providing sufficient motivation to enable them to learn English successfully. This is evident in Krashen's theory as shown in Yuan's study (2018) who claimed that students who learn in an environment that increases their anxiety experience blocks in their brain, making the process of learning English very difficult.

His study supports Krashen’s hypothesis and maintains that every student has an internal affective filter. This mechanism filters the amount of comprehensible input “new language” that actually reaches the part of the brain responsible for language acquisition. A student’s filter can be higher or lower depending on the motivation provided from the school environment. If ESOL students are motivated, their self-confidence increases and this in turn impacts positively on the process of learning English.

According to Yuan (2018), school leaders and teachers need to provide a supportive and inclusive environment that motivates ESOL students to turn off the filter. Additionally, having a sense of belonging and feeling safe in the classroom environment increases the self-esteem of ESOL students making the process of learning English much easier. The following Figure 1.1, based on Krashen’s theory of language acquisition, reflects the role of the filter, and shows how affective factors influence ESOL students learning English.

**Figure 1.1: Affective filter of language acquisition**

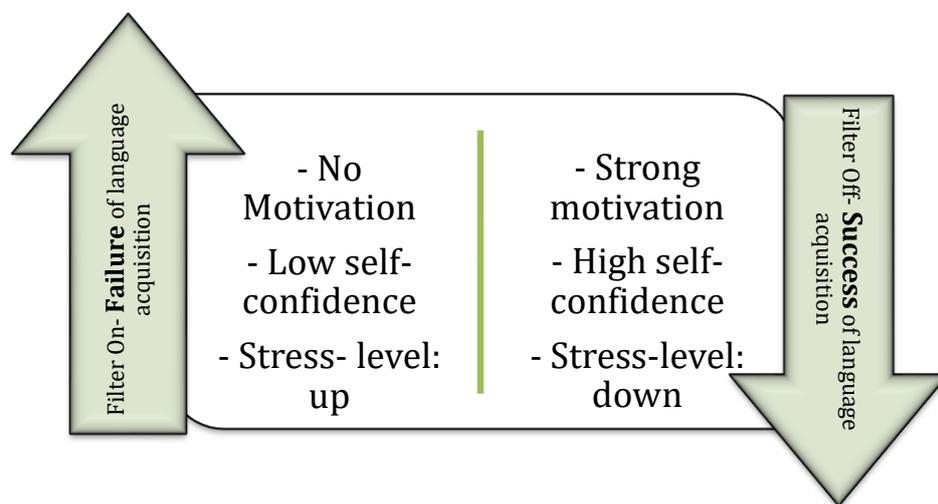


Figure 1.1 summarises Krashen’ theory concerning the most important factors that affect ESOL students learning English. It shows that when school leaders don’t provide ESOL students with a supportive environment that increase their self-confidence, ESOL students won’t be able to acquire English. This is because the brain’s filter is activated and blocks access to the new language thus making the goal of acquiring it hard to achieve. However, when school leaders provide ESOL students with the conditions that increase their commitment to learn, ESOL

students' anxiety will come down and their self-esteem will come up. This, in turn, will turn the affective filter off and the process of learning English will become faster and easier because there is no barrier to the input (Yuan, 2018).

To ensure that ESOL students do not experience any of the above factors, studies from within New Zealand and internationally (Ascenzi-Moreno et al., 2016; Callahan et al., 2019; McGee et al., 2015; Louie et al., 2018) showed that there is a strong positive relationship between the success of ESOL students and effective leadership. These studies emphasise that leadership is considered to be effective when school leaders and teachers are well-prepared in knowledge and expertise, so they are able to perform their roles effectively with respect to ESOL students' needs. In other words, lack of knowledge in the teaching and learning process around ESOL area is considered to be an important factor that adversely affects ESOL students attempting to learn English (Baecher et al., 2013; McGee et al., 2015).

Several studies from the United States of America (USA) (Ascenzi-Moreno et al., 2016; Elfers & Stritikus, 2014) have shown that there is an urgent need for school leaders to have prior preparation related to teaching English to second language students. This is because school leaders need to support their classroom teachers as they are not trained in teaching English to second language speakers. This is supported by Téllez and Manthey (2015) who both argue that when classroom teachers lack the important skills necessary to implement linguistically responsive teaching practices, their teaching practices may leave a negative impact on students' learning. This is also aligned with Elfers and Stritikus (2014) who note that when classroom teachers have poor knowledge of how to teach the language, they gradually start to put low expectations on ESOL students' capabilities in regard to learning a new language. This is also the view of Rigby et al. (2017), who suggest that classroom teachers naturally build certain stereotypes about ESOL students. They think that the home language of second language speakers hinder ESOL students from achieving high outcomes (Hopkins et al., 2019).

For this reason, school leaders should have prior knowledge and expertise in ESOL teaching and learning. This knowledge and expertise can enhance school leaders' capability in creating an effective school programme and in developing classroom teachers' practices which in turn help

ESOL students to increase their ability to learn English language effectively (Baecher et al., 2014; Baecher et al., 2016; McGee et al., 2015, Russell & Von Esch, 2018). However, supporting classroom teachers and ESOL students cannot be achieved only by the actions of the top leader. This was stressed by different studies such as those of Ascenzi-Moreno et al. (2016); Baecher et al. (2016) and McGee et al. (2015). These studies concluded that as the number of ESOL students is increasing in schools, there is an importance for school principals to increase their leadership capacity through sharing leadership with other leaders, namely ‘middle leaders’, to ensure that ESOL students are able to achieve high outcomes. The next section reflects middle leadership definitions followed by an evaluation of their impact in an ESOL context.

### **Who are middle leaders?**

Middle leaders comprise a large and diverse group in New Zealand primary schools. According to the Ministry of Education (2022a), middle leadership includes pedagogical leaders at the subject level, and teachers with whole school responsibilities such as a curriculum leader or a subject leader. Also included are team and syndicate leaders and leaders offering pastoral support to students in a school. An additional group comprises mentor leaders who are responsible for professional learning and teacher development (Ministry of Education, 2022a). The diverse nature of this group suggests that middle leadership represents a form of distributed leadership (De Nobile, 2018) in which leadership is practiced by school leaders and teachers who work together to achieve change (Harris et al., 2019; Youngs, 2017).

Taking all of these roles into account, middle leadership roles in an ESOL context are mostly occupied by teachers who assist school leaders to lead and develop school performance with respect to ESOL students (Baecher et al., 2014; McGee et al., 2015). This is the view of McGee et al. (2015) who state that leading ESOL learning is a kind of shared responsibility among school members. Generally, the responsibility for ESOL students is left to whichever leaders who have relevant knowledge in ESOL techniques, or to classroom teacher who have relevant experience working with ESOL learners (Ascenzi-Moreno et al., 2016; McGee et al., 2015). This suggests the need to critically evaluate how leadership is distributed among school members, and how school middle leaders involve other individuals with non-formal titles to take an active role in

leadership with the goal of maintaining school performance with respect to ensuring ESOL students' success. In the study of Harris et al. (2019) and Youngs (2017), shared leadership becomes the prominent leadership style by school leaders because of its positive impact on teachers' and on students' outcomes.

Despite the positive impact of distributed leadership on school outcomes, a synthesis of many studies argued that distributed leadership is viewed in some schools as a delegated and impractical process (De Nobile, 2018; 2019; Irvine & Brundrett, 2019; Notman, 2020). School leaders in other schools saw distributed leadership as an opportunity to relieve themselves of their workload by delegating their responsibilities to others, leading to the loss of the school organisation, ultimately ruining the school system (Irvine & Brundrett, 2019; Notman, 2020). Though in other schools, leaders face different challenges while dispersing their power, such as having to give the power to other leaders whose knowledge and experience is limited. This is the view of De Nobile (2018; 2019) who argues that individuals should have specific qualities to achieve success. These qualities are irrespective of their formal or non-formal titles (De Nobile, 2018). De Nobile (2018; 2019) suggests that knowledge and experience are two essential characteristics that individuals must have in order to perform their roles effectively. This is because these characteristics are the main tools that allow school leaders to increase the quality of their performance in leading teaching and learning practices with respect to ESOL students.

An example is given by Baecher et al. (2014) who supported the importance of knowledge in ESOL area. These researchers undertook a comparison between lesson plans written by two teachers, one of whom had general teaching and learning qualifications, while the other had TESOL qualifications. They found that the design of the lesson plan from the specialist ESOL teacher proved to be more effective in meeting the diverse needs of ESOL students. It is effective when it meets the diverse needs of ESOL students. Their study suggests that knowledge in ESOL area is essential for school leaders and teachers to have in order to produce effective lesson plans that aligns exactly with the different needs of their students. This is similar to the view of Louie et al. (2019) who states that school leaders who receive formal education in ESOL context are more able to support and impact on school practices with respect to ESOL students. This leads to

raise the question of how school middle leaders with their knowledge impact on school practices and support their classroom teachers in their work with ESOL students. The next section specifically examines the impact of middle leadership on ESOL students as well as classroom teachers in ESOL context.

### **The impact of middle leadership in an ESOL context**

In the literature, it is hard to find an exact evaluation of the impact of middle leadership on ESOL students. Most New Zealand studies, such as those of Cardno et al., (2018), De Nobile (2018; 2019), and Harris et al. (2019) examined middle leadership practices in general contexts, with no specific reference to an ESOL context. A study of McGee et al. (2015) is an exception. Nevertheless, international studies, such as those of Ascenzi-Moreno et al. (2016); Baecher et al. (2016); Daly and Sharma (2018); McGee et al. (2015) and Louie et al. (2019), imply that middle leaders' practices for students' learning support ESOL students even when not specifically targeted at their particular needs. This is because middle leaders are by nature instructional leaders who are responsible to build the best conditions that allow students to increase their outcomes. These conditions were mostly based on providing students with a school environment that enhances their capability to achieve their goals effectively. Yet, in the light of the high number of ESOL students in schools, studies suggest that middle leaders have to use a collaborative leadership style in order to encourage other teachers to participate and work alongside them to support ESOL students in their linguistic needs. Youngs's (2014) study views this style of leadership is considered as an emergent solution that school leaders adapt to secure students' success. This seems to be evident as mentioned earlier in ESOL contexts when the responsibility was shared among school members to support ESOL students' learning (Baecher et al., 2016; McGee et al., 2015). The following headings reflect the main practices undertaken by middle leaders in order to help ESOL students increase their ability in learning English. These practices are building the school vision and empowering the school capacity to meet ESOL students' needs, establishing an effective school programme for ESOL students, developing people skills to meet ESOL students' needs, and building an inclusive classroom for ESOL students and ESOL families.

## **I. Building the school vision for ESOL students**

In New Zealand, every school is defined by its own vision, which is manifested through its specific routines, practices, and core values, and many schools proclaim its commitment to embrace diversity and inclusion, especially after the increasing number of ESOL students in their schools (Ministry of Education, 2020). Based on this, researchers suggest that middle leaders play a critical role in developing the school vision in a way that ensure ESOL students are included in school practices and able to access school curriculum effectively (Ascenzi-Moreno et al., 2016; Louie et al., 2019). Despite the limited studies that examine middle leaders' roles in building the school vision, the Ministry of Education (2016) state specific principles to help school leaders in developing their school vision and practices according to their ESOL students' needs. These principles are knowing the learners, their language background, and their experimental background'. Since these principles cannot be fully approached by the actions of a single leader (McGee et al., 2015), it is reported that middle leaders should share their vision, promote the collegial work, and build partnerships with ESOL students and their families to be able to acquire sufficient information about ESOL student in order to be able to form their vision appropriately. According to Ascenzi-Moreno et al. (2016) and Louie et al. (2019), when school leaders create a space for teachers, parents, and students to share decision, school practices that aim to achieve equity and inclusion for ESOL students are more likely to develop. This, in turn, might address ESOL students' social and academic needs. This aligns with the view of Theoharis and O'Toole (2011), "inclusive education as providing each student the right to an authentic sense of belonging to a school classroom community where difference is expected and valued." (p.649).

This reflect an important perspective regarding the way that middle leaders perform their roles to be able to achieve the school vision. Researchers claim that middle leaders should perform their role as a role model (Callahan et al., 2019; Louie et al., 2019). In their views, middle leaders have to show the values and attitudes they want their classroom teachers to adapt to ensure that their classroom teachers are able to influence their students effectively. This might be achieved, for example, through middle leaders building strong relationships with classroom teachers. In other words, when middle leaders have strong relationships with their classroom teachers, they, in this

way, inspire them to build strong relationships with their students. Such relationships have a positive impact on ESOL students' performance. In other words, research suggests that when ESOL students feel supported, their commitment to learn and participate is more likely to increase (Yuan, 2018).

## **II. Establishing an effective school programme for ESOL students**

In New Zealand, a school programme plays a critical role in ensuring that students receive a coherent and well-structured programme that fit with their different needs (Ministry of Education, 2020c). Based on this, research suggests that middle leaders are responsible to improve the quality of teaching and learning practices through providing ESOL students with an effective programme that increases their outcomes. In accordance with this, school leaders started to develop their programmes differently (Ascenzi-Moreno et al., 2016; Baecher et al., 2016; McGee et al., 2015; Theoharis & O'Toole, 2011). For example, in some schools, school leaders designed their programme to be based on transitional bilingual instructions. This means that is the instructions are friendly used to support students in their first transition while learning a new language (Stepanek et al., 2010). While in other schools, school leaders built their programme to be based on bilingual model. The instructions used are provided in two languages that enable the students develop their home language as well as the new language (Ascenzi-Moreno et al., 2016). Most recently, school leaders planned their school programme to be based on sheltered instruction model. In this model, the instruction is totally in English as it is the case in New Zealand schools (McGee et al., 2015). Therefore, school middle leaders implement different strategies to support ESOL students to meet their linguistic needs effectively (McGee et al., 2015). These strategies are: 'push-in' and 'pull out'. Push in strategy is when school middle leaders encourage specialist ESOL teachers and teacher aides to work with ESOL students within the classroom. On the other hand, pull out strategy when middle leaders ask specialist ESOL teachers to support ESOL students out of their classrooms for a portion of time.

In New Zealand, specialist ESOL teachers seem to play an important role school contexts. They collaborate with middle leaders to support ESOL students through providing them with specific ESOL lessons that enrich ESOL students' vocabularies and employing effective resources that

help them to use language confidently. Most of school resources were adopted by the Ministry of Education (2022a). Examples of selected resources include:

- *The English Language Learning Progression (ELLP)* (Van Hees, 2017) is a resource that supports both leaders and other staff to work through the content by applying different strategies to help ESOL students approach their goals with respect to the four strands of the English language: speaking, listening, reading, and writing (Ministry of Education, 2021);
- *Supporting English Language Learning in Primary Schools (SELLIPS)* (Ministry of Education, 2018) which outlines ways in which teachers can scaffold the learning of English language learners so that they can achieve learning outcomes at their appropriate stages; and
- A picture dictionary that assists new ESOL students to learn English because it is based on demonstrating the most important vocabularies ESOL students need to learn English quickly (McGee et al., 2015; Ministry of Education, 2021).

This leads to the fact that middle leadership composes of formal and informal leaders who share the same responsibility to increase the quality of the school performance to increase students' outcomes (De Nobile, 2018). This also leads to note that informal leaders play a significant role in developing leadership performance with respect to students' needs. For example, Baecher et al. (2014) and McGee et al. (2015) claim that specialist ESOL teachers are the main resource for both school leaders, classroom teachers, and ESOL students. This is because ESOL specialist teachers are more aware of what practices might be better for ESOL students to increase their achievements. Similarly with Ascenzi-Moreno et al. (2016), Daly and Sharma, (2018) and Edwards (2012) who assure that including ESOL specialist teachers in leadership team may develop leadership performance which in turn increase ESOL students' outcomes. This is because ESOL specialist teachers have rich knowledge of ESOL strategies, and their input might increase the quality of the teaching and learning practices with respect to middle leaders' efforts.

However, Baecher et al. (2014) indicate that including ESOL specialist teachers and applying the strategy of pulling out are considered to be insufficient practices for ESOL students to achieve their goals. The researchers suggest that school middle leaders should develop their school

programme to be based on using explicit English inside the classrooms to help ESOL students develop their English effectively. This entails through implementing a space in the school curriculum that teach formal language properly and providing students with different learning activities that increase the academic achievements of ESOL students and mainstream students as well (Baecher et al., 2014; Russell & Von Esch, 2018). Yet, there are no studies that show how middle leaders designed their school programme with respect to ESOL students' needs. Thus, the question remains of how middle leadership developed their school programme to support ESOL students' needs and increase their abilities to achieve their goals effectively.

### **III. Developing people skills to meet ESOL students' needs**

Classroom teachers may lack confidence while working with ESOL students. This is because classroom teachers have little or no prior knowledge about how to instruct and teach ESOL students effectively (Télez & Manthey, 2015). Based on this, studies suggest that school middle leaders are responsible for improving teachers' skills and expanding their knowledge to meet the different needs of their students (Ascenzi-Moreno et al., 2016; De Nobile, 2018; Ministry of Education, 2022a; McGee et al., 2015). Studies report different ways middle leaders support their teachers to improve their professional skills. For example, middle leaders in some schools involve classroom teachers in their work and encourage them to work alongside them to create different activities and resources for ESOL students thinking that this may influence classroom teachers and may improve their knowledge in ESOL area (Stepanek et al., 2010).

While middle leaders in other schools expand their capacity by involving individuals who have specific knowledge in ESOL area, namely 'specialist ESOL teachers', to support both classroom teachers and ESOL students in their learning to achieve success (Baecher, 2014). While in other schools, middle leaders provide classroom teachers with general trainings to develop their understanding of how to apply different practices effectively (Irvine & Brundrett, 2019; Hopkins et al., 2019; Stepanek et al., 2010). According to Irvine and Brundrett (2019) and Hopkins et al. (2019), effective middle leaders should provide classroom teachers with ongoing professional development workshops that increase the quality of teachers' instruction in order to assist ESOL students to achieve their goals effectively. In their views, such workshops should expand teachers'

knowledge and stimulate them intellectually to find effective learning activities that help students acquire the language faster. This is similar to McGee et al. (2015) and Baecher et al. (2016) who state that providing teachers with workshops is important when working with ESOL students. Such workshops can develop classroom teachers' abilities to plan and practice their roles effectively with ESOL students, and thereby impact on students' outcomes. However, it is argued that middle leaders have to keep their pedagogical knowledge up to date in order to run effective trainings (De Nobile, 2018). Besides, Stepanek et al. (2010) claim that workshops alone are not sufficient for classroom teachers to develop their skills and practices to address ESOL students' needs. They said that classroom teachers do not find workshops effective unless they were followed by consistent observations that aim to evaluate whether classroom teachers were able to address ESOL students' needs effectively or not (Rigby et al., 2017; Smith et al., 2020; Stepanek et al., 2010). In literature, evaluation observation is an essential practice that has an impact on teachers' practice (Smith et al., 2020). Similarly with Rigby et al., (2019) who assure that classroom observations can increase teachers' academic skills which in turn impact on students' outcomes.

Yet, in New Zealand, middle leaders who lead ESOL teaching and learning may lack specific pedagogical knowledge in ESOL area. This, in turn, may affect their efficacy in terms of how effective the feedback is to empower classroom teachers' capabilities (Ascenzi- Moreno et al., 2016; Baecher et al., 2016; McGee et al., 2015). This is because the observations that are conducted with no specific goal are considered to be not effective. Based on these contributions, I have been unable to find any resource that reflected how middle leaders, with respect to their knowledge and expertise, enhance their classroom teachers' practices to meet ESOL students' needs. The current studies were mainly depicting middle leaders as influencers and role models who encourage classroom teachers to follow. Then, the question remains of how middle leadership supports classroom teachers in their knowledge and practice with ESOL students to learn English successfully.

#### **IV. Building a supportive environment for ESOL students' families**

Research suggests that, because parents are the first teachers to their children, they have a great impact on educational achievements (Bull, 2014; Irvine & Brundrett, 2019; McGee et al., 2015; Vera et al., 2016). School leaders, therefore, need to involve parents in planning the learning for these students (Bull, 2014; Vera et al., 2016). In New Zealand, middle leaders and senior leaders are often responsible for providing ESOL students' parents and whānau with a safe and supportive environment that allows them to create positive relationships with teachers and other staff members. These kind of positive relationships helps ESOL families to better understand the school community, and to build a clear picture of how their children are progressing (McGee et al., 2015).

According to an initiative instigated by the Ministry of Education (2022a), middle leaders are responsible for promoting reciprocal, learning-centered relationships among schools, whānau, community, and teachers. These relationships, based on empathy and mutual respect, encourage leaders and teachers to value the diverse identities, languages, and cultures of their school community. However, a few studies explored the ways in which middle leaders developed relationships with ESOL students' whānau (Bull, 2014; McGee et al., 2015). For example, a study conducted by Bull (2014) in New Zealand suggests that middle leaders should work alongside their colleagues to build a partnership with families through enlightening families about their children's needs, achievements levels, and the goals that need to be achieved to meet expectations. McGee et al., (2015) suggested that middle leaders improve their relationships with families when they build a school system that is based on valuing families' language, identity, and culture. This is evident when middle leaders celebrate students' identities through conducting festivals in the school contexts and encouraging ESOL students' families to connect with the school community to be part of the school context. Such events may support ESOL students and increase their self-confidence in using English (Ascenzi-Moreno et al., 2016, McGee et al., 2015; Vera et al., 2016). Yet, it is still unclear how middle leaders support ESOL students' families when it comes to teaching the language itself; the available studies reported that ESOL parents were supported with either events or through school conferences (Baecher et al., 2016; McGee et al., 2015; Vera et al.,

2016). Then, the question remains of how middle leaders are able to support ESOL students and their families to learn English successfully.

### **Gaps in literature**

The lack of adequate specification of middle leaders' roles has become the concern of many scholars who found that the studies constantly defined the term "middle leadership" in general contexts (Baecher et al., 2016; Cardno et al., 2018; De Nobile, 2018; 2019; Fairman & Mackenzie, 2015; McGee et al., 2015; Louie et al., 2019). This is supported by Gurr and Drysdale (2013) who note that middle leadership has not yet reflected and captured the interest it really deserves specifically in the ESOL field. This is especially the case if assuring effective teaching and learning for ESOL students was at the heart of middle leadership roles. Thus, ambiguity still exists despite what middle leaders are doing to support ESOL students learning English (Elfers & Stritikus, 2014). There were insufficient studies into the practices of middle leaders' that document the ways in which they have an impact on the process of teaching and learning for ESOL students to help them to learn English. Most researchers claim that balancing the school curriculum required for supporting ESOL students to learn English has been identified as a challenge for middle leaders (Ascenzi-Moreno, 2016; Baecher et al., 2014; Baecher et al., 2016). In addition, there has also been limited research into how middle leaders help classroom teachers in their work with ESOL students who have limited English (Elfer & Tom, 2014). Lastly, while some studies showed that middle leaders cooperated with students' whānau through involving them into the school community (Louie et al., 2019), there was no study, within the bounds of my searching that investigates precisely how middle leaders communicate with students' parents especially in cases where parents have limited English (McGee et al., 2015). As a result, what is needed is a conceptual framework to guide future research attempting to explore the nature of these roles in ESOL field as suggested by McGee et al. (2015). This project assisted me in acquiring an enhanced understanding to address my research queries around how middle leadership addressed the needs of ESOL students to learn English effectively.

## **Conclusion**

A large body of literature was reviewed to reflect the importance of examining the impact of middle leadership practices to support ESOL students in their needs to learn English. In literature, middle leadership has been shown to have an important impact on school achievement as a whole. These leaders work as a teacher inside their classrooms, as an administrator who works alongside senior leadership, and finally as a leader who work alongside their colleagues. This chapter has reviewed many of the most recent studies that show the practices middle leaders undertook to increase the school performance and help ESOL students to increase their outcomes. These practices include building the school vision and empowering the school capacity to meet ESOL students' needs, establishing an effective system of curriculum and resourcing for ESOL students, developing people skills to meet ESOL students' needs, and building an inclusive classroom for ESOL students and ESOL families. However, within each practice there is ambiguity in whether these practices could serve ESOL students' needs or not; and whether middle leaders achieve their goals or not. These practices are in need further research to understand how middle leaders' efforts impact on the school system and make a change in its performance in a way that support ESOL students to learn English effectively.

## **Chapter Three: Methodology**

### **Introduction**

This chapter describes the research methodology used in this study to investigate the impact of middle leadership practices on ESOL students to learn English. Firstly, it represents an overview of the conceptual framework of the research methodology in relation to interpretivism and constructivism. It then provides a rationale as to why a qualitative approach has been adopted in this study. It also outlines how the schools and study samples were selected for the data collection. Semi-structured interviews were considered to be the best fit for this the research study to acquire data concerning how middle leaders could support ESOL students to learn English. A thematic analysis process was then used to analyse the data. Four criteria of trustworthiness were described clearly in the research. All ethical issues that relate to the study will be included at the end of the chapter.

### **Methodology**

The conceptual framework of this study is based on interpretivist and constructivist paradigms. Choosing these two positions assisted me to find answers for my research questions since they are based on understanding the human experience. Ontologically, the approach is interpretivist as this theory is based on describing and understanding human interactions and meanings. It examines how common-sense meanings of reality are created and used by people for practical purposes (Mackenzie & Knipe, 2008). According to Creswell (2013), interpretivist theory refers to the existence of multiple realities that are shaped by different views and meanings of people. In this research, I was determined to investigate the participants' interpretations of their realities with ESOL students to understand how middle leaders support ESOL students to learn English. Each participant was engaged to add a personal worldview regarding what they consider to be the best leadership practices that help ESOL students to learn English. This is based on their experiences and their way of interpreting reality. This means that truth is not assumed to be ready to collect, but it is constructed from people' experiences and perceptions. According to Mertens

(2005), “interpretivists believe that reality is constructed from people’s experiences and there is no such truth or knowledge out there” (p.12).

In terms of epistemology, knowledge and understanding depends on how people have constructed their knowledge. In the constructionist view, Crotty (1998) states “meaning is not discovered but constructed- meaning does not inhere in the object, merely waiting for someone to come upon it” (p.43). In accordance with this theory, I invited people to participate who had different positions, and who would acknowledge different realities and be able to co-construct the knowledge. I relied on participants’ perceptions, experiences, and knowledge to understand how middle leaders constructed their knowledge and meaning about what leadership practices are best to help ESOL students to learn English. The inclusiveness in participation had the aim of seeking, thorough data, information regarding the impact of middle leadership practices that supported ESOL students in their attempts to learn English. I was able to construct the research findings and inform middle leaders’ impact on ESOL students’ English learning (Creswell, 2013; Tolich & Davidson, 2018).

Given these two paradigms, a qualitative approach was considered the most effective approach to fit with the interpretivist and constructivist position. As stated by Merriam and Tisdell (2016), “qualitative research is an interpretive activity to understand the meaning people have constructed, that is, how people make sense of their world and experiences they have in the world” (p.28). Using qualitative research enabled me to construct a better understanding of the realities of middle leaders and their support of ESOL students. Additionally, it enabled me to identify and interpret people's experiences, views, and perceptions to be able to construct a quality knowledge of what practices middle leaders used to help ESOL students in their needs to learn English (Privitera & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2019). This occurred when middle leaders of this study shared their perspectives and their views about their actual role, their context, and their opinions concerning what practices could help ESOL students to acquire English.

To identify the middle leaders’ experiences when supporting ESOL students it was decided that interviews were the most effective tool among those utilised within qualitative approach. The reason for selecting interviews was not only the need to find answers to my research questions

but also to help improve my understanding of middle leadership and ESOL students' situations within New Zealand primary schools. As mentioned by Savin-Baden and Major (2013), interviews assist to explore "data on understandings, opinions, what people remember doing and the cultures in which they live and work" (p.358). The research was guided by three main questions as follows:

1. How do primary school middle leaders support ESOL students who are new to New Zealand to learn English?
2. How do primary school middle leaders build classroom teachers' capacity and capability to support ESOL students who are new to New Zealand to learn English?
3. How do primary school middle leaders collaborate with the families/whānau of these ESOL students to support their English language learning?

### **Semi-structured interviews:**

In a qualitative approach, there are generally three kinds of interviews: structured, semi-structured and unstructured interviews. As this study was a small scale one, semi-structured interviews were considered the most effective tool to gain a detailed understanding of middle leaders' impact on ESOL students to learning English. Semi-structured interviews are defined as an open source which leads to a better quality understanding of the social world through listening to participants' experiences and perspectives (Wellington, 2015). As this kind of interview is based on open questions, this assisted me in obtaining further in-depth information on the middle leadership's perspectives and experiences with ESOL students who are learning English. Moreover, this kind of interview provided an opportunity to have free-flowing conversation with participants who were not limited by time or by a set of closed questions as is the case with structured interviews (Wellington, 2015). The flexibility in semi-structured interviews allowed me to ask additional probing and prompting questions to inform my research inquiries (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013; Wellington, 2015). Thus, conducting semi-structured interviews was the key to gathering data needed to answer my research questions (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). In addition, this approach

engaged the participants and provided them with an opportunity to reevaluate the effectiveness of their practices.

The interview questions were adapted from King et al. (2019). Ten purposeful questions were divided into three sets that started from general questions and moved towards deep questions (Appendix A). The first set of questions was designed to find out about participants roles and experiences in their schools. The aim of the first set was to create a rapport with the participants which created a foundation from which to gain information in a comfortable way. The second set of questions was designed to gauge the impact middle leadership has on ESOL students in their schools. This set of questions aimed to produce in-depth information about their practices with ESOL students, including how they support classroom teachers in their knowledge and practice with ESOL students. Information was also sought on how they supported the families of ESOL students to help their children to learn English effectively. According to King et al. (2019), in-depth questions need to include all types of questions such as contrasting, evaluating, and comparative questions. Thus, having different kinds of questions encouraged participants to share their experiences deeply and explicitly regarding their work with ESOL students. The last set of questions was designed to engage participants to evaluate the effectiveness of their practices through sharing their challenges and their response to these challenges. During the interview, there were follow-up questions that assisted me to have rounded, detailed discussions that allowed the participants to estimate how effectively middle leadership practices impact ESOL students' learning English.

Prior to the interview day, all preparatory matters that are considered important were addressed (Wellington, 2015). Inviting participants, asking for their interest, recording their information, and providing assurance of confidentiality and minimising harm for participants were all addressed. This was achieved through providing a set of purposeful questions that were thoughtfully composed so that they made sense to interviewees and were completely explicit (Appendix A). All questions were designed consistently with the principles of King et al.'s question style (2019). Additionally, follow-up questions were used appropriately and sensitively to obtain more explicit or extensive responses from participants or to clarify any ambiguities.

Wellington (2015) considered follow-up questions to be a valuable tool when using open questions. These follow up questions provided an important help to avoid having limited data.

To ensure participants did not become fatigued was considered most important. The researcher ensured that the interviews would last for a maximum of one hour to address this concern. Also, the interviews were conducted in participants' offices, based on their request. All interviews were conducted in a quiet room where conversations and voice recordings could be conducted with minimal interruptions. At the end of each interview, interviewees were asked if they would like to add any comment or discuss any additional issues, as sometimes these sorts of questions produce valuable responses related to the study. Lastly, appreciation was expressed to participants for taking part in the study. This included presenting a *koha* to the participant for sharing with their experiences and knowledge about ESOL students' English learning with me.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed to ensure a better understanding of the research outcomes. As identified by Seidman (2019), recording the interview allows the researcher to develop a comprehensive understanding of the participant responses. As the interview data and its results are influenced by the researcher's own perceptions and interpretation, I decided to transcribe the interviews personally to understand participants' responses more implicitly. According to Bailey (2008), transcribing is "an interpretive act rather than simply a technical procedure" (p.130), as it encourages the researcher to obtain a more comprehensive understanding and to analyse any unanticipated phenomena. Thus, transcribing the data personally allowed the following benefits:

1. It enabled me to capture how data were expressed by participants when I listened to the recording. It also provided the opportunities to transfer participants' body language and could point to the questions that appeared to be of most interest to the participants. This could positively impact my abilities to analyse the data effectively.
2. It provided an opportunity to compare the participants' responses in a direct way. It allowed to identify the differences and similarities among participants' experiences which provided me initial ideas regarding codes and themes that should be approached for the study. As

stated by Wellington (2015), “careful recording and processing of interview records can enhance and encourage respondent validation” (p.153).

After transcribing all the interviews, all transcripts were shared with the participants to review their answers and check whether they needed to alter any information. Once participants confirmed there were no changes or edits required, I was able to begin the data analysis process which is described briefly in the next section.

### **Data analysis**

Data analysis is described as a ‘mindwork’ where the researcher is required to use their intellectual abilities to make sense of the qualitative data obtained from semi-structured interviews. It is an ongoing process that involves breaking data into meaningful parts for the purpose of examining them further (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). The main purpose of qualitative data analysis is to make sense out of the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), with an intention to find answers to the research questions. Thus, when I analysed the data, I could identify the potential codes leading to determining how data should be compared. I had the opportunity to examine the data deeply, both in parts and when assembling the data together to make a sensible whole. According to Savin-Baden and Major (2013), data analysis is “key for researchers to organize and interrogate data in ways that allow them to identify patterns, create themes, discover relationships, improve explanation, make interpretations, mount critiques, or generate theories” (p.148).

Thus, the most appropriate process to ensure an effective analysis of data in this research project was a thematic analysis approach. This process is based on following important protocols to enhance the overall quality of complicated data (Scharp & Sanders, 2019). The first step was to complete the interviews and have them transcribed. Once data is transcribed, I analysed the data by reading the transcripts repeatedly to understand hidden meanings embedded in the data. Reading the data consistently enabled me to explore it effectively through highlighting the keywords, assigning codes using important comments that expressed what the participants meant by an argument (Privitera & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2019). Moreover, to increase the quality of the

analysis of the data, I made sure of the trustworthiness of the results by different means which are classified into four main criteria as described below.

### **Criteria of trustworthiness of the study**

The main aim of exploring trustworthiness in a qualitative study is to support the aims of the research by ensuring that the research findings are “worth paying attention to” (Elo et al., 2014, p.2). Privitera and Ahilgrim-Delzell (2019) claimed that there are four criteria of trustworthiness to increase the quality of the study. These are: transferability, dependability, confirmability, and credibility. Transferability relates to external validity, ensuring the generalisation of the research findings. However, generalisation is not always applicable in qualitative research if it is based on a small sample. To increase the transferability of this research, participants have been selected from five different contexts holding different roles. The greater number of participants in different situations, the more likely it is that the results are transferable to similar contexts. Also, the time frame which was given to participants was extended to one hour to give them the comfort of sharing their perspectives freely with no restricted short time. The participants were engaged and happy to share their perceptions about what practices and contributions have been made available to ESOL students to help them acquire English effectively. Through this discussion, middle leaders could critically evaluate how they could improve or alter their practices to more effectively meet the various needs of ESOL students to learn English.

The second criterion, dependability, refers to reliability. This relates to how consistent the results of a study would be if it had been conducted by other researchers (Scharp & Sanders, 2019). To make this study beneficial to others, processes throughout the study have all been described and explained thoroughly, from obtaining participants, increasing rapport with participants, interpreting their perceptions, and constructing the final outcomes.

Thirdly, the confirmability of the study refers to neutrality, specifically the extent to which data is transferred accurately without reflecting the researcher’s own point of view. Since this research is based on interpretivist and constructivist positions, recording the semi-structured interviews electronically ensured that I reported the interviews accurately, ensuring an unbiased

interpretation of the participants' views. Moreover, to avoid any further bias from my personal way of interpreting and understanding the data, checking by participants of the transcription was involved—all interview transcripts were shared with the participants to ensure a true representation of their views was recorded (Wellington, 2015).

The last criterion, credibility, is known as internal validity. According to Cohen et al. (2011), “in qualitative data, validity might be addressed through honesty, depth, richness, and scope of the data achieved” (p. 179). To achieve this, adopting the way of King et al. (2019) in dividing the interview questions into three categories (the initial questions, the in-depth questions, and the follow up questions) assisted me to obtain thorough data from participants. Prior to the interview day, I worked on establishing a rapport with the participants that provided them with a sense of comfort and led them to share their honest views and perceptions about how their leadership practices fulfill the different needs of ESOL students to learn English.

Additionally, another effective technique that increased the credibility of research data is triangulation. Triangulation refers to obtaining information from different resources, which is important to ensure that the data is comprehensible to formulate a deep understanding of the topic (Privitera & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2019). In this study, having a group of different leaders in different positions such as ESOL leaders, ESOL teachers, CoL Leaders, and Team leaders resulted in a more dynamic and comprehensive understanding of the topic. The study participants also benefited from this approach as experiences and perceptions of how their practices impact ESOL students' ability to learn was able to be affirmed and reinforced (Privitera & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2019).

## **Sampling**

Sampling depends on the researcher's study plan. It is the key for researchers to be able to access a portion of people with certain characteristics and experiences to represent the view of a wider community (Privitera & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2019). In terms of a small-scale study, non-probability purposive sampling was selected to gain thorough data from a specific group of participants. According to Privitera and Ahlgrim-Delzell (2019), participants' perspectives in non-probability

sampling do not represent the wider community. Thus, purposive sampling was the key to target a specific group of people in order to meet my research aims. Middle leaders whose position related to ESOL students' English learning were approached to share their knowledge about how they support ESOL students to learn English effectively. According to Cohen et al. (2018), purposeful sampling is used to enable access to 'knowledgeable people' who have in-depth knowledge about issues related to their professional role, power, access to networks, expertise, and experiences. As mentioned in the literature, the term 'middle leadership' is hard to define as they hold dual roles leading and teaching (De Nobile, 2018; Harris et al., 2019). And in both roles, they have an impact on ESOL students' learning because they are responsible for the quality of teaching and learning programmes in their school. For this reason, purposive sampling was the main tool which assisted me to recruit a group of various middle leaders with different roles and positions related to ESOL students' learning experiences.

Wellington (2015) confirms that in purposive sampling researchers can deliberately select a wide range of different cases. In the process of selecting schools, I firstly narrowed my focus to primary schools included in the Auckland Central Community of Schools (ACCOS), a Community of Learning (CoL) in Central Auckland, for two reasons. Firstly, this CoL includes nine primary schools and has a particular focus on researching best practices to support the needs of multilingual, ESOL learners within their schools. Secondly, these schools have a relatively high proportion of ESOL students therefore approaching them was considered a good decision. I approached the entire CoL, however only four leaders from two schools out of nine expressed interest in participating in this study. Of these four leaders, two were Across-School CoL leaders, one was an ESOL leader, and one was a team leader. After consideration, I expanded the circle of schools into different areas in Auckland to increase the numbers of participants. I used the *Education Counts* website to identify three other schools. The following Table 3.1 presents information about the selected five participants' schools in regard to the number of ESOL students and their ethnicities.

Table 3.1 *Overview of participating schools*

| School Name | Total School Roll | European/Pakeha | Maori | Pacific | Asian | MELAA | Other | ESOL Number | Percentage of ESOL students |
|-------------|-------------------|-----------------|-------|---------|-------|-------|-------|-------------|-----------------------------|
| Tahi        | 595               | 202             | 23    | 20      | 314   | 19    | 12    | 140         | 23.5%                       |
| Rua         | 207               | 2               | 0     | 7       | 84    | 107   | 7     | 110         | 53%                         |
| Toru        | 171               | 3               | 9     | 22      | 127   | 9     | 1     | 90          | 52%                         |
| Whā         | 465               | 193             | 10    | 14      | 193   | 37    | 18    | 130         | 28%                         |
| Rima        | 423               | 145             | 63    | 111     | 63    | 40    | 1     | 120         | 28.4 %                      |

The principals of those schools were approached through email (Appendix B) introducing the researcher and the research study. A copy of the information sheet (Appendix C) and ethics form (Appendix D) were attached to the email for participants' review. The information sheet was the source of participants' willingness to ask for more details about the research. It contained a summary of the research, aims, its significance, the benefits, and the research plan. Once principals confirmed their interest in the study, I selected the participants based on two essential criteria. The first criteria was used to select middle leaders whose roles allowed them to have a direct influence on the learning of ESOL students such as the ESOL 'lead teacher'. This is because ESOL lead teachers are usually in consistent direct contact with ESOL students, so their influence is considered to be direct. The second criteria was used to select middle leaders who had experienced being a leader for second language speakers such as the pedagogical leader or team leaders. This is because they are supposed to have good knowledge of school programmes and resources that better serve ESOL students' needs to learn English.

Considering the participants' criteria, nine different participants were invited for the research from five different primary schools. Most middle leaders who were approached were syndicate leaders such as Across-School Leader and team leaders; senior leaders who hold middle leadership roles such as deputy principals, and informal leaders holding leadership roles such as specialist ESOL teachers. Having middle leaders holding different roles helped to ensure the trustworthiness of the data gathered.

Once middle leaders affirmed their readiness, I arranged an initial meeting with them to present the documentation. In the meeting, I explained the research plan, the methodology, and its aims using the information sheet. I emphasised that being involved in the study was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time. They were informed that they could add to or change their data at any time prior to the findings being released. Once middle leaders showed their interest in taking part in the study, the researcher provided them with a copy of the Consent Form (Appendix E) and the interview questions (Appendix A) so that participants had an idea of what they were going to be asked in the interview.

### **Ethics considerations**

The nature of this study required deep and rich descriptions from middle leaders' experiences regarding supporting ESOL students learning English. The researcher was concerned that many ethical issues needed to be considered before starting with the data collection process to ensure that the research was ethical. According to Brooks et al., (2015) “it is everyone's responsibility to ensure that educational research is ethical research, and the better prepared we are to address this task, the better our research will be”. (p.7)

To start with, the procedures of this study were approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEK) (see Appendix D). I followed three main principles to ensure that the research was ethically good: respect for persons, minimisation of harm, and ensuring justice to the research.

In regard to the first principle, respect for others, it refers to the need to acknowledge the autonomy for participants. I demonstrated this first principle, respect for persons, by explaining the research project to participants and school principals. I sent school principals invitation emails that included an Information Sheet explaining the research plan and purpose. Once the principals showed their interest, they were asked to forward the invitation email to their middle leaders who deal with ESOL students. I then conducted a meeting prior to the interview to provide all participants with information sheets that included sufficient information about the research study such as the research purposes, plans, methodology, methods used, and its significance. Also, a

Consent Form was provided to participants so they could get an idea about the interview protocol. Miller et al. (2012) maintain that consent forms should be clear, and the research described briefly to participants because 'informed consent' can be considered as problematic if it is not clear what the participant is consenting to, and where 'participation' begins and ends. At the end of the meeting, I emphasised to participants that my contact details were highlighted in the Information Sheet if they have queries regarding the study.

The second principle, minimisation of harm, involves two main elements. These are showing the good of conducting the research and avoiding any risk or harm to participants (Brooks et al., 2014). To achieve the first requirement, during the pre-interview meeting I explained to participants how both middle leaders and the community could benefit from this research. I assured participants that through participating in the study they would be able to reflect on the efficacy of their practices relating to ESOL students. By sharing their experiences and perceptions, they would be in a better position to review the ESOL students' learning experiences and could critically evaluate how much their practices impact on ESOL students' English learning. In regard to community benefit, the research findings may lead to improvement in school practices regarding ESOL students.

To achieve the second requirement of minimising any risk or harm to participants, participants were only asked questions that were related to the study (Brooks et al., 2015). Participants' rights were maintained consistently throughout the research. For example, their schools were not identified, and their names were replaced with pseudonyms to ensure their privacy. All personal information was destroyed and all data for the final thesis were kept confidential and stored in an office at Auckland University of Technology. Additionally, participants had the right to review their own transcripts and were able to make any amendments to their data. During interviewing, I established relationships based on engagement, appreciation, and caring to show respect and care towards the participants. After the interview, participants were given a small koha to express the researcher's appreciation for their time and information.

Regarding the last principle, ensuring justice in participants' selection, the researcher mentioned in the meeting that middle leaders were selected based on specific criteria in order to be able to provide effective results to fill the research gap. According to Brooks et al. (2015), “it is unjust to select systematically some groups of people for research simple because of their availability, their compromised position, or their manipulability, rather than reasons directly related to the problem being selected” (p.10).

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has explained how the research methodology was selected. Two main theories were considered: the interpretivism and constructivism paradigms, with regard to their usefulness in improving our understanding of the impact middle leadership has on ESOL students learning English. An interpretivism approach helps towards an understanding of how people view and make sense of their realities, whilst a constructivism approach assists towards understanding how people create their knowledge. This chapter explored different aspects of adopting qualitative research, the methods selected, data analysis, criteria for selecting participants, and ethics. A discussion of the four criteria of trustworthiness was briefly addressed to ensure the quality of the research methodology.

## **Chapter Four: Findings**

### **Introduction**

This chapter details the results obtained in nine semi-structured interviews that examined the impact of middle leadership practices on ESOL students new to New Zealand to learn English. Firstly, a brief overview is provided on the background of the research participants, followed by an outline of the data analysis. With regard to the results, data comprise information about effective leadership in the ESOL field, including the impact of middle leadership practices on teachers as they seek to develop their skills. These skills, in turn, appear to influence how effectively ESOL students learn English. Additional data represent various ways middle leaders communicate with ESOL students' whānau and parents to achieve the ESOL students' goals.

The data analysis process described in the second part of the chapter is in two main parts. In the first part, the findings are presented according to middle leaders' perspectives including a deputy principal, three team leaders, and two Across-School CoL leaders. In the second part, the data is analysed with regard to three ESOL teachers with leadership roles.

The data shared from the ESOL teachers provides information about the practices and strategies they used to support ESOL students who are learning English. Barriers and challenges are included in the reported experiences of both middle leaders and ESOL lead teachers. To protect the identity of participants, Māori numbers (Tahi, Rua, Toru, Whā, Rima) have been used as pseudonyms for the five schools selected for the study and participants' names are also replaced with pseudonyms to protect their identity and privacy.

### **Research participants' backgrounds**

This section describes each participant's role and years of experiences in relation to supporting ESOL students to learn English. This detail is included to reflect how each participant in their role adds a different insight to the study. The participants' descriptions are detailed below in relation to their schools which are represented in te reo Māori numbers (Tahi, Rua, Toru, Whā, Rima).

Fe and Jenny hold dual roles, as teachers and leaders, at Tahī School. Fe has been a middle leader for six years, including the last two years as an Across School Leader (ASL) in her school's Community of Learning (CoL). Fe is leading an initiative across central Auckland schools to identify the best strategies to help ESOL students to learn English more quickly. Jenny has been a teacher of ESOL students for the last six years, including the last two years as a team leader. Her role is to work alongside teachers and leaders to find the most effective practices for improving ESOL students' literacy.

Sophia, Sarah, and Lily work at Rua School. Sophia has been a team leader for the last five years, Sarah has been a team leader and a specialist coordinator for the senior school for the last two years, and Lily has been an ESOL specialist teacher holding a leadership role for one year at Rua school, and two years abroad.

Lee has been an ESOL teacher and a school team leader for many years. She then began her role as Deputy Principal and ESOL coordinator at Toru School. This was only a year before her participation in this study. She brings her experience to the role.

Kim and Molly are both middle leaders at Whā School, with fifteen years' experience and two years' experience respectively. Molly also has fifteen years' experience as an ESOL teacher in other schools.

Cindy has been an ESOL teacher for eight years. She is also the coordinator who leads the ESOL programme at Rima School. Cindy was promoted to this leadership role because of her knowledge and her practice in regard to teaching ESOL students.

### **Interview data analysis**

As noted in Chapter Three, semi-structured interviews were the sole method used to collect the research data, chosen because of its effectiveness in acquiring thorough information from participants. Eight questions were asked of the six middle leaders, while ESOL teachers with leadership roles answered two additional questions. The aim of including the extra two questions

for ESOL teachers with leadership roles was to gather data specific to those roles. Both sets of questions are provided in (see Appendix A).

The main aim of data analysis is to reduce the amount of information into more manageable chunks using codes, categories, and themes (Privitera & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2019). Once data had been collected from participants, each interview record was transcribed manually into a Word document and sent back to the participant for review. Only two transcripts were returned with minor changes which reworded a small number of statements to make them more relevant to the question.

The thematic analysis process is based on identifying and describing both implicit and explicit ideas within the data (Guest et al., 2012). To start with, the hard copies of the transcripts were read and reread repeatedly in order to understand the data in depth. While reading, a highlighter was used to identify the important and relevant information needed to answer the research questions. Notes of any interesting, surprising, or contrasting ideas among participants were annotated in the margin of the transcript. These notes assisted in the establishment of a holistic picture of the data and allowed the identification of the initial grouping of the data.

According to Privitera and Ahlgrim-Delzell (2019), the main purpose of compiling the data is to identify the codes and to create meaningful categories that help to identify the themes for the research inquiries. In order to do so, the initial codes were extracted from the research questions wording and used to create emergent categories based on participants' perceptions within each question. All the initial codes and emergent categories were transferred to a Word document in which a specific text colour was assigned to each transcripts' codes. Next, the categories were arranged individually in alphabetical order to identify any duplicates. Once duplicates were removed, categories were read and reread consistently to relocate the categories that relate to each other. This process facilitated the creation of new categories. The total number of the new categories was sixteen. Once the new categories were printed and cut up, they were manually grouped together, and put into potential themes in a way that fit with the research questions. The

aim of this was to reflect the participants' perceptions precisely. Quotes from participants are also included in the following section to accurately reflect the perspectives of the participants.

## **Research findings**

This section documents participants' perspectives regarding their practices to support ESOL students, new to New Zealand, in their efforts to learn English. Findings are distributed under a number of headings in order to reflect the main ideas of each section.

1. Effective middle leadership in ESOL contexts include collaboration and communication with team members;
2. Effective middle leadership practices support ESOL students through reshaping school programmes and providing effective resources;
3. Effective middle leadership appears to participate in classroom teachers' development through modelling and classroom observation;
4. Effective middle leadership appear to foster strong relationships between ESOL families and the school;
5. Effective middle leaders appear to overcome ESOL students' barriers through providing them with an inclusive classroom environment and effective teachers;
6. ESOL specialist leaders appear to have a significant impact on ESOL students' ability to learn English; and
7. Effective middle leaders appear to face difficulties supporting ESOL students' learning.

First and most importantly, it is important to highlight that all participants, regardless of their position, acknowledged the difficult role held by middle leaders in primary schools. Lee described how middle leaders are a "bridge between the principal and the Board of Trustees, to the teacher and the students" (Lee, Turo, ML). The coming sections expand upon the seven research findings that are listed above.

### **Finding one: Effective middle leadership in ESOL contexts includes collaboration and communication with team members**

Three main categories emerged from participants' views of effective middle leadership in relation to teaching and learning with ESOL students. These were as follows:

1. Leadership should be adaptable, responsive, and relevant;
2. Leadership should foster staff collaboration and communication; and
3. Leaders and teachers should share decision-making.

All participants expressed the opinion that, with the increasing number of ESOL students in primary schools, there was an urgency for leaders to change their leadership practice in order to be able to enhance school performance and be able to effectively address ESOL students' needs in regard to learning English. From the participants' perspectives, effective leaders are leaders who are responsive, adaptable to different situations and flexible when it comes to different needs, whether experienced by teachers or students. This is maintained when leaders lead in a collaborative way such that teachers and leaders work alongside each other, share together their vision, and exchange with each other their experiences so as to benefit from each other to meet the needs of their students. For example, a teacher who has a student with limited English who is not showing any signs of progress can freely seek support from middle leaders. According to participants, when middle leaders perform their role in an effective way, show their enthusiasm towards the school goals, and think critically about students' challenges, they are influencing the teachers around them to work in a similar manner. This was seen in Rua School when middle leaders acted decisively to change teaching practices in response to ESOL students' low achievement. After noticing a gap in ESOL students' results, particularly in Maths and Reading, the school investigated the source of that gap. This resulted in middle leaders changing their leadership plans and a new pedagogy was adopted based on a comprehension approach that assisted ESOL students to achieve balance in performance in different subjects.

An additional finding was identified when participants were asked how leadership helped teachers meet ESOL students' needs. Middle leaders commonly mentioned that good communication between staff and the ability to work alongside each other were essential. Middle leaders

expressed the view that if there is no ‘zone of comfort’ where everyone is allowed to talk freely, there would be no authentic interaction between teachers and leaders. Poor communication is likely to have a negative impact on teachers’ methods of teaching and the way of supporting ESOL students, which in turn may adversely affect ESOL students’ motivation and their ability to learn English effectively. In other words, if classroom teachers have no opportunities to talk, express their opinions, and share the challenges they face in teaching ESOL students, development in both teachers’ teaching skills and students’ outcomes will be limited. This is emphasised by Fe who expressed her perspective on the benefit of effective communication:

*“I think communication is the key. For example, in staff meetings, if we don’t have effective communication and if we don’t have the chance to speak and have the relationship, then this interaction would not be successful”* (Fe, Tahi, ML).

This view was supported by Sarah at Rua School who said that such open conversations assisted both leaders and teachers to think critically about different ideas and decide together which strategies might assist ESOL students to achieve their goals. She expressed her opinion about the benefits of collaborative leadership by stating: *“The more minds, the better ideas, the better solutions that would come up with this”* (Sarah, Rua, ML). Lee also emphasised this view of the impact of communication on the quality of school performance. She said:

*“By communication, we could provide knowledge to our colleagues, implement little things, and model what we believe in because we know that modeling is the most effective way to get people on board”* (Lee, Turo, ML).

### **Finding two: Effective middle leadership practices appear to support ESOL students through reshaping school programmes and providing effective resources**

The findings in this section indicates two important insights concerning participants’ practices in support of ESOL students’ learning:

1. Middle leaders reshape school programmes to increase the quality of teaching and learning;  
and
2. Middle leadership develop programme resources to help ESOL students acquire the language.

Exploring this question was quite revealing in terms of how middle leaders managed the language barriers present with ESOL students trying to learn the same curriculum as their peers. Based on this, middle leaders at Tahi, Rua, Toru, and Whā schools ensured that they reshaped the school programme and built it in a way that achieved inclusion for diverse learners. According to participants' perspectives in regard to their ESOL students, planning a programme that aligns with the New Zealand Curriculum (The New Zealand Curriculum, 2022), while also valuing ESOL students' culture, helped their ESOL students effectively. They expressed the view that when ESOL students are connected to their culture, they feel more valued and their commitment to learn English increases. Also, it was mentioned by participants that it is not about the curriculum, it is about how the curriculum content is applied. For example, Sarah, Sophia, and Lily from Rua School described how they managed changes in classroom practices because all of their students are ESOL students. They explained that their learning and teaching pedagogy is based on using explicit English to increase the comprehension skills of students in order to help them achieve high outcomes in learning English. The teachers in their school were asked to increase the discussion time with their students to expand ESOL students' vocabulary and increase their concentration while reading or listening to English texts. This strategy, in the leaders' opinion, assisted ESOL students to develop their comprehension and critical thinking skills, thereby resulting in a better outcome in their language skills. Sophia and Sarah talked about the benefit of the comprehension approach by stating:

*“We realised that what we have been doing for the last ten years is not working for our ESOL students especially with those who have very limited English. The students are not reading enough to understand what the question is asking them to do. And with the comprehension, students could achieve their goals”* (Sophia, Rua, ML).

In Tahi and Whā schools, the Across-School Leader from each school ran different initiatives to improve their learning and teaching programme resources for their students. They met together regularly to manage these initiatives based on their contexts' needs. In 2020, the initiatives of both schools were mainly based on supporting ESOL students through unpacking the *English Language Learning Progressions Pathways* Year 1-8 (ELLPs) (Van Hees, 2022). The schools have gone down the route of adapting the ELLPs statements into more child-friendly speak, with

the view of also aligning them with their school programmes. This strategy helped to develop ESOL students' language and assisted them to achieve high outcomes. According to both participants, their CoL meetings assisted them in developing their own resources and in incorporating different strategies that supported ESOL students to decrease their difficulties while learning English. The researcher noted that having an Across CoL leader was advantageous for a school as it kept school connected to new developments in ESOL teaching and learning and created an awareness about how other schools were supporting their ESOL students.

When considering the resourcing of the five schools, having an ESOL specialist teacher as part of the middle leadership team appeared to play an important role in supporting ESOL students' learning. This is because ESOL specialist teachers have an in-depth knowledge of ESOL teaching and learning strategies. Reflecting on the role of the ESOL specialist teachers in Tahī, Rua, Whā and Rima schools, these teachers were responsible for working collaboratively with classroom teachers to create an individual plan for each ESOL student. These plans are designed to develop ESOL students' language skills by teaching them the main vocabulary of the programme content through games and different contexts such as cooking activities. This was seen specifically in Tahī and Whā schools, where ESOL students improved their speaking skills and vocabulary when learning took place during authentic experiences. Molly from Whā School believes that school programmes should incorporate some practical methods because they have found them to be the most effective method in developing their ESOL students' language skills.

In contrast to this perspective, however, Lee, a deputy principal at Toru School, does not believe that a specific ESOL plan and practical learning methods are necessary for effective learning within her school. ESOL students follow the mainstream programme; ESOL specific learning is limited to special readers; and there are no ESOL specialist teachers. This is despite 52% of enrolled students are ESOL. Lee believes that their school programme design meets all their students' needs, and she expressed the value and need for their classroom teachers to build their awareness of language acquisition and have additional training in ESOL teaching and learning.

When comparing Lee's perspectives of the participants at the other four schools, it is questionable how effective the programme at Toru School is without the support of a specialist ESOL teacher. The majority of participants asserted that ESOL students have different abilities and different needs that are likely hinder their ability to cope with the mainstream school programme. They believe that students who are being taught by someone who has deep-knowledge in ESOL, both in relation to theoretical understanding and practical knowledge is key for the acceleration of students' progress, particularly during the early stages.

It should be noted that these responses suggested it was not just about the teaching of English, but it was also about how these students are integrated into the new environment effectively. Molly from Whā School talked about the positive outcomes of ESOL classes, stating:

*“ESOL classes enabled ESOL students to participate fully in class learning, to play in the playground, to join sports, and to go to a special event confidently”* (Molly, Whā, TL).

Additionally, middle leaders designated specific resources for ESOL students, who are either new to New Zealand or for students who had limited English, to support them within their classrooms. These resources included bilingual cards and picture dictionaries so both teachers and ESOL students can use them to communicate with each other.

The last finding in relation to school resourcing has to do with the way technology is integrated into school programmes. Classroom teachers of the five schools were encouraged to share interesting learning videos to develop their ESOL students' understanding of programme content. In addition, ESOL students were encouraged to use digital platforms with the support of an ESOL specialist, or during their free time. These platforms, based on participants' feedback, improved their ESOL students' literacy knowledge, their cognitive efficiency, and their processing skills. The applications include: StepsWeb (The Learning Staircase Ltd., 2022), Sunshine Online (Pye, 2021), Unite for Literacy (Unite for literacy, 2014), Study-ladder (Studyladder, 2022), Epic (Epic, 2022), Learning Village (Across Cultures Limited, 2021), Language Nut (Languagenut Ltd., 2018), and Education.com (Schwartz, 2016). Kim from Whā School reported that students who

spent at least ninety minutes fortnightly on these applications showed an obvious improvement in their literacy.

**Finding three: Effective middle leadership appears to participate in classroom teachers' development through modelling and classroom observation**

This section required respondents to share their perspectives about what skills middle leaders need to provide their teachers to better impact ESOL students' English language learning. Exploration of the data resulted in two main findings:

1. Middle leaders increase teachers' awareness of language acquisition; and
2. Middle leaders develop teachers' skills to help ESOL students to learn English.

Teachers' awareness of the language acquisition process was acknowledged by the majority of participants, especially those at Whā and Toru Schools, as essential. The middle leaders from both these schools noticed that classroom teachers were influenced by certain stereotypes concerning ESOL students' abilities. Kim from Whā School and Lee from Toru School said that classroom teachers assumed that when ESOL students were able to speak English, they were also able to write with correct grammar. In their opinion, the best way to increase teachers' awareness of language acquisition is to provide classroom teachers with workshops that can enhance their understanding of this process. However, despite participants' responses, middle leaders were not providing classroom teachers with either ESOL courses or ESOL training. According to participants' responses of the five schools, classroom teachers were mainly supported with general training through modelled lessons. This strategy showed classroom teachers new strategies to improve the general teaching and learning processes within their classroom. Other workshops were designed for teachers who were new to the teaching profession, and who were learning how to use ESOL resources correctly such as a book guide called *Supporting English Language Learners in Primary School* (SELLIPs) (Ministry of Education, 2018). These workshops were considered to be insufficient in terms of extending teachers' language awareness and improving their teaching strategies with ESOL students.

Despite the lack of workshops in relation to ESOL teaching, classroom teachers' skills appear to be enhanced by the middle leaders of the five schools. Middle leaders in Tahī, Rua, Toru, and Whā Schools believed that modelling was the most effective way to increase not only the quality of teaching and learning methods, but also to develop their classroom teachers' capabilities. It helped to increase teachers' self-confidence which supported them become more adaptive, responsive, responsible, and flexible with their ESOL students' needs. Sarah from Rua School reflected on the benefit of modelling, commenting:

*“Our aim was to train teachers on how to work with students who have limited English, and through modelling new teaching methods to use inside their classrooms, teachers were able to approach ESOL students and to increase their language skills”* (Sarah, Rua, ML).

A further finding that improved teachers' capabilities was conducting observations. Middle leaders of Tahī, Rua, Toru, and Whā Schools asserted that observations allowed them to identify areas that their classroom teachers needed to improve to impact on their students effectively. According to their perceptions, observing teachers in their classroom and providing them with feedback empowered their teachers and improved their practices with ESOL students. Feedback was particularly helpful when it included suggestions and strategies on how teachers could improve their practice. Sophia from Rua School who talked about the benefit of observing teachers' lessons, noting: *“Observation helps teachers to open their eyes to their kids' needs”* (Sophia, Rua, ML).

#### **Finding four: Effective middle leadership appear to foster strong relationships between ESOL students' whānau and the school**

This section focused on investigating the ways middle leaders engage ESOL students' families to support their children to learn English. One category emerged strongly from the participants' responses, namely:

Middle leaders promote school partnership with ESOL students' parents.

Building a partnership with families was emphasised by most middle leaders to engage parents to support their children to learn English. From their perspective, parents played an important role

in their ESOL children' learning because they have the power to influence their children to achieve their goals effectively. There were common actions taken by participants to improve the partnership with ESOL students' families. The first was conducting a special meeting with parents prior to the students' first day at school. During this meeting, leaders introduced parents to most aspects of learning in the school, including showing them the resources they use with the students to teach them English. In this way, parents developed an understanding regarding what their children will learn and how they can support them at home. Following on from this, the majority of participating schools have a system where, twice a term, the leaders, teachers, and current students welcome new families to the school community. On this day, the new parents meet and interact with each other, building new relationships which assist them to feel more connected to the school and more engaged in their children's learning journey.

Another way of connecting families with each other was through the use of digital applications that brought families with the same language and culture together. Examples of the apps used by participated schools include WeChat and WhatsApp. These kinds of applications were evident particularly in Tahi School where middle leaders actively supported new families to integrate into their new environment and community. Fe and Jenny from Tahi School ensured that these platforms had a positive outcome and ensured ESOL families were aware of school plans that assisted them to manage their children' learning.

A further finding concerning building partnerships with parents is having a consistent way to communicate with ESOL students' parents. Most research participants said that their teachers were always encouraged to communicate with ESOL students' parents because they are in direct contact with students, whose needs they know. Sophia from Rua School described how teachers were encouraged to call parents to tell them of their children's significant achievements. Also, research participants reported that they helped teachers to keep this connection active by organising conferences, sending follow up emails, talking by phone, or meeting with them face-to-face especially with families who have limited English. Kim shared how parent conferences helped teachers and middle leaders communicate the students' needs and goals with the families. She said:

*“In conferences, we set goals with the kids and the parents. We tell the issues about the children, and we show how can we fix these issues” (Kim, Whā, ML).*

Another way that middle leaders empowered the partnership with ESOL’s families was through inviting them to attend the school assemblies which were designed in a way that embraced ESOL students’ identify and ethnicity. Research participants expressed how effective this was seen to be, reflecting on how their ESOL students became proud of themselves, and proud of their identity, language, and ethnicity. As expressed by Fe from Tahi School

*“In the cultural assemblies, kids started to feel more valued and more connected to their identity and culture within a school” (Fe, Tahi, ML).*

Moreover, middle leaders discussed how they collaborate with ESOL parents to celebrate their differences by having food fairs, creating big posters about their home country, and hosting question and answer sessions about their culture. Participants emphasised these kinds of events could increase the rapport between teachers and families which in turn could positively impact students’ progress. Also, having these kinds of events could promote students’ understanding of their identity and keep them more connected to their culture. This was reinforced by one of the interviewees’ comments:

*“Every year we run a cultural concert, children from all the school share their traditional dance and their traditional customs. Those children ask their families support to provide them with some stuff and help with performance (cultural concert, dances for assemblies). This has always been, in my opinion, a great link of communication between our families and school.” (Fe, Tahi, ML).*

**Finding five: Effective middle leaders appear to empower ESOL students by providing an inclusive classroom environment**

In this section, respondents were asked to discuss the most important elements that ESOL students needed to learn English in a school context. Two main elements emerged from participants’ answers:

- 1- Middle leaders create an inclusive classroom environment; and
- 2- Middle leaders ensure teachers know the ESOL learner.

According to participants, middle leaders are required to ensure that school classrooms are designed in an inclusive way for ESOL students. Participants over the five schools designed the classroom to incorporate school values aimed at achieving inclusion and equity. Middle leaders ensured that the classrooms had ‘word walls’ that displayed common vocabulary words in both English and the home language of ESOL students. Where possible new ESOL students were connected with a buddy who speaks the same language, assisting them to adapt to their new environment. From their perspective, this practice promoted rapid progress in ESOL students’ development. As mentioned by Fe in Tahi School *“A buddy system could help socially and academically our ESOL students with the new transition to school”*.

Also, middle leaders provided their ESOL students who have very limited English with a teacher aide to help and assist them with their inclusion in school activities. Leaders also encouraged teachers to learn some basic vocabulary of other languages as a way to value ESOL students’ identity. Lastly, middle leaders ensured that the curriculum was designed in a way that integrated students’ cultures into programme topics. All these practices, based on participants’ opinions, foster a safe and empathetic environment for ESOL students, which helped them to adapt and to learn the language more successfully. Cindy shared her perspectives on the impact of an inclusive environment, stating:

*“It does not matter where children come from, what language they speak. What is matter is the attitude and the people around them. They adapt very quickly with having a supportive environment.” (Cindy, Rima, TL).*

The second element arising out of the data is that middle leaders ensured that classroom teachers have prior knowledge about their ESOL learners. Middle leaders from the majority of schools created an individual portfolio for each ESOL student. This portfolio contained information about their prior life, socio-cultural situation, their prior knowledge, their first language. Middle leaders claimed that this measure assisted classroom teachers to be culturally and emotionally sensitive to the needs and past experiences of these students.

### **Finding six: ESOL specialist teachers appear to have an impact on ESOL students' ability to learn English**

This section reports the findings of ESOL specialist teachers with leadership roles who were asked whether their ESOL qualification improved their capacity to teach ESOL students effectively.

Two main findings were identified from the responses of two participants:

- 1- ESOL teachers believe that the TESSOL qualification that stands for 'Teaching English in Schools to Speakers of Other Languages' is important to address ESOL students' needs; and
- 2- ESOL teachers' pedagogy develops ESOL students' language skills.

In this study, there were only three participants who were both ESOL leaders and teachers, one from Rua School, one from Whā School, and the other from Rima School. These leaders confirmed that their TESSOL qualification increased their language awareness and ability to understand the process of acquiring a second language. Also, the qualification helped them to develop their critical thinking skills and gave them exposure to creative ideas and strategies to help ESOL students achieve their goals. Lily said:

*"TESSOL enabled me to develop the learner's fluency and critical thinking skills. And improved my strategies that allowed them to informally express themselves confidently."* (Lily, Rua, TL).

The second aspect of this finding concerns ESOL teachers' pedagogy in relation to ESOL students. The first insight shared by the three participants was the need to remain patient and understanding regarding ESOL students' differences and challenges. It is a fact that ESOL students require time, support, and lots of repetition to learn English. Secondly, ESOL teachers shared their strategies for scaffolding the four strands of the language to ESOL students: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Based on ESOL specialists' perceptions, listening happens first. If students can understand what people are saying (the input), their consequent output (speaking) will be greater. These two strands, based on their experience, are approximately two years behind

the other two skills of reading and writing. Listening and speaking are improved within the class environment, as many activities and opportunities are provided which suit all students' needs. The role of ESOL specialists is to improve the other two skills (writing and reading) to assist ESOL students to reach the same level as their peers in the classroom. In accordance with this, ESOL specialists developed a schedule to run their ESOL lessons. These lessons focused on teaching formal English with attention to the school programme content. Within these lessons, ESOL teachers used explicit English during different learning activities, such as cooking a Matariki vegetable soup. This enhances the four strands, starting with listening and speaking skills and ending with the remaining two skills, reading and writing. Molly described the advantage of learning through experiences. She said:

*“By doing the Matariki activities, they were building on their retelling skills, improving their understanding, expanding their vocabulary, sequencing and being able to match visual prompts to new vocab.”* (Molly, Whā, TL).

#### **Finding seven: Effective middle leaders had difficulties during their work with ESOL students**

This section focused on investigating middle leadership's own difficulties while supporting ESOL students to learn English effectively. Responses explaining how middle leaders managed the difficulties are included. Three main findings are discussed:

1. Middle leaders require specialist knowledge in language acquisition;
2. Middle leaders have ESOL students who are not progressing; and
3. Middle leaders experience difficulties with time factor.

What became prevalent through the interviews was that middle leaders require specialist knowledge in language acquisition processes. This is noted from participants' responses when they say they depend on their years of experience rather than their knowledge in language acquisition knowledge. This was evident as the practices and contributions to develop the classroom teachers' skills and increase their language awareness were insufficient. There was no reference to any training provided to their teachers regarding teaching a second language to ESOL students. This might lead the teachers to feel isolated and make the process of teaching ESOL

students a challenge for them. Based on Lee's and Molly's perceptions, middle leaders must have this knowledge to be more purposeful in terms of not only supporting ESOL students to learn English more effectively, but also support their classroom teachers in their teaching strategies. This also suggests that middle leaders must have a good understanding of ESOL teaching and learning strategies to be able to effectively lead programmes for ESOL students, and to model effective new strategies that support teachers in their work with ESOL students. According to Lee from Toru School,

*"It is necessary for middle leaders to be knowledgeable about the language acquisition process in order to be able to impact successfully on teachers, and to show them the strategies in a clear effective way". (Lee, Toru, ML).*

In Tahi, Rua, Whā, and Rima schools, middle leaders shared their experience of the challenges faced when ESOL students were unable to cope with the new programme and unable to achieve high outcomes. Most middle leaders reacted similarly regarding this challenge. The process for supporting ESOL students progressed as follows: middle leaders communicate with their teachers; ESOL teachers and classroom teachers collaborate together to create a specific plan for the ESOL students; middle leaders visit the classrooms to observe ESOL students' performance to identify what resources can support struggling students; and, lastly, the students receive small group lessons with support staff to engage them through specific strategies. If none of these practices enhanced ESOL students' academic progress, middle leaders communicated with the student's family to figure out if the student had specific issues that the school needed to be aware of. Overall, all participants stated that they follow specific steps to solve such problem, starting with communicating with the classroom teacher to establish how the student is doing in the classroom. If the teacher has done everything, they can do to help the child, they communicate with the ESOL specialist teacher to find out what more can be done to support the child.

Creating space for middle leaders to achieve their goals with respect to ESOL students' needs was another challenge middle leaders mentioned in the interview. Most respondents explained that school programmes consisted of many different activities that kept their ESOL students busy most of their time. This was emphasised especially by ESOL specialist teachers from Whā and

Rima Schools and team leaders from Rua School who created specific plans to follow which were, unfortunately, easily interrupted because of the varied school programme. Most common actions taken by middle leaders were based around meeting with teachers to arrange another time to follow up with ESOL students, asking parents to drop off their children earlier, or asking high achieving students to help ESOL students complete what they had been asked to do.

At the end of each interview, all participants emphasised the importance of reevaluating their practices to check if they had succeeded in improving ESOL students' performance and assisted them to learn English. They said that ESOL students' needs are constantly changing, so it was important for school leaders and teachers to consistently update their skills to positively impact ESOL students' progress. According to Sarah in Rua school *"If you empower your teachers, if you prepare your resources, if you prepare your programmes, your students will move forward straightaway"* (Sarah, Rua, ML).

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has brought together the findings from the nine research interviews. The results are organised into seven main findings. All sections demonstrated research participants' practices in support of ESOL students who are learning English. The most common practices that participants perceived as making a difference to students' performance are as follows: maintaining strong communication between school communities, empowering teachers, building an inclusive environment, valuing ESOL students' culture and keeping connected with ESOL students' families. The next chapter discusses the themes that emerged from the current research. Three themes were extracted from the research data: middle leaders promote an inclusive school environment, the interdependence of middle leadership and ESOL teachers' practices, and, lastly, the provision of the staff development by middle leaders.

## Chapter Five: Discussion

### Introduction

This chapter discusses the research findings in the context of the literature reviewed in Chapter Two. The discussion is framed by the research aim which was to critically investigate the impact of middle leadership practices on the teaching and learning of English by ESOL students.

The research questions for this study were:

1. How do middle leaders support ESOL students new to New Zealand to learn English?
2. How do middle leaders build classroom teachers' capacity and capability to support ESOL students who are new to New Zealand to learn English?
3. How do middle leaders collaborate with the families' whānau of these ESOL students to support their English language learning?

Three main themes arose from the data analysis: middle leaders promote an inclusive school environment, the interdependence of middle leadership and ESOL teachers' practices, and the provision of staff development by middle leaders. These themes represent the study's findings with respect to how middle leaders perform their leadership roles within the ESOL context, and the extent to which their practices impact on a school's performance when it comes to improving ESOL students' language skills.

To answer the research questions, this chapter begins with a discussion of links constructed between the major themes from the research data reported in Chapter Four and the themes discussed in the literature review in Chapter Two (Table 5.1). Then, a reflection of the importance of middle leadership in ESOL contexts is included based on the table review (5.1). Thirdly, a detailed discussion of the research themes is framed by a conceptual model adapted from the *Wellbeing* website (Wellbeing@School. 2018). This website is aimed at assisting school leaders and educators to ensure that their practices address all of their students' needs physically and emotionally. In addition, the recommended practices of the Wellbeing model reflect the practices that, to a certain point, middle leaders have been undertaking to support ESOL students in their transition to adapt with the new culture, new environment, and new language. However, there

remain some points that middle leaders still need to consider while practicing their leadership roles in ESOL contexts. These points are discussed in detail through the themes of this chapter.

## Links with the literature

The literature has highlighted a surprising lack of published studies that investigate the impact of middle leaders' practices in ESOL contexts. The study undertaken by McGee et al., (2015) is a notable exception. Links from the available literature are matched with this study's findings to demonstrate how the major themes developed, as outlined in Table (5.1). The first column outlines the major themes that emerged from the literature and the findings that will shape the discussion. The two middle columns outline, explain, and compare these themes. The final column is an analysis of the themes, and brings together the findings of the literature and data to clarify their implications for the answers to the key questions posed in this study.

Table 5.1 *Links with the literature*

| Major themes of discussion chapter                                             | Literature sub-themes                                                                                                                                                                                                      | Key themes from the data                                                                                                                  | Implications                                                                                                        |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>* Middle leaders promote an inclusive school environment</b>                | *Authentic contexts (McGee et al., 2015; Yuan, 2018).<br>*Involving parents about the school programme (Baecher et al., 2016; Bull, 2014; Vera et al., 2016).                                                              | *Promoting and valuing student's cultures and identities.<br>*Building effective partnerships between teachers and ESOL families.         | * Developing the cultural awareness is vital.<br>* Parents involvement in programme construction is prioritised.    |
| <b>* The interdependence of middle leadership and ESOL teachers' practices</b> | *Distributed/collaborative leadership (Youngs, 2014)<br>*Innovation (Baecher et al., 2016; Day et al., 2016; McGee et al., 2015; Youngs, 2017)<br>*Adaptation, flexibility, and collaboration (Harris, 2019; Youngs, 2014) | *Step-back to enhance leadership capability in others.<br>* Enhancing leadership capability (involving ESOL teachers in leadership roles) | *Involving ESOL specialist teachers with formal roles is vital.<br>* ESOL knowledge by middle leaders is paramount. |
| <b>*The provision of the staff development by middle leaders</b>               | * Empowerment through observation and evaluation feedback (Baecher et al., 2016; Elfers & Stritikus, 2014; McGee et al., 2015).                                                                                            | *General feedback provided.<br>*Step-up leading (Enhancing capability)                                                                    | *Targeted feedback at ESOL practices is essential.                                                                  |

Overall, this table indicates that middle leadership in an ESOL context appears to have a different impact than that reported in the literature concerned with middle leadership in general contexts.

This is because most literature depicts middle leaders as being the main key to impacting students' learning only in a general learning context (Ascenzi-Moreno et al., 2016; Baecher et al., 2013; Mc Gee et al., 2015). By contrast, the current study revealed that middle leaders were not the only key to increasing ESOL students' ability to learn English. Instead, this study demonstrated that middle leaders shared responsibility for supporting ESOL students' learning with others who have specific knowledge based around ESOL strategies.

In regard to the first theme 'middle leaders promote an inclusive school environment', the study highlighted two sub-themes identified in the literature 'creating authentic contexts to increase students' achievements' and 'informing parents about the school plans and practices'. These align with some of the key themes arising from the data which are: 'promoting and valuing student's cultures and identities' and 'building effective partnerships between teachers and ESOL families to develop ESOL students' outcomes'. However, a New Zealand study by Bull (2014) suggests that in order to have an effective outcome for ESOL students, school leaders should also involve parents in creating the school programme. Based on Bull's (2014) finding, parents are able to add an effective input into the school programme in terms of their language structure and an understanding of how much it prevents their children from learning English.

The second theme 'the interdependence of middle leadership and ESOL teachers' practices' highlighted three sub-themes from literature 'distributed leadership', 'innovation, and adaptation, flexibility', and 'collaboration'. When considering these, there is a link with the theme that comes from the data, specifically 'step-back to enhance leadership capability in others'. This theme reflected some forms of distributed leadership as discussed in this chapter. This illustrates how middle leaders can step back from leadership in favour of ESOL teachers. ESOL teachers who acted as 'informal leaders' in my study appeared to play an important role in developing leadership practices in regard to increasing the quality of the school programmes. This is because they have the potential to share their knowledge and expertise in a manner that resulted to have extra-programmatic activities designed to raise the achievements of ESOL students. This aligns with Baecher et al. (2013) and McGee et al.'s (2015) findings, both of whom described ESOL

teachers as the ‘holder of knowledge’ in which their valuable knowledge helps ESOL students to achieve their goals more effectively.

The last theme ‘the provision of the staff development by middle leaders’, confirmed that middle leaders demonstrated another form of leadership that increased the quality of classroom teachers. This is based on the concept of ‘step-in’ and relates to the sub-theme that emerged from Chapter Two: ‘empowerment of classroom teachers through collaboration, coaching, observation, and providing evaluation feedback’. This theme showed that middle leaders had a significant impact on classroom teachers’ work. However, middle leaders’ impact could be greater if their performance was targeted at ESOL students’ learning in particular.

Despite the variety of arguments, this research showed that middle leaders play an important role in shaping the school practices in ways that support every learner, even when not specifically targeted at their ESOL students’ needs. They undertook a variety of roles that assisted in developing their school context. They interpreted their principal’ goals, translated the curriculum approaches for teachers to develop their professional knowledge, and created effective teams to run different initiatives that helped ESOL students to raise their academic achievements. Such contributions included the extent to which middle leaders were goal-focused, collaborative, decisive, and adaptive at communicating their goals to school staff. Evidence of these attitudes and actions on the part of middle leaders, necessary in support of ESOL teaching, was presented in the following section that reflected the importance of middle leadership in the ESOL context.

### **The importance of middle leadership in the ESOL context**

A starting point for a consideration of the importance of middle leadership in an ESOL context is a definition of their roles and responsibilities in the school context. In a literature survey, there were a very limited number of studies that examined middle leadership in an ESOL context. Most literature described middle leaders only as leaders in a general context. They are described as either managers running the school system (De Nobile, 2018; Cardno et al., 2018), leaders who are always in the frontline of leading teaching and improving students’ outcomes (Day et al., 2016; Harris et al., 2019), or as teachers who develop classroom teachers’ practices. A literature

search identified no specific studies that explained how middle leaders managed these roles in order to impact on students' outcomes specifically within ESOL contexts.

Most studies showed that middle leaders were instructional leaders in their practices, similar to school principals, in terms of improving the work of their school and enhancing the ability of the staff to have a positive effect on students' results (Cardno et al., 2018; Irvine & Brundrett, 2019). This research revealed that, in addition, middle leaders appeared to be instructional leaders following the dimension of distributed leadership. Their practices reflected both theoretical perspectives: instructional and distributed leadership, in order to cope with the increasing number of ESOL students.

In the literature, integrating instructional and distributed styles is considered to be an effective practice to allow school leaders to achieve success with respect to student achievement. Adapting both styles allowed middle leaders to develop effective relationships and to promote collegial work with people who had the most knowledge, namely 'specialist ESOL teachers'. This seemed to be a positive influence on classroom teachers' practices and on ESOL students' outcomes. Youngs (2014) goes so far as to say that when distributed leadership practices coexist in a form of shared-instructional leadership, the influence on classroom teachers' practices and students' outcomes is considerable.

Of significance to the importance of middle leadership in the ESOL context, middle leaders appeared to cultivate a collaborative learning environment through ensuring that both leaders and teachers work alongside each other to create an appropriate cultural context for ESOL students. This indicates that middle leadership is based on experiencing both top-down and bottom-up leadership. In other words, middle leaders encourage staff members at all levels to step-in and work alongside each other in an aligned way, working together towards improving the school practices with respect to ESOL students. In addition, the autonomy and transparency in communicating the school plans which middle leaders brought to the workplace, positively influenced classroom teachers' practices. These values assisted classroom teachers to share their own challenges with ESOL students, and to develop innovation within the school context.

These kinds of acknowledgements about middle leaders show them to be very influential and important as far as a school's 'core business' is concerned. Grootenboer et al., (2019) describes middle leaders as the "key school-based leaders to drive educational change" (p.253). De Nobile (2018; 2019) has a similar view on the importance of middle level leadership, describing this level as the "main engine driving school effectiveness". Such descriptions recognise and position middle leaders as a 'key' force in achieving change in a school. This strongly accords with the principles expressed by the Ministry of Education (2022) which concludes that middle leaders are the main source of change and influence towards increasing desired school outcomes.

### **A model of middle leadership impact on ESOL students in primary schools**

The number of ESOL students in New Zealand schools has continued to increase, as was reflected within the participating schools. Such growth has led school leaders to focus on identifying the important initial needs ESOL students have that must be met in order for them to cope within their new context. Based on the current study's findings, the model presented on the Wellbeing website "Inclusive Practices Toolkits" (Wellbeing@School, 2018) fits perfectly with the themes identified. One reason why this model fits with this study is that the model was structured around two main themes 'the inclusion theme' and 'the school system theme'. The inclusion theme is based on investigating those inclusive educational practices which comprise the most effective ways to motivate, include, and increase student achievement within the new environment. The school system theme is based on the commitments of school leaders to promote these desirable practices in support of students achieving their learning goals.

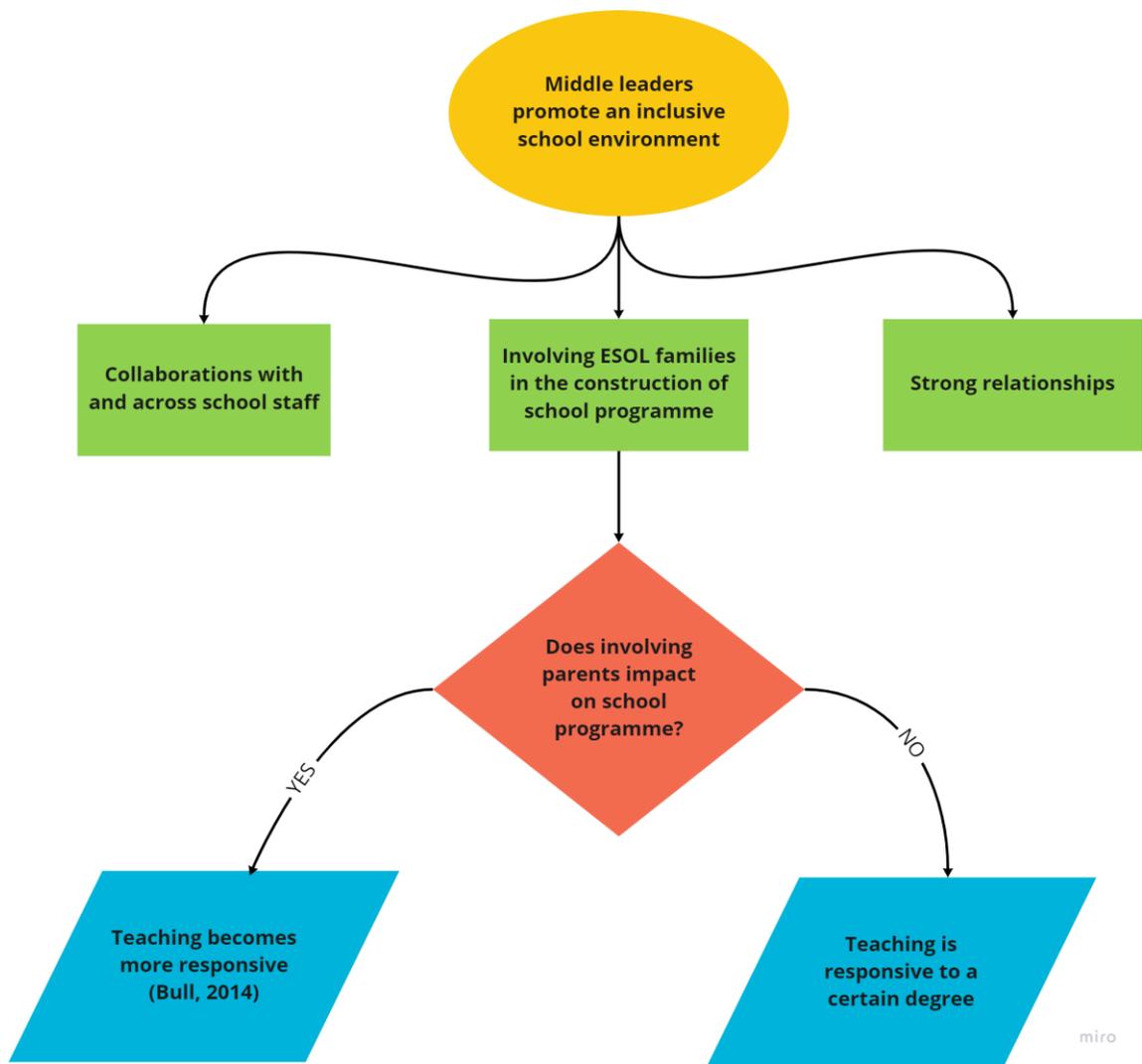
These themes, outlined within the Inclusive Practices Toolkit (Wellbeing@School, 2018), were quite similar to how middle leaders participating in this study shaped their school context and performed their roles to achieve inclusion for ESOL students. This was demonstrated in this study by the manner in which school leaders ensured that the school leadership practice strongly reflected a valuing and respecting of students' identities and cultures which resulted in a significant positive influence on students' behaviour towards learning and achieving their goals.

### **Middle leaders promote an inclusive school environment**

This theme represents an answer to Research Questions 1 and 3, which sought to understand ‘how middle leaders support ESOL students to learn English’ and ‘how do middle leaders collaborate with the families’ whānau of these ESOL students to support their English language learning’. Figure 5.1 constitutes a flow-chart in which standard symbols are used to represent various relationships as follows: An oval represents the starting point, processes are presented by rectangles, decision points by diamond shapes, and input or output by parallelogram. Relationships between these elements are indicated by the arrows that connect them. The same conventions are used in subsequent flow charts within this chapter.

The theme identified as the role played by middle leadership in promoting an inclusive school environment is the starting point for Figure 5.1. The manner in which they did so is represented by the rectangle illustrating middle leaders’ practices with respect to ESOL students. The positive consequences of those practices are shown in subsidiary rectangles. The evaluation of those practices, by means of the study data, together with data from studies published in the literature, is illustrated in the diamond decision space where arrows indicate the alternative outcomes of either a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ decision. The outcomes represent the extent to which the practice has influenced ESOL students’ English learning, as represented within two parallelograms.

Figure 5.1 *Middle leaders promote an inclusive school environment*



Based on Figure 5.1, both the existing literature and the current research findings emphasise the need to build an inclusive school environment that encourages ESOL students to achieve their academic goals effectively. The research data indicated that middle leaders’ practices reflected the fact that they valued and respected students’ identities and cultures, which led to an increase in students’ commitment and adaptation to their new context, and thereby to achieving their goals. This conclusion is consistent with Krashen’s language acquisition theory that arose out of an investigation into the main factors that allow ESOL students to limit their affective filters so as to learn English effectively (Yuan, 2018). In accordance with Krashen’s theory, a supportive and inclusive environment is the most significant factor that motivates ESOL students to overcome their challenges and learn English effectively. This is also in accord with the view of Louie et al. (2019) and Theoharis and O’Toole (2011) who go so far as to assert that ESOL students can better

improve their English when they have an authentic environment in which difference is valued and accepted, and that provides them with a sense of belonging.

Moreover, the current study found that middle leaders were cultural ambassadors in their practices when they ensured that diversity and inclusivity was applied effectively by classroom teachers. This took place through middle leaders' activities and attitudes towards connecting ESOL students and their families to their classroom teachers and to the school context in general. Such a function was demonstrated when middle leaders promoted partnerships with ESOL students and their families through school meetings and events. The actions that were carried out by middle leaders serve an inspirational model to classroom teachers. In other words, middle leaders' practices influenced the classroom teachers to change and develop their own practices, which in turn had a positive impact on students' outcomes.

These findings are similar to those reported by Louie et al. (2019) and Daly and Sharma (2018) who investigated the benefit for leaders acting as role models in their context. They found that when school leaders pay attention to how they perform their roles, they inspire teachers and encourage them to act with cultural awareness, as for example when middle leaders take the trouble to collect information about ESOL students' backgrounds. This advantage was also seen when middle leaders promoted and sustained relationships between ESOL families and school staff, as demonstrated by classroom teachers being encouraged to keep in contact with ESOL families. Based on the study findings, these actions expanded classroom teachers' mindsets, enhanced their practices, and developed their flexibility in terms of how they responded effectively to their ESOL students' different needs.

### Implications

Evidence in the literature, both internationally and in New Zealand, indicates that the communication of information alone to ESOL families is not sufficient to have a positive impact on their children's learning. Taken together the efforts by middle leaders might still keep ESOL students restricted with their academic outcomes. However, studies suggest that involving parents is an effective tool to make the teaching and learning process for ESOL students more relevant

and more responsive to ESOL students' needs. As Bull (2014) concluded in her study on community engagement, leaders should involve parents in designing the school programme and they should see them as experts in their culture and language who should therefore be given an opportunity to have a stronger input with respect to ESOL students' learning. In Bull's (2014) findings, building partnerships that keep families and students' whānau connected to the school context has a positive impact on ESOL students' English learning.

Thus far, the findings of this study suggest that middle leaders should be aware of the fact that partnership should not be based merely on maintaining contact. There is sometimes a lack of understanding of the importance of obtaining and implementing families' input. In other words, when families get involved in forming the actual ESOL programme, it will be directed more appropriately to ESOL students' needs. Baecher et al. (2014) also hold this view, and maintain that collaborating with parents and building partnerships, rather than merely informing families what to do, has an increased positive influence on the quality of the school programme, and thus on the progress of ESOL students' learning English. This view is supported by McGee et al. (2015) who also assert that collaboration between parents and school staff over and above communication, has a significant positive impact on the quality of ESOL students' outcomes.

### **The interdependence of middle leadership and ESOL teachers' practices**

The second theme addresses answers for Research Question 2: How do middle leaders build classroom teachers' capacity and capability to support ESOL students new to New Zealand to learn English? The major findings in this respect were that middle leaders and teaching practice were interdependent. Middle leaders' practices appeared to be not only instructional, but also distributed. They distributed their power across specific staff in the school with an aim of increasing the quality of leadership performance and the quality of the school programme with respect to ESOL students. However, this power was distributed based on the emergent situations which means their distribution was based mainly on two forms which were 'step in' and 'step back'.

Step-in is a process whereby middle leaders themselves hold the ultimate power of leading and managing the school issues to shape the school context and develop students' outcomes. However, step-back is a process whereby middle leaders, with respect to their titles and roles, give space to other knowledgeable and effective staff to fill a gap to enhance the quality of the leadership performance. These two forms are discussed in detail by Youngs (2014) whose study was mainly focused on finding out which leaders were practicing these leadership forms and when they were using them. In Youngs's study (2014), distributed leadership is not about leaders delegating roles and tasks to other people, it is about how school leaders bring people to work on a common goal of increasing student outcomes. This is also the view of Harris et al., (2019) and Notman (2020) who each viewed distributed leadership as a process that involves many experienced trusted people who share their power, their knowledge, and experience to produce a positive effect on student outcomes.

In my research, this was seen clearly when middle leaders shared their power with other proficient staff who have the capability to manage and meet a particular leadership need, which is 'supporting ESOL students in their English learning'. Figure 5.2 below illustrates how middle leaders share their power with other staff members, adopting the form of 'step-back' to increase the quality of the teaching and learning programme for ESOL students. The function of the different shapes in the figure is as previously described for Figure 5.1.

Figure 5.2 The interdependence of middle leadership and ESOL teachers' practice

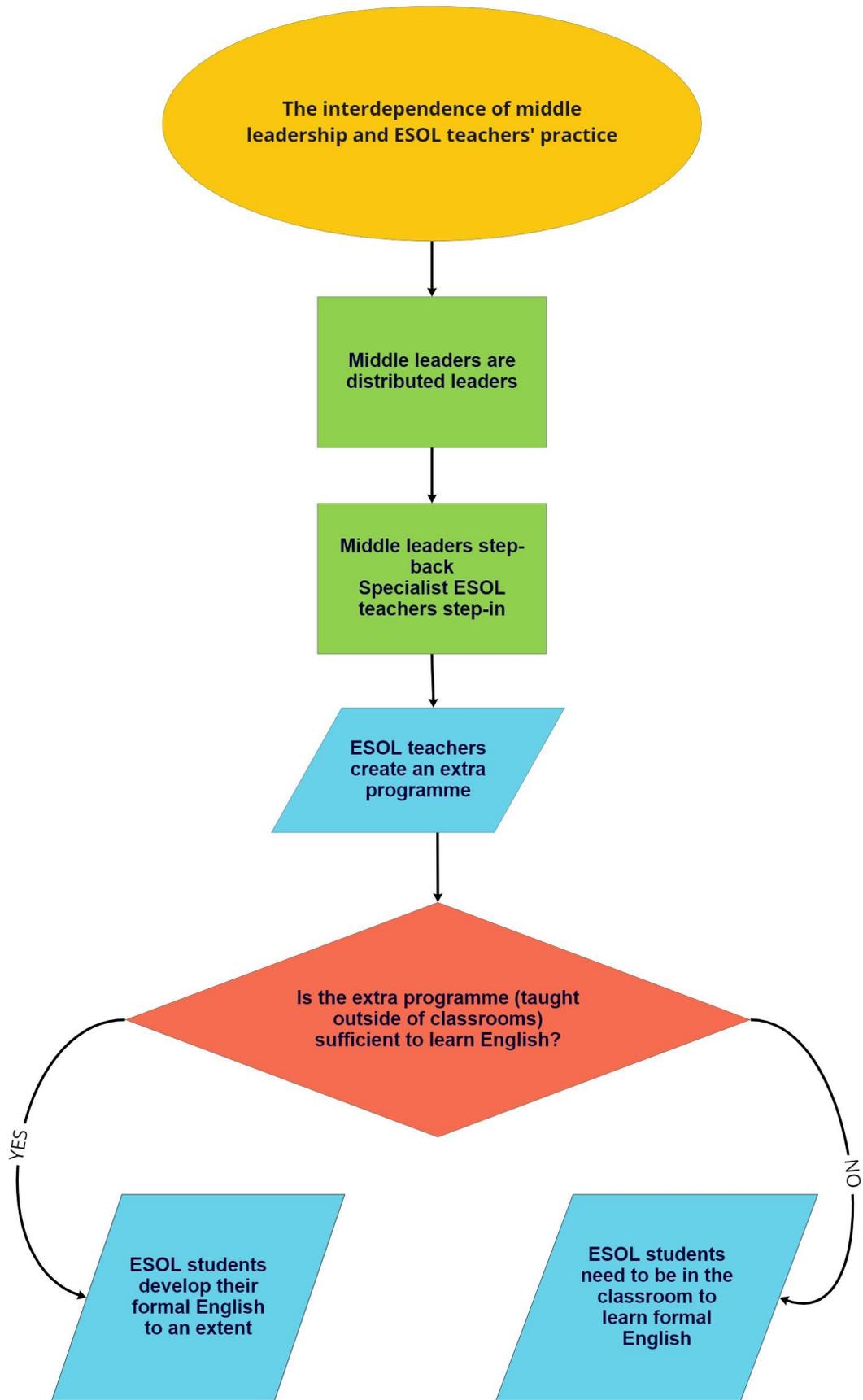


Figure 5.2 illustrates how leadership was distributed to staff members who do not have a formal title. In this study, middle leaders were seen stepping back from leadership on two different occasions delegating their power to ensure that ESOL students were receiving high quality of teaching practices that increase their ability to learn English.

The first occasion was when middle leaders delegated their power to knowledgeable people, who as shown in figure 5.2, are specialist ESOL teachers. Including specialist ESOL teachers in a middle leadership team appeared to have a positive impact on the quality of school leadership performance, as well as the quality of the school programme with respect to ESOL students. This finding closely aligns with the literature discussed in Chapter Two that advised school leaders to include a specialist ESOL teacher in the school hierarchy because of their effective contribution based on their relevant knowledge with respect to ESOL strategies (Baecher et al., 2016). In accordance with their findings, my thesis emphasises that including specialist ESOL teachers in the middle leadership team appeared to increase the effectiveness of their school teaching programme in which it allowed to create effective extra-programmatic activities for ESOL students to develop their English. This programme was the main tool to enhance ESOL students' language skills.

Another occasion that showed middle leaders stepping back from leadership is when middle leaders promoted their teachers' skills informally through participating in informal conversations and engaging in coaching. They believed that giving classroom teachers the space to practice their teaching roles independently would increase their self-efficacy and would maintain the trust between each other which in turn would increase teachers' innovation and make them more able to contribute effective ideas that might increase ESOL students' ability in learning English. However, the findings in my study contradict the literature reviewed in Chapter Two. Several studies indicated that teachers usually lack the confidence teaching ESOL students (Edwards, 2012; Téllez & Manthey, 2015). This is because teachers were trained to teach students generally. In other words, these classroom teachers lack specific knowledge of how to interact with ESOL students and what practices should they use to include them in the classroom and address their needs effectively.

Having teachers who lack experience and proficiency in teacher' skills can easily affect ESOL students' progress (Télez & Manthey, 2015). This is shown clearly in this study in which little progress by ESOL students was seen, especially those students who undertook extra programmes out of their classroom area where they were not experiencing the same instruction and activities as occurred inside their classrooms. This means that there is still a gap in the way the school performance is running. The implications arising from this theme, including evidence from published literature, are presented next.

### Implications

A number of critical implications arose from this study as demonstrated in Figure 5.2. In this figure, a decision needs to be made on the question 'Is the extra programme (taught outside of classrooms) sufficient to learn English? The decision made is based on the analysis of the current study data and the findings of the literature. Despite the fact that ESOL students were supported with an extra school programme, the current study aligns with literature in which ESOL students, as shown in Figure 5.2, could develop their English only to an extent. This is because ESOL students were restricted to a certain time to acquire English. My data and the literature findings note that ESOL students can develop their English more effectively if these activities were merged into the national school programme that is used inside classrooms. This leads to the important conclusion that middle leaders still lack the identification of building school programmes based not only on meeting the students' cultural needs, but also on meeting their linguistic needs. This conclusion is supported by the views of Baecher et al. (2013) and Daly and Sharma (2018) who advised that school leaders have to create a specific space that teaches formal English for ESOL students in the school curriculum. Having this space would help ESOL students raise their English as well as their academic achievements.

Another important implication of this study is that the collaboration between middle leaders and ESOL teachers confirmed that middle leaders' knowledge of ESOL pedagogy remains an important area of discussion and reflection concerning effective leadership aimed at supporting ESOL students to achieve their goals. The knowledge that middle leaders developed and depended upon to serve ESOL students was the result of involving ESOL teachers. This leads to

the conclusion that because middle leaders are responsible for shaping the school programme, it is important to upskill their capability in the ESOL field. It is desirable for them to develop their knowledge by obtaining TESSOL leadership qualifications thereby strengthening their instructional practices.

There are relatively few relevant studies that call for school leaders to develop their leadership capacity in terms of ‘knowledge and skills’ that is specifically based in the ESOL area. Among the few studies that did, were those undertaken by Ascenzi-Moreno et al. (2016) in the USA, McGee et al. (2015) in New Zealand and Louie et al., (2019) in the USA. These authors recommended that school leaders should obtain a TESSOL leadership qualification in order to improve and develop their practices. Baecher et al. (2016) also concluded that the school leadership team should include at least professional ESOL teachers to effectively influence school leadership practices. This implies that leaders should expand their understanding and develop their skills with respect to ESOL strategies. In this way, their contribution to teachers’ work and teaching programmes’ becomes more effective. Baecher et al. (2016) state:

“School leadership preparation that benefits ELLs must include developing an understanding of second language acquisition that can be applied to learning about the linguistic as well as cultural backgrounds of their students”. (p. 202)

Edward (2011) and Theoharis and O’Toole (2011) indicate that having pedagogical knowledge in ESOL teaching and learning gives middle leaders more confidence to influence teachers’ work when it comes to their supervision role. This is because the key for teaching and teachers’ quality depends on how relevant middle leaders’ pedagogical knowledge in certain subject is. This was pointed out by De Nobile’s (2018) study. He said: “it makes sense that good knowledge of subject area and pedagogical expertise are valued in middle leaders because both components increase middle leaders’ competence in adding appropriate practices that students need to increase their outcomes” (p.402).

The role ESOL teachers play, as reported in this study and other literature studies, was based only on working alongside classroom teachers and ESOL students through modelling and discussing

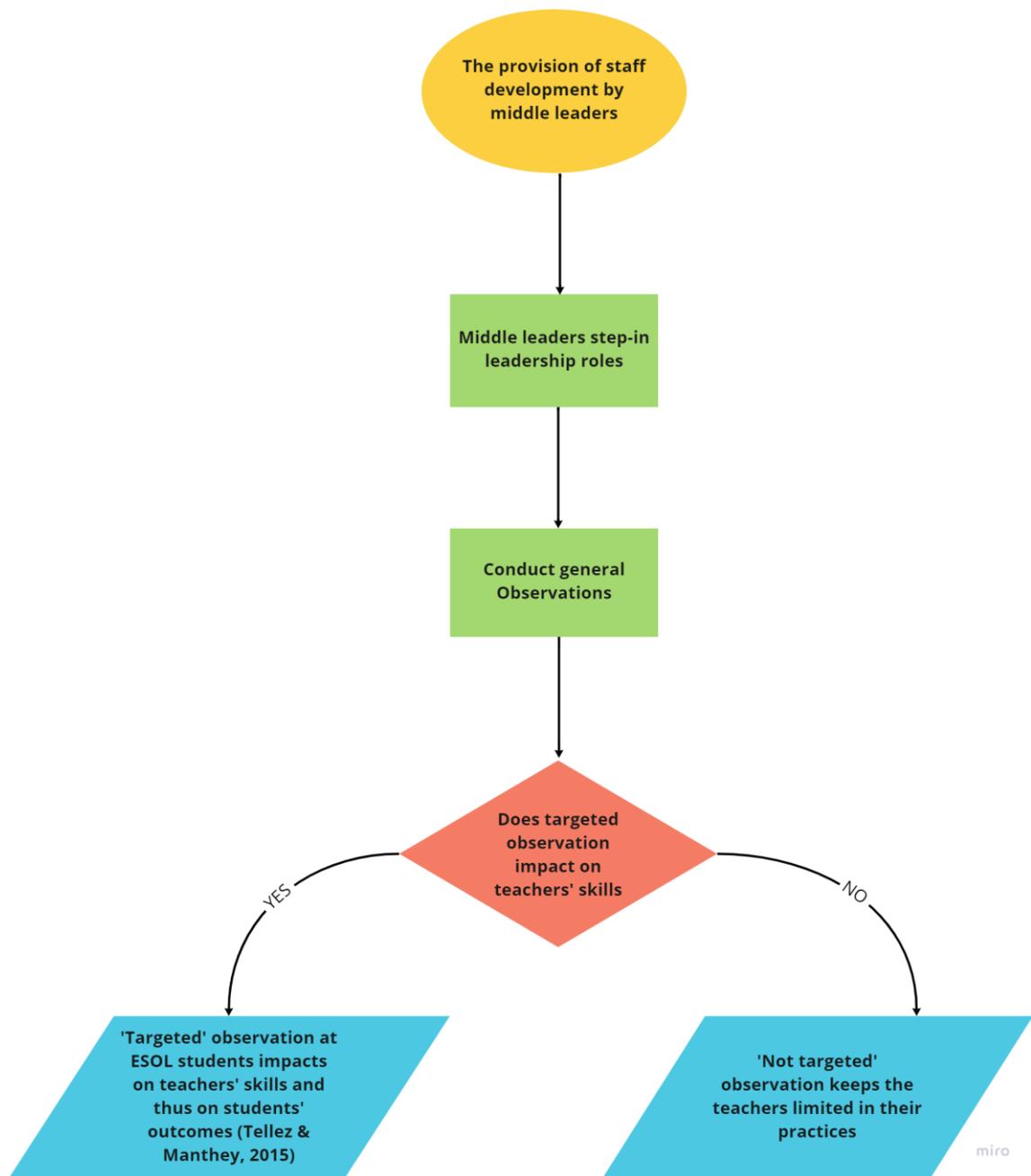
certain practices that relate to ESOL learners. However, despite the rigorous role ESOL teachers play in leading ESOL programmes and supporting middle leaders and classroom teachers in their work with ESOL students, the quality of ESOL teachers' knowledge was not valued. ESOL teachers were not encouraged to develop classroom teachers' practices nor to expand their knowledge through training. This indicated that the ultimate power for leadership and change was allocated to school principals and middle leaders. This in turn may tend to restrict the development of school leadership practices in regard to supporting ESOL students to learn English. Also, this appears to restrict the development of ESOL teachers' competencies and keep them unable to grow their leadership skills.

Russell and Von Esche (2018) suggest that identifying this knowledge is the most important element for school leaders and teachers to have because of its effectiveness in increasing their capabilities which in turn increase the quality of the teaching and learning of the school programme. Thus far, the coming theme answers the second part of Research Question 2 which seeks to investigate how middle leaders increase the capacity of classroom teachers to support ESOL students in their needs to learn English.

### **The provision of staff development by middle leaders**

This theme reflects the evidence obtained in this study that middle leaders were found to support classroom teachers, but also only to a limited extent. As seen in Figure 5.3 below, middle leaders, in contrast with the previous section, hold ultimate power in enhancing their classroom teachers' capabilities to meet the diverse needs of their students.

Figure 5.3 *The provision of staff development by middle leaders*



‘Step-in’ leadership is used widely by different middle leaders as seen in the previous section. This form is used by deputy leaders and team leaders who both show their flexibility to share their power with specialist ESOL teachers to increase classroom teachers’ ability to adapt to the different needs of ESOL students. However, this study showed that the provision of the staff development was mostly undertaken by middle leaders irrespective to the benefit of having specialist ESOL teachers who can contribute effective information and practices related to ESOL teaching and learning.

Figure 5.3 shows that middle leaders showed their influence on the development of teachers' skills through conducting regular observations. Based on different studies, observation that is followed by evaluation feedback is an effective practice to develop teachers' practices (Rigby et al., 2017; Smith et al., 2010). For example, Tuytens and Devos (2014) referred to evaluation feedback as an effective practice contributing to classroom teachers' improvement with respect to their instructional practices, and within their decision-making process. This is also in accord with the conclusion of Rigby et al. (2017) who claim that observations are an effective way for classroom teachers to develop both their professional skills and their programme practices.

### Implications

Despite the fact that observation has a positive impact on teachers' performance inside the classrooms, this study found these observations conducted by middle leaders may not show any impact on ESOL students' learning. This is because these observations were not targeted at ESOL students' learning in particular, but were conducted to evaluate the programme practices generally. It was somewhat surprising that middle leaders considered that observation followed by evaluation feedback constituted professional development (PD) for teachers. They believe that evaluation feedback can precisely address teachers' mistakes and increase their self-confidence in delivery of instructions or the application of different learning activities.

It is somewhat surprising because, based on studies such as Baecher et al. (2016), PD is the main way for teachers to develop their capacity whether in knowledge or in skills. This is also the view of Heineke et al. (2018) and Téllez and Manthey (2015) who both argued that since the number of ESOL students is increasing in classrooms, it is necessary for school leaders to employ various workshops that are designated specifically to develop their teachers' capabilities with respect to teaching English to ESOL students.

Based on these implications, my study closely aligns with the important findings of Robinson et al.' (2015) in *the School Leadership and Students Outcomes: Identifying What Works and Why Best Evidence Synthesis programme (BES)*. Their findings reported that generally school leaders spend limited time on developing their classroom teachers' skills. In my research, providing PD

in the ESOL area has been largely ignored. This leads to the conclusion that there is a need to emphasise the importance for school leaders, especially middle leaders, of expanding their relevant knowledge and understanding, given that they are in the front line of responsibility when it comes to enhancing teachers' development and improving students' outcomes.

This thesis, also, revealed that middle leaders were far from engaging in critical thinking about how to extend their own capacity and increase their language awareness, and some way from improving the quality of their leadership traits from ESOL teachers. They were unaware that allocating the mission of developing classroom teachers' understanding of ESOL teaching and learning to specialist ESOL experts who are ESOL teachers is an advantage to developing school performance and thereby students' outcomes.

In addition, if middle leaders do not have rich knowledge in ESOL area, their leadership practices which stands for developing the quality of teachers and the quality of school programme may be not effective. This is supported by the view of Smith et al.'s (2020) who stated that, "when school leaders lack knowledge in subject content, potential improvement of teacher effectiveness is going to be limited" (p.679). Bachaer et al. (2016) had a similar view, they wrote: "When classroom observations are conducted with knowledge and understanding of best practices for special populations, such as ELLs, reaching the goal of improving the instructional practice for that population is enhanced and more likely to be achieved" (p.202).

Thus far, when middle leaders lack knowledge in the ESOL area, their impact on classroom teachers' development is unlikely to be effective. They would, inadvertently, keep teachers in a narrow circle of uncertainty in which their practices might or might not fit or not fit ESOL students' needs inside the classroom. This was observed both in this study and in other published studies (Baecher et al., 2016; Rigby et al., 2017; Smith et al., 2020) when middle leaders conducted observation of classroom teachers' lessons. Subsequent feedback did not target practices related to the needs of ESOL students. This reflects middle leaders' limited knowledge in the ESOL field. This limited knowledge affected middle leaders' performance in which they were not concerned whether the teachers' practices are sufficient to meet the needs of ESOL

students. Their evaluation of school practices, also, remained general, and their concerns about ESOL students was limited.

## **Conclusion**

This study adds to our knowledge and understanding of the way school middle leaders indirectly achieve and sustain improvement for ESOL students' English learning. This was achieved through combining both distributed and instructional leadership practices. The study found that the achievement of ESOL students was not only the result of middle leaders' practices, but also the result of sharing leadership and power with effective staff 'specialist ESOL teachers'.

Each of the three themes stress the importance of middle leaders increasing the quality of their leadership through enhancing their own capacity so as to have a more significant impact within their own practices, whether with regard to school programmes or during their work with classroom teachers. In short, being a leader in ESOL context is challenging, and demands a high quality of knowledge and experience, especially within the process of determining what strategies and practices impact positively on these learners.

## **Chapter Six: Conclusions and recommendations**

### **Introduction**

The aim of this research was to investigate the impact of middle leadership practices on ESOL students' ability to learn English. This chapter reflects on the implications of the two key findings that emerged from the principal themes discussed in the previous chapter. These two key findings will provide a summary of the middle leadership practices that most impacted on the teaching and learning of English by ESOL students. The first key finding illustrates what makes middle leadership practices special in ESOL contexts, and the second key finding confirms that the critical role specialist ESOL teachers play needs to be formalised. Following this, the strengths and weaknesses of this study will be discussed, along with recommendations for future study.

### **Key conclusions**

#### What makes middle leadership practices special in ESOL context

The prominent finding is that middle leaders have a central position in the school context such that this position allows them to lead and influence other staff through their distributed leadership strategies 'stepping in and stepping back'. Both strategies enabled middle leaders to maximise productivity and improve team performance. Also, both strategies brought both top-down leaders such as those of formal titles 'senior leaders' and bottom-up leaders such as informal titles 'specialist ESOL teachers' on board together to work collaboratively to increase the capacity of school leadership and achieve a deeper change. Such contributions appeared to have a substantial influence on ESOL students by promoting a sense of belonging and connectedness; maintaining an effective and supportive community of learning; building a responsive teaching programme; and establishing effective teams which work collaboratively alongside each other to increase the outcomes of their students.

Current literature is replete with evidence in favour of the importance of distributed leadership by middle leaders in an effort to address ESOL students' needs (Notman, 2020; McGee et al., 2015; Youngs, 2017). The findings in this study offer a positive perspective on how and why

middle leaders used distributed leadership. The positive perspective is that middle leaders typically maintain three main characteristics: empowerment, accountability, and a decision-making partnership which was found to have a significant influence on the quality of leadership with respect to ESOL students.

This influence is evident when middle leaders increase their leadership capacity through empowering specialist ESOL teachers. Those ESOL teachers, who have the chance to play a leadership role, develop their skills and become more thoughtful as to what resources and practices can be used to increase students' outcomes. Besides, establishing a decision-making partnership with specialist ESOL teachers allows middle leaders to produce a more significant improvement in school performance as demonstrated through making changes in school programme approaches, and implementing effective activities for ESOL students.

However, this study finds that the impact of middle leaders' practices on ESOL students is still limited because shared responsibility remains within a small circle. In other words, this study shows that middle leaders still own the ultimate power, and those without formal titles, specifically 'specialist ESOL teachers', still are not giving any power. This, unfortunately, leads to only a limited change in school practices with respect to ESOL students.

#### The critical role specialist ESOL teachers play needs to be formalised

Despite the strengths the top-down and bottom-up leadership with respect to school leadership improvement, specialist ESOL teachers, who are the people who can most increase the capacity of school leadership, still have no formal authority in the school context. Middle leaders are still limiting specialist ESOL teachers' roles to be only responsible for two main aspects addressing ESOL students' needs through the extra-programmatic activities and giving support to classroom teachers if needed.

Having an overlap between middle leaders on ESOL teachers requires middle leaders to either be proficient in the ESOL area or to consider specialist ESOL teachers formally as part of the leadership team. When specialist ESOL teachers are formally considered as leaders, their input will be more obvious. Their existence is more likely to change school policies in ways that fits more with ESOL students' needs. Their knowledge will contribute to increase the quality of the

national curriculum through creating an allocated slot in the curriculum for ESOL students so to raise ESOL students' commitment to acquiring English language competence. This was the view of Baecher et al. (2014) and Daly and Sharma (2018) who concluded that in order to support ESOL students to develop their ability to learn English language, the main requirement would be to establish a certain space that teaches formal English to ESOL students, which in turn would help them to scaffold their language skills gradually, while remaining inside their classrooms.

### **Strengths and limitations of the current study**

It is important as a researcher to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the study that has been undertaken. First and foremost, the major limitation of this study was the difficulty of finding schools that have ESOL students who are specifically 'new' to New Zealand. This was particularly the case due to the Covid-19 lockdowns that occurred during the period of the research. However, this difficulty was managed by depending on input from experienced middle leaders who shared their knowledge and expertise over the years in terms of how they have managed the transition into New Zealand schools of new ESOL students with limited English. Secondly, this study comprised a small sample size, and it proved impossible to recruit as many participants as envisaged. Since this study was limited to only nine participants carefully selected from five different primary schools across Auckland – six middle leaders and three ESOL teachers- there will be a reduction in the generalisability of participants' responses. Having participants who have specific knowledge in ESOL contexts could clearly point out the difference from middle leaders' knowledge in terms of how they lead ESOL students' learning. One advantage of this group of participants was that four of them were second language speakers whose responses informed the importance of increasing the language awareness in school leaders who take the responsibility of developing the school programme and raising students' outcomes.

Despite the answers from the various participants, the study may have been more fruitful if it also included ESOL students. However, it is unlikely that students would provide more definitive evidence of what practices or areas middle leaders need to develop to support ESOL

students more effectively. This is to bring evidence on the importance for school leaders to increase their understanding on the challenges of ESOL students while acquiring the language.

Selecting semi-structured interviews was a strength of this study. This is because these kinds of interviews could assist the researcher to collect thorough data about participants' perspectives with respect to ESOL students to learn English. These kinds of interviews encouraged middle leaders and ESOL teachers to reevaluate their practices as to whether they fit with the needs of their ESOL students or not. Also, the use of the interpretivist and constructivist paradigms has provided a deeper insight into participants' realities. It helped to critically evaluate middle leaders' practices in ESOL field.

## **Recommendations**

An analysis of the impact of middle leadership practices' on ESOL students' English learning has led to the following internal and external recommendations:

### **Internal recommendations**

- It is recommended that the capacity of middle leaders be improved and enhanced through obtaining a TESOL Leadership Qualification as suggested by a New Zealand study undertaken by McGee et al., (2015). This kind of qualification would help middle leaders to increase their leadership performance. They would be more accurate and more precise in employing education practices within the national school curriculum which can lead to having a better impact on ESOL students' achievements.
- If they do so, they might be able to avoid ESOL students going out of their classrooms by providing them an effective school programme that has a specific space for teaching formal English for ESOL students. This is because ESOL classes that were running for a few hours per week are still not considered sufficient for them to learn academic English and be able to progress as same as first English speakers. Therefore, it is strongly recommended for middle leaders to improve their knowledge in ESOL teaching and increase their language awareness to better impact on teachers' practices and strategies

inside their home classrooms. Such knowledge assists school middle leaders to better improve ESOL students' language in all areas.

- It is also recommended that classroom teachers be encouraged to have specific workshops that can help to increase their professional knowledge in ESOL teaching and learning strategies and thus impact on ESOL students' learning.

### **External recommendations**

- The Ministry of Education needs to support middle leaders in their complicated roles. It is recommended, with the growing number of ESOL students, to provide more detail on the requirements that middle leaders need to develop their leadership practices in the ESOL context, such as how to create a space in New Zealand curriculum that teaches formal language for ESOL students to help them progress to the level of mainstream students.
- The Ministry of Education needs to provide more guidelines as to how to involve parents and whānau in the building of school programmes in which involving parents adds great value, such as how their home language look like English, how they are different. By doing this, school leaders and teachers might improve their understanding of ESOL students' needs to learn English.

### **Suggestions for future research**

The topic 'The impact of middle leadership practices on ESOL students' English learning' deserves to have further examination. Suggestions for further research include investigating:

- The impact of middle leadership in ESOL context in a larger sample study with the opportunity of consuming more time and more participants rather than being restricted to a few participants and a specific time.
- The extent to which the efforts of middle leaders towards promoting ESOL students' English learning are influenced by the socio-economic status of their school families. It is assumed, in some cases, if there are few children who require ESOL assistance, school

leaders may find that ESOL teachers can only be employed to assist the children if the school is able to find a top-up source of funding. In poor socio-economic areas, hiring an ESOL teacher might not be prioritised for this purpose.

### **Final conclusions**

This research is a small-scale study that investigated the impact of middle leadership practices on English language learning by ESOL students new to New Zealand in five primary schools in Auckland, New Zealand. The positive outcomes of the impact of middle leaders' practices on ESOL students highlighted the important of promoting an inclusive school environment that values and respects the different identities of ESOL students.

The results of this study suggest that for middle leadership practices to be more effective and more specific to ESOL students' needs, middle leaders need to develop their own capacity, knowledge, content, and skills in ESOL area. They need to be able to show their success in integrating effective ESOL strategies with the key components of effective leadership. Middle leaders also have to give more consideration to bottom-up leaders and grow their leadership skills to ensure that classroom teachers are supported with appropriate training workshops that are mainly based on ESOL teaching and learning, so that teachers' skills be promoted, and their ability to adapt to ESOL students' different levels and requirements improved.

Lastly, they need to consider developing the school programme by taking account of ESOL families' perspectives. This should benefit programme effectiveness, and thus impact on ESOL students' ability to raise their outcomes. Since the research findings points to a lack of knowledge in the area, more investigation is still needed in the future for two reasons. The first reason is to help school leaders who are in charge of improving students' outcomes. The second reason is to build upon the current foundation with the aim of exploring in more depth the impact of middle leadership in the ESOL context.

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## Appendix A:

### Interview questions for middle leaders

- 1- Can you tell me about yourself in your job here?
  - I. How long have you been here?
  - II. What do you like about being a leader?
- 2- There have been different styles of leadership and every leader has his own style in leading.
  - I. Can you share your own style in leadership? Why do you choose this style?
  - II. what is your perspective and opinion about what makes leadership effective and successful?
- 3- I'm really interested in your role as a middle leader at this school.
  - I. What sorts of things do middle leaders do at this school?
  - II. What do you do specifically as a middle leader at this school?
- 4- I am particularly interested in the impact of middle leaders' practices on the English learning by ESOL students.
  - I. What do you do as a middle leader that is particularly to do with ESOL students?
  - II. In what ways does your middle leadership work have a positive impact on ESOL students learning English?
  - III. What specific resources and programmes are available to your ESOL students?
- 5- I am interested in how middle leadership supports classroom teachers in their knowledge and practice with ESOL students.
  - I. What skills and practices do you feel classroom teachers need to best meet the needs of their ESOL students?
  - II. How does middle leadership in your school support classroom teachers in setting students that are new to New Zealand into the classroom and wider school environment?
  - III. What kinds of facilities and resources has your school provided for classroom teachers to support their ESOL teachers to learn English?

- 6- In your opinion, what are the essential factors that help ESOL students to obtain English in your school?
- 7- I am interested in how middle leadership is involved in supporting the families/ whānau of ESOL students in their school community.
  - I. How does middle leadership support communication with parents/families of ESOL students?
  - II. What ways does middle leadership collaborate with parents to engage them in supporting their child's English language development?
- 8- I am interested in the experience of middle leadership in supporting ESOL learners in their school.
  - I. What kinds of challenges have you encountered while supporting ESOL students new to New Zealand to learn English? What did you do in response to these challenges?
  - II. What have been some of the highlights or successes of working with classroom teachers to support ESOL students in your school?
- 9- What are your school goals/vision for supporting the needs of ESOL students within your school in the coming year?

### **Interview questions for ESOL Specialists Leaders**

- 1- Can you tell me about yourself in your job here?
  - I. What do you like about being an ESOL specialist?
  - II. Can you describe your teaching philosophy on a day-to-day basis with ESOL students?
- 2- I'm really interested in your role as being a teacher leader for ESOL section at this school.
  - I. How has your education supported your role as an ESOL specialist Leader?



## **Appendix C:**

### **Information Sheet: Principal**

**Date Information Sheet Produced:** May 27th, 2021

#### **Project Title**

The impact of middle leaders' practices on English language learning by ESOL students new to New Zealand

#### **An Invitation:**

Kia Ora! My name is Lana Al Jazmaty, and I would like to invite you to participate in my research about the impact of middle leaders on the language learning by ESOL students new to New Zealand. In this research, I will be conducting semi-structured interviews to be able to collect data about middle leaders' practices that influence and support ESOL students to learn English. Being a part of this research will enable you to share your own experience and practices related to the research topic, and the final thesis findings may also benefit other middle leaders. Through thesis findings, I would be able to complete my Master of Educational Leadership in 2021.

#### **What is the purpose of this research?**

The purpose of this research is to improve my understanding about the influence of middle leadership practices that assist ESOL students to learn English.

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

I approached the principal of your school who agreed to hold a meeting to explain the research plan and purposes. As this research based on middle leaders' practices, you are uniquely positioned to provide me with information about your experiences in supporting ESOL students to learn English. In the meeting, you will be provided with an information sheet that contains the research plan and the participants' criteria to participate as participants will be selected depending on the following criteria:

Criteria 1- requires the selection of middle leaders whose roles allow them direct influence on the learning of ESOL students such as curriculum leader or team leader.

Criteria 2- requires the selection of middle leaders who have experienced being a leader for English speakers of other languages (ESOL leader).

If more participants volunteer to participate than are required, participants will be selected through using a tool like Spinner.

### **How do I agree to participate in this research?**

Your participation in this research is voluntary (it is your choice) and whether or not you choose to participate will neither advantage nor disadvantage you. You are able to withdraw from the study at any time. If you choose to withdraw from the study, then you will be offered the choice between having any data that is identifiable as belonging to you removed or allowing it to continue to be used. However, once the findings have been produced, removal of your data may not be possible.

### **What will happen in this research?**

As this research will be based on investigating middle leadership practices with ESOL students to learn English, I will conduct semi-structured interviews with you as a middle leader. The main purpose of conducting this kind of interview is to fully explore different views and perceptions about middle leaders' practices that influence ESOL students to learn English. Although I will have a set of questions already prepared, we are free to talk about other related matters that come-up in our conversation. Your interview will take place either at your school or in a meeting room at an AUT campus if you prefer and will take about 45-60 minutes. With your permission, the interview will be recorded and transcribed by a professional transcriber who will have signed a Confidentiality Agreement. The data that you provide will be confidential and will only be seen by myself and my supervisor. Lastly, your identity and the name of your school, as well as the names of people or organisations to whom you may prefer, will be kept confidential in my final thesis document through the use of pseudonyms.

### **What are the discomforts and risks and how will they be alleviated?**

You are very unlikely to feel uncomfortable or be at risk by participating in this research. Every care will be taken to ensure that your privacy is respected and that the interview will be a comfortable and rewarding experience for you.

### **What are the benefits?**

It is hoped that participants in the research will benefit through participating in the semi-structured interviews which are characterised with flexibility in having open discussions that lead to have rich data about the research study. The research will give in-direct benefits to the research participants, to the Researcher, and to the wider community.

The potential benefits to the participants, middle leaders might become more aware of how effective their practices are with ESOL students regarding helping them learn English when they share their practices with the Researcher.

In regard to the wider community, the potential benefits might come from the thesis findings. Senior and middle leaders in primary schools may be able to use the findings of the research to improve their own practices in providing ESOL students with the most effective learning experiences to help them to learn English effectively.

Regarding the Primary Researcher's benefits, this thesis will assist her to have a better insight and understanding of middle leadership practices in primary schools that support ESOL students to overcome the language barrier. She will use the data from participants' responses to construct findings for her thesis and be able to complete her Master of Educational Leadership.

### **How will my privacy be protected?**

Your confidentiality will be preserved because you will not be identifiable in the final thesis. Your name, the name of your school, as well as the names of people or organisations to whom you may refer will be protected through the use of pseudonyms.

### **What are the costs of participating in this research?**

The only cost associated with participation is your time. You can expect that your interview will take 45-60 minutes and reviewing your interview transcriptions may take another 30 minutes.

### **What opportunity do I have to consider this invitation?**

Please consider this request and if you are interested in participating, please contact me within two weeks of receiving this Information Sheet. If I have not heard from you by then, I will follow up my invitation a second time by sending another email.

### **Will I receive feedback on the results of this research?**

I will supply you with a summary of the research findings once my research has been examined. This will be emailed to you.

### **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, *Alison Smith*, [alison.smith@aut.ac.nz](mailto:alison.smith@aut.ac.nz), 09 921 9999, ext. 7363

Concerns regarding the conduct of the research should be notified to the Executive Secretary of AUTECH, **Dr Carina Meares, 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:*** [REDACTED]

***Project Supervisor Contact Details:*** Alison Smith, alison.smith@aut.ac.nz, 09 921 9999, ext. 7363

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 9 October 2020, AUTECH **Reference number 19/329.**

## **Appendix C:**

### **Information Sheet: ESOL Specialist Teacher**

**Date Information Sheet Produced:** May 27th, 2021

#### **Project Title**

The impact of middle leaders' practices on English language learning by ESOL students new to New Zealand

#### **An Invitation:**

Kia Ora! My name is Lana Al Jazmaty, and I would like to invite you to participate in my research about the impact of middle leaders on the language learning by ESOL students new to New Zealand. In this research, I will be conducting semi-structured interviews to be able to collect data about middle leaders' practices that influence and support ESOL students to learn English. Being a part of this research will enable you to share your own experience and practices related to the research topic, and the final thesis findings may also benefit other middle leaders. Through thesis findings, I would be able to complete my Master of Educational Leadership in 2021.

#### **What is the purpose of this research?**

The purpose of this research is to improve my understanding about the influence of middle leadership practices that assist ESOL students to learn English.

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

I approached the principal of your school who agreed to hold a meeting to explain the research plan and purposes. As this research based on middle leaders' practices, you are uniquely positioned to provide me with information about your experiences in supporting ESOL students to learn English. In the meeting, you will be provided with an information sheet that contains the research plan and the participants' criteria to participate as participants will be selected depending on the following criteria:

Criteria 1- requires the selection of middle leaders whose roles allow them direct influence on the learning of ESOL students such as curriculum leader or team leader.

Criteria 2- requires the selection of middle leaders who have experienced being a leader for English speakers of other languages (ESOL leader).

If more participants volunteer to participate than are required, participants will be selected through using a tool like Spinner.

### **How do I agree to participate in this research?**

Your participation in this research is voluntary (it is your choice) and whether or not you choose to participate will neither advantage nor disadvantage you. You are able to withdraw from the study at any time. If you choose to withdraw from the study, then you will be offered the choice between having any data that is identifiable as belonging to you removed or allowing it to continue to be used. However, once the findings have been produced, removal of your data may not be possible.

### **What will happen in this research?**

As this research will be based on investigating middle leadership practices with ESOL students to learn English, I will conduct semi-structured interviews with you as a middle leader. The main purpose of conducting this kind of interview is to fully explore different views and perceptions about middle leaders' practices that influence ESOL students to learn English. Although I will have a set of questions already prepared, we are free to talk about other related matters that come-up in our conversation. Your interview will take place either at your school or in a meeting room at an AUT campus if you prefer and will take about 45-60 minutes. With your permission, the interview will be recorded and transcribed by a professional transcriber who will have signed a Confidentiality Agreement. The data that you provide will be confidential and will only be seen by myself and my supervisor. Lastly, your identity and the name of your school, as well as the names of people or organisations to whom you may prefer, will be kept confidential in my final thesis document through the use of pseudonyms.

### **What are the discomforts and risks and how will they be alleviated?**

You are very unlikely to feel uncomfortable or be at risk by participating in this research. Every care will be taken to ensure that your privacy is respected and that the interview will be a comfortable and rewarding experience for you.

### **What are the benefits?**

It is hoped that participants in the research will benefit through participating in the semi-structured interviews which are characterised with flexibility in having open discussions that lead to have rich data about the research study. The research will give in-direct benefits to the research participants, to the Researcher, and to the wider community.

The potential benefits to the participants, middle leaders might become more aware of how effective their practices are with ESOL students regarding helping them learn English when they share their practices with the Researcher.

In regard to the wider community, the potential benefits might come from the thesis findings. Senior and middle leaders in primary schools may be able to use the findings of the research to improve their own practices in providing ESOL students with the most effective learning experiences to help them to learn English effectively.

Regarding the Primary Researcher's benefits, this thesis will assist her to have a better insight and understanding of middle leadership practices in primary schools that support ESOL students to overcome the language barrier. She will use the data from participants' responses to construct findings for her thesis and be able to complete her Master of Educational Leadership.

### **How will my privacy be protected?**

Your confidentiality will be preserved because you will not be identifiable in the final thesis. Your name, the name of your school, as well as the names of people or organisations to whom you may refer will be protected through the use of pseudonyms.

### **What are the costs of participating in this research?**

The only cost associated with participation is your time. You can expect that your interview will take 45-60 minutes and reviewing your interview transcriptions may take another 30 minutes.

### **What opportunity do I have to consider this invitation?**

Please consider this request and if you are interested in participating, please contact me within two weeks of receiving this Information Sheet. If I have not heard from you by then, I will follow up my invitation a second time by sending another email.

### **Will I receive feedback on the results of this research?**

I will supply you with a summary of the research findings once my research has been examined. This will be emailed to you.

### **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, *Alison Smith*, [alison.smith@aut.ac.nz](mailto:alison.smith@aut.ac.nz), 09 921 9999, ext. 7363

Concerns regarding the conduct of the research should be notified to the Executive Secretary of AUTECH, **Dr Carina Meares, 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:*** [REDACTED]

***Project Supervisor Contact Details:*** Alison Smith, alison.smith@aut.ac.nz, 09 921 9999, ext. 7363

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 9 October 2020, AUTECH **Reference number 19/329.**

## **Appendix D:**

### **Ethics Approval**

9 October 2020

Alison Smith

Faculty of Culture and Society

Dear Alison

Re Ethics Application: **20/228 The impact of middle leaders' practices on English language learning by ESOL students new to New Zealand**

Thank you for providing evidence as requested, which satisfies the points raised by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC).

Your ethics application has been approved for three years until 9 October 2023.

### **Standard Conditions of Approval**

1. The research is to be undertaken in accordance with the Auckland University of Technology Code of Conduct for Research and as approved by AUTEC in this application.
2. A progress report is due annually on the anniversary of the approval date, using the EA2 form.
3. A final report is due at the expiration of the approval period, or, upon completion of project, using the EA3 form.
4. Any amendments to the project must be approved by AUTEC prior to being implemented. Amendments can be requested using the EA2 form.
5. Any serious or unexpected adverse events must be reported to AUTEC Secretariat as a matter of priority.
6. Any unforeseen events that might affect continued ethical acceptability of the project should also be reported to the AUTEC Secretariat as a matter of priority.

7. It is your responsibility to ensure that the spelling and grammar of documents being provided to participants or external organisations is of a high standard and that all the dates on the documents are updated.

AUTEC grants ethical approval only. You are responsible for obtaining management approval for access for your research from any institution or organisation at which your research is being conducted and you need to meet all ethical, legal, public health, and locality obligations or requirements for the jurisdictions in which the research is being undertaken.

Please quote the application number and title on all future correspondence related to this project.

For any enquiries please contact [ethics@aut.ac.nz](mailto:ethics@aut.ac.nz). The forms mentioned above are available online through <http://www.aut.ac.nz/research/researchethics>

(This is a computer-generated letter for which no signature is required)

The AUTEC Secretariat

**Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee**

Cc: 

## Appendix E:

### Consent form to access school organisations

**Project title:** The impact of middle leaders' practices on English language learning by ESOL students new to New Zealand

**Project Supervisor:** Alison Smith

**Researcher:** Lana Aljazmaty

- I have read and understood the information provided about this research project in the Information Sheet dated 28th May 2021.
- I have had an opportunity to ask questions and to have them answered.
- I understand that notes will be taken during the interviews and that they will also be audio-taped 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 without being disadvantaged in any way.
- I understand that if I withdraw from the study then 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 tick one): Yes  No

Participant signature: .....

Participant name: .....

Participant Contact Details (if appropriate) .....

Date: .....

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 9 October 2020

AUTEC Reference number 19/329

Note: The Participant should retain a copy of this form

