

How the Formative Leadership Development Experiences of School Leaders Influence Middle Leadership Development in their Schools

Daniel Rattray

2026

A dissertation submitted to Auckland University of Technology in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree of Master of Education (Educational
Leadership)

Faculty of Culture and Society AUT - Auckland University of Technology

Acknowledgements

To my research supervisor, Dr. Melanie Drake, your cheerful spirit and unwavering support has been a constant source of strength as I have navigated competing priorities across work, research and family life. I have valued your insightful guidance, encouragement and optimism which has shaped this work and my own growth throughout this process.

To Dr Howard Youngs, whose leadership steered me toward this meaningful research path and whose steadfast guidance throughout this master's journey has been a steady beacon, I owe a debt of gratitude.

To the senior leaders who contributed their time, expertise and authenticity to informing this research, your time, willingness to engage and support of this project has been invaluable. I am deeply grateful for your trust and perspectives you shared.

Lastly, to my two girls Isla and Sadie, whose patience and unconditional love has been the quiet enduring anchor of this journey. I thank you for your warmth and grace in which you tolerated the nights and weekends I spent engaged in this work, I am endlessly grateful for you both.

Ethical approval was granted by Auckland University of Technology Ethics committee on the 17th October 2025; Reference 25/291.

Abstract

This study investigates how the formative middle leadership development experiences of senior school leaders shape the design and enactment of middle leadership development in New Zealand secondary schools. Guided by the literature that positions middle leadership both as a distinct practice and as a mechanism for the improvement of student outcomes and school improvement, this study examines how senior leaders' own middle leadership journeys shape the development opportunities, support, and constraints they afford for middle leaders.

Using a qualitative and interpretive design, this study draws on semi-structured interviews with senior leaders responsible for middle leadership development, exploring their formative experiences of middle leadership, and the current practices they enact. Thematic analysis reveals three interrelated themes: (1) the meaning of leadership and its influence on development priorities; (2) the perceived impact of mentoring and relational leadership; and (3) the tension between support and formal development as distinct yet overlapping constructs.

Key findings indicate that formative experiences shape what senior leaders value in middle leadership development, including their ontological positioning and implicit theories of leadership. These constructs then shape middle leadership development priorities in their schools, often favouring mentoring and relational approaches embedded in both intentional and reactionary development. A further finding reveals the way in which senior leaders tend to reproduce, formalise or compensate for their formative experiences while acknowledging the limitations of these actions. The implications suggest that school leaders could benefit from reflecting critically on their formative experiences, and that benefit could be found in clarifying the language of support and development, increasing the intentionality of middle leadership development, broadening pathways into leadership, and strengthening mentoring practices, without over-relying on them.

This study highlights opportunities for future research to build on these findings and address limitations. A larger qualitative study would enhance transferability and future work could measure the effectiveness of middle leadership development against improvements in practice or other school outcomes. Finally, incorporating Te Ao Māori and its indigenous leadership knowledge offers an opportunity to strengthen the bicultural partnership in line with Te Tiriti o Waitangi.

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 previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor used artificial intelligence tools or generative artificial intelligence tools (unless it is clearly stated, and referenced, along with the purpose of use), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning."

Daniel Rattray, 2026

Artificial Intelligence Declaration Template

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE DECLARATION TEMPLATE

Artificial Intelligence Guidelines:

Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools, including generative AI tools approved for use by AUT ([AI Tool Register](#)), can be used as learning tools when preparing to write your research proposal or research component. AI tools also have capability to assist with data modelling, data analysis and data visualisation. However, the research component you submit for examination must be substantively your own work. AI tools cannot solely be used to generate content when writing or creating an artwork/artefact, as this constitutes plagiarism. The formal guidelines for appropriate use of AI on the [AI Hub](#) must be followed. Also refer to the [Using Artificial Intelligence in your Research: Self-Assessments, Checklists, and Sample Text](#), for examples and sample text.

If you do plan to use AI tools, this declaration should be submitted with the initial research proposal, Confirmation of Candidature, and when you submit your research component for examination. You must complete the template below for each AI output used detailing the following:

- Chapters where AI was used in any way
- Purpose of AI Use
- AI Tool(s) Used
- Prompts Used
- Post-AI Processing Methods



Specify the chapter number(s) in your research proposal/research component where AI was used.	
Chapter number(s):	Abstract, Chapter 5, Chapter 6
Briefly explain why the AI tool was used (e.g., idea generation, summarization, data analysis, image creation, etc.).	
Purpose of AI Use:	AI was used only for editorial support on text that I had written myself. It was used to identify possible improvements in grammar, spelling, punctuation, sentence structure, and tone. I reviewed all suggestions critically, disregarded many, and adopted selected edits only where they enhanced the clarity or expression of my original writing and ideas. AI-assisted transcription was generated using AUT-approved Microsoft Teams Copilot as an initial transcription support tool. All transcripts were then manually reviewed and cross-checked against the original recordings by the researcher to verify accuracy and correct transcription errors.
Clearly state the AI tools used.	
AI Tool(s) Used:	AUT approved MS Teams Co-pilot for transcription Chat GPT for proofing assistance
Prompts or queries entered into the AI tool (only the instructive portion of the prompt is required). Include all relevant variations.	
Prompts Used:	"Can you provide some feedback around grammar, punctuation, spelling and the general tone and feel of this abstract" "I need a better word for 'provides' in this sentence - what are some alternatives" "Can you review this sentence for my dissertation suggesting possible ways of rephrasing for clarity, while keeping the original meaning" "Can you review this paragraph for spelling, grammar, punctuation and general paragraph structure and suggest editorial improvements to help the writing read more clearly" "Can you scan the paragraph below making recommendations for grammar, spelling and phrasing to ensure it aligns with a masters level of academic writing" "Can you check this discussion paragraph for cohesiveness, sentence structure and writing style"

"I need a softer start to this sentence from a masters dissertation. Something like "the findings suggest" what else could I use?"	
A summary or description of the AI-generated output. (Optional: attach output in an appendix.)	
Output Received:	The proofing output was based on text I had already written and provided feedback on grammar, spelling, punctuation, sentence structure, and clarity of expression. It identified possible errors, highlighted areas where phrasing could be improved, and suggested editorial alternatives to strengthen flow and readability. The output was advisory in nature and was reviewed critically rather than adopted automatically.
Describe how the AI output was used, edited, or transformed.	
Post-AI Processing Methods:	The output was used as an editorial aid to support proofreading of original text. Spelling and grammar mistakes were often corrected where appropriate, though Americanised spelling was ignored. Phrasing and style options were considered critically and only considered if output added clarity and expression of my original writing.
You may use this free text box to explain the intent for the use of the AI generated content. For example, rather than stating what prompt(s) were used, you may articulate the purpose for which the prompt was used (supported by examples) here:	
STUDENT DECLARATION	
By signing you are confirming that the AI use stated in the table(s) above are accurate and follow AUT's recommended guidelines detailed in the AI Hub and Postgraduate Handbook.	
Student Name: Daniel Rattray	Signature: 
Date: 6/7/2026	

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	2
Abstract	3
Attestation of Authorship	4
Artificial Intelligence Declaration Template	5
Table of Contents	7
Chapter One: Introduction	10
Background and Rationale for Study	10
Aim of the research	10
Research questions	11
An outline of the dissertation	11
Chapter Two: Literature Review	13
Theoretical Framework	13
Leadership ontology	13
Implicit Leadership Theory	14
Leadership as Practice	14
Middle leadership as an entity	15
Middle leadership as practice in New Zealand	16
Middle leadership challenges	18
Lack of Time and Workload	18
Relational and positional challenges	18
Professional development shortfalls	19
Considerations for middle leadership development	20
Practices for middle leadership development	21
The role of senior leaders	24
Conclusion	25
Chapter Three: Research Methodology	26
Research question	26
Chapter overview	26
Research design	26
Ethics	27
Data collection	28
Data Analysis	28
Trustworthiness	29
Chapter Four: Research Findings	30
Introduction	30
Theme One - What is leadership?	31

1.1 - Leadership is about trust and autonomy	31
1.2 - Leadership is about context expertise	31
1.3 - Leadership is about role modelling and high performance	32
1.4 - Leadership is about relational trust and growth	33
Theme 1 - Conclusion.....	35
Theme Two - The perceived impacts of mentoring and relationships in leadership development.....	35
Theme two - Conclusion.....	37
Theme Three - Support and Development; are they the same?	38
3.1 - Structured versus unstructured development	38
3.2 - Less effective development practices	40
3.3 - Leadership development occurring through experience	41
Theme Three – Conclusion	43
Chapter Five: Discussion.....	44
Introduction.....	44
Discussion Theme One - How implicit leadership theories shape development priorities.....	44
1.1 - Different conceptions of leadership shape different development priorities	45
1.2 - Entitative assumptions: when advancement becomes the marker of development.....	47
1.3 - From roles to practice: rethinking what counts as development	48
1.4 - Discussion Theme Summary.....	48
Discussion Theme Two - Reactionary and intentional development in practice	48
2.1 - Participants' formative experiences of leadership development	50
2.2 - Limitations and assumptions in reactionary leadership development.....	50
2.3 - Intentional leadership development as a point of contrast.	52
2.4 - Discussion theme summary.	53
Discussion Theme Three - Reproducing, formalising, and compensating for formative experiences	53
3.1 - Senior leaders are reproducing what worked for them	54
3.2 - Senior leaders are compensating and formalising development practices	54
3.3 - Ongoing limitations in development practices	55
3.4 - Discussion theme summary	56
Discussion Theme Four - What these findings suggest for senior leaders	56
4.1 - Clarifying the language of support and development	56
4.2 - Building greater intentionality into middle leadership development	57
4.3 - Strengthening mentoring without over-relying on it	57
4.4 - Creating broader pathways into leadership development	57
4.5 - Encouraging senior leaders' reflectivity.....	58
4.6 - Discussion theme summary	58
Chapter Summary	59
Chapter Six: Conclusion and recommendations	60
Implications for practice	60
Limitations of the research	60
Further research recommendations	61
Final thoughts	61
References:	62

Appendices.....	66
Appendix 1 - Ethics Approval	67
Appendix 2 - Principal Information Sheet and Consent to Access	68
Appendix 3 - Participant Information Sheet	72
Appendix 4 - Participant Consent Form.....	76
Appendix 5 - Semi structured interview questions	77
Appendix 6 - Thematic Analysis Mind Map.....	78
Appendix 7 - Thematic Analysis Table	79

Chapter One: Introduction

Background and Rationale for Study

Middle leadership is widely recognised as a complex yet essential element for improving student outcomes in education (De Nobile, 2018; Harris et al., 2019; Ministry of Education, 2012). A substantial body of research has investigated middle leadership in schools, addressing both how middle leadership is conceptualised in practice and the challenges faced by those in middle leadership roles. Large-scale, systematic reviews across international educational research have further illuminated the multifaceted nature of middle leadership, revealing contextual variations and a range of challenges as diverse as the role itself (Bennett et al., 2007; De Nobile, 2018; Harris et al., 2018; Lipscombe et al., 2023). The significance of effective middle leadership is underscored by its impact on student achievement outcomes. Given the challenges inherent in these roles, the development of middle leaders is of paramount importance, with numerous studies advocating for prioritising middle leadership development. Yet, implementation frequently rests with individual schools, leading to inconsistent provision that often fails to meet the needs of middle leaders (Cardno & Bassett, 2015; Lipscombe et al., 2023).

My interest in middle leadership development began through my master's in educational leadership studies. I found myself reflecting on my own experience as a pastoral middle leader in a New Zealand high school and noting my experiences of middle leadership development aligned with much of the literature. That is, that many of the challenges reported in middle leadership literature resonated with me, and additionally that there were, I believe, potential shortfalls in the development that I received as a middle leader. This interest was further provoked through learning that many of my colleagues in middle leadership shared similar frustrations in their development experiences. This inflamed my desire to understand more about middle leadership development practices, what does effective middle leadership development look like, and what influences schools to take the development approaches that they do.

Aim of the research

The aim of this research is to explore the formative middle leadership development experiences of senior leaders who have middle leadership development as part of their area of responsibility and examine the links between their formative experiences and the middle leadership development practices they now enact. This study seeks to add to the existing research on the experiences of middle leaders by revealing one

of the many channels through which effective development of middle leaders in education can be shaped. By examining the middle leadership development experiences of current principals and senior leaders through an interpretive lens, the research aims to reveal how personal, cultural, and historical factors mold the cultures and practices surrounding middle-leadership development. The outcomes of this study are expected to extend existing knowledge by clarifying how the experiences of senior leaders can either enhance or inhibit development cultures and practices within their schools. The findings could inform school leaders and policymakers leading to more robust support structures that acknowledge variability in middle-leadership development and address these gaps. Additionally, the work may underscore the value of reflective leadership as a driver of effective development cultures in schools. Finally, the study aspires to contribute to theoretical discourse on middle leadership by foregrounding its social-constructivist nature, recognising it as an evolving, context specific phenomenon.

Research questions

The questions that guided this research are;

- What are the similarities and differences between senior leaders' formative middle leadership development experiences, and the practices they now enact for their middle leaders?
- Why do these similarities and differences exist?
- What does this mean for how senior leaders influence effective middle leadership development at their schools?

An outline of the dissertation

This dissertation is organised into six chapters, each representing a different part of the research process.

Chapter 2 presents an overview of the reviewed literature in Middle leadership in schools. From conceptualising what exactly middle leadership is, to discussing the challenges middle leaders face and finally considers the development of middle leaders.

Chapter 3 considers the methodological approach of this study including; ethical considerations, research design, data collection, and analysis.

Chapter 4 presents the research findings, interpreted by the author to best answer the research question. Three themes are discussed including; what is leadership to the participants, the perceived effectiveness of mentoring and relationships in development, and the differences between support and development as a mechanism for leadership development.

Chapter 5 provides a discussion of the results in relation to the research question and considering the literature base from chapter 2 and explores this through four discussion themes; How implicit leadership theories shape development priorities, reactionary and intentional development in practice, reproducing, formalising and compensating for formative experiences, and what these findings mean for senior leaders

Chapter 6 offers a conclusion to the research study.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

This chapter is a review of literature in the field of middle leadership in education. The aim of this review is to understand the role middle leaders play, the challenges they face, and their subsequent development needs. A particular lens is taken exploring the role of senior leadership in the development of middle leaders in a New Zealand high school setting. The literature base in New Zealand is limited, therefore much of the research is based internationally. However, there are many international studies that include New Zealand contributions and contexts, while also sharing similar findings to domestic literature.

For this review, literature was selected that included middle leadership in primary and secondary settings; while those that had a focus in the fields of early childhood or tertiary education were omitted. One limitation of this review is that all studies and reviews conducted were written in the English language. As New Zealand is an English speaking country, this may serve as an accurate representation of the New Zealand education system. However, it is worth acknowledging that the voices of non-English speaking communities and in particular Te Ao Māori may be missing from this review. Further, while there are many indigenous studies on leadership, this literature review found little mention of our bicultural partnership through Te Tiriti o Waitangi referenced in New Zealand based literature.

Theoretical Framework

Leadership ontology

Effective leadership in education is widely acknowledged to be essential in improving student outcomes (Gurr, 2024, Highfield & Woods, 2024). However, in the post-heroic era there are as many types of leadership as there are those to enact them. In New Zealand, the hierarchical leadership model adopted by most educational institutions' positions leadership conceptually as an entity. That is, that leadership exists as a position in that hierarchy, a role or a title that has authority and/or responsibility attached to it, for example; Principal, Associate Principal, Head of Faculty, Dean, and so on. However, since educational reform in the 80's and 90's the increase in administrative demands of school leaders has meant their workload has been distributed further afield, often to those who don't hold a leadership role or title but will undertake leadership tasks and responsibilities (Bassett, 2016; Youngs & Evans, 2021). Youngs and Evans (2021) discuss the impact of this phenomenon often defined as distributed leadership theorising that "distributed leadership can imply a shift away from associating leadership with an exclusive

group and towards thinking of it as a more inclusive and organisation-wide practice” (Youngs & Evans, 2021. p. 209). This alternate framing of leadership moves it ontologically away from a leader or hero-centric view, and towards a process-centric view; whereby leadership is something we do, not necessarily something we are. A process ontological view of leadership suggests that leadership emerges from practices, rather than existing in individual traits and attributes associated with traditional heroic leadership theory. This dichotomy of leadership existing as both a practice and an entity creates complexities in the field of leadership studies in education.

Implicit Leadership Theory

Implicit leadership theory is described as an internal schema or preconception about what leaders are and how they will behave (Rush et al., 1977). These notions are formed by previous experiences, socialisations or cultural cues which reinforce particular leader behaviours as being preferable or more effective in leading. Recent research has shifted to how an individual's implicit leadership theory is embedded in context and evolves within ongoing leader-follower relations over time, with attention expanding to implicit followership theory highlighting how internal schemas also shape perceptions on leader-follower relations (Lord et al., 2020).

Leadership as Practice

The framework of this study is not focused on leadership styles, or what makes a good leader, but foregrounds process ontology (Youngs & Evans, 2021), with leadership as practice (Raelin, 2016) as a foundation for understanding leadership as emergent through ongoing processes and practices, rather than emanating from a fixed role or entity. To translate Raelin’s general framework into the educational leadership domain, this study employs the concept of practice architectures. Grootenboer and Edwards-Groves (2023) describe practice architectures as “sayings, doings and relating’s, that hang together in a distinctive project (like education)” (Grootenboer & Edwards-Groves, 2023. p. 80). In this way, practice architectures provide the bridging structure that links leadership as practice to the context of education. Crevani and Endressat (2016) reinforce this orientation by stressing “leadership-as-practice emphasises the importance of practices, not the practitioner” (Crevani & Endressat, 2016. p. 47). Highlighting that the bridge to education rests in the contexts and conditions that make leadership practice possible. Thus Grootenboer and Edwards-Groves, (2023) reinforce this bridge from Raelin’s (2016) framework to educational leadership through the lens of practice architectures.

This study is focused on exploring the formative middle leadership development experiences of senior leaders and exploring how those experiences shape the current development practices and arrangements they enact to develop middle leaders in their schools. The theoretical framing of this study considers the work of Rush et al. (1977), which suggests how leadership is conceived, and the values and practices that are prioritised, are formed through, and influenced by one's previous experiences. When considering middle leadership development, leadership as practice (Raelin, 2016) and process ontology (Youngs & Evans, 2021) provide a lens in which to view how middle leaders practice, and how they could be developed.

Middle leadership as an entity

Exploring middle leadership has been an area of growing interest in educational leadership research for some time. However, the postulation of a single definition of middle leadership has proved to be complex for researchers due to the influence of unique contexts creating disparities across different educational fields. Therefore, there is further challenge in identifying best practice for middle leadership and indeed to further identify how to best support middle leaders in their roles. Lipscombe et al. (2023) offers a definition of middle leadership established through their review of 35 articles across 14 different countries between 2006 and 2020. They determined that “a teacher with formal leadership responsibility is the most commonly used characteristic to explain the position of a middle leader” (p. 275). They went on to further state “School middle leaders are formally appointed leaders with accountable responsibilities who operate between senior leaders and teachers. As such they have a wide range of people that they influence and are influenced by” (Lipscombe et al., 2023. p. 283). This definition reinforces the complexity of the middle leadership role. Furthermore, De Nobile (2018) suggests from their review of over 250 international articles dating back over 20 years that middle leaders are those who “operate between the senior leadership group (for example principals and deputy principals) and the teaching (and where relevant, non-teaching) staff” (p. 396-397).

Though these reviews provide a similar framework for defining middle leadership as an entity, the contexts in which middle leadership is practiced is diverse and therefore middle leadership practice remains more difficult to conceptualise. Harris et al. (2019) in their thematic analysis of 49 articles predominately across Europe attempted to explore the knowledge base of middle leadership in schools since 2003. They identified that an even more diverse range of middle leadership roles have emerged in the literature since the work of Bennet et al. (2007). This indeed leads to a broadening of middle

leadership practice and therefore makes the design and provision of professional development more complex.

When considering middle leadership in a New Zealand context, recent contributions by Highfield and colleagues have added to scholarly field of middle leadership by building on the work of Cardno and colleagues over the last decade. Cardno's work offers several criteria that define middle leadership across numerous studies. That is; that middle leaders are in the middle of the school hierarchy between senior leaders and teachers, often holding both teaching and management responsibilities, and additionally, they hold a wide range of administrative functions (Cardno et al., 2018; Cardno & Bassett, 2015; Cardno & Robson, 2016). For the purposes of this research we align our definition of middle leadership as an entity with the work of Cardno et al. (2018) who offer a concise definition stating "middle leaders are those who hold positions in the middle-level of the school organisational hierarchy between the senior leaders (principals and a deputy or assistant principals) at the top of the hierarchical structure and the teachers who form the operating level below" (Cardno et al., 2018. p. 34).

What is evident from the literature is that middle leadership as an entity has become relatively consistently defined, yet in practice remains a broad and contextualised concept. Despite this, there is strong advocacy for the importance of effective middle leadership practice in the literature, suggesting that student outcomes are improved through good middle leadership practice. The Highfield and Woods (2024) review of middle leadership literature in New Zealand refers to middle leadership practices being associated with improved student academic outcomes in New Zealand schools. While Gurr (2024) in their review states that "there is sufficient evidence to claim confidently that teacher and middle leaders can impact positively on students, teachers and schools" (Gurr, 2024, p.5).

Middle leadership as practice in New Zealand

The New Zealand Ministry of Education attempts to conceptualise the practice of middle leadership for the New Zealand context through their document 'Leading from the Middle' (Ministry of Education, 2012). In this document, it describes "the purpose of middle and senior leaders is to improve outcomes for all students – outcomes that embrace their education, welfare and development" (Ministry of Education, 2012, p. 8). It goes on to list a number of functions that school leaders undertake in their roles. This list is quite extensive and reinforces the wide range of practices that middle leaders undertake in their roles. Interestingly, there are number of reoccurring practices across these functions such as; working relationally with staff to ensure best practice and professional growth, leading in a way that is responsive

to students' unique needs in an Aotearoa context, and managing and leading change and school systems, to name a few. The frequent mention of relational skills across these practices does not go unnoticed, and indeed many studies have identified relational skills as being of upmost importance in effective middle leadership practice (Bassett, 2016; Edwards-Groves & Grootenboer, 2021, Highfield & Woods, 2024). Of further note, in *Leading from the Middle* (Ministry of Education, 2012) there is no disaggregation in the functions, or capabilities required of middle and senior leaders. This suggests that middle leaders and senior leaders require similar skills and may practice leadership in similar ways. Consequently, middle leaders need to be well-equipped with the requisite skills to fulfill their roles effectively, thus reinforcing the importance of effective middle leadership development.

Further alignment of middle leader and senior leader practices can be observed in Australia. Lipscombe et al. (2020) states that “The Australian Professional Standard for Principals has been suggested by the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership as a useful framework for middle leaders” (p. 412). Which suggests that leadership practice in education requires similar skillsets but is practiced in different contexts and at different levels of the organisational hierarchy. When applying this to a New Zealand context, one could draw on the work of Wylie and McKinley (2018) whose *Leadership Capabilities Framework* identifies practices drawn from empirical research that can be used by New Zealand schools to promote leadership growth and learning through different educational contexts. It identifies nine key capabilities which are; building trust and relationships, culturally responsive practice, building and sustaining collective leadership, strategic thinking and planning, evaluating practice, resource management, self-learning and development, embodying organisational values and contribution to the development and wellbeing of education beyond the organisation. Within this framework, the above criteria are applicable for leadership practice regardless of hierarchical positioning, with key points under each criteria accounting for contextual differences based on where leadership is applied. This shares alignment with leadership as practice theory (Grootenboer & Edwards-Groves, 2023; Raelin, 2016).

The emergence of middle leadership as an entity in education has been explored by many researchers over the last twenty years and these studies have refined our understanding of where middle leadership exists. Recent literature indicates that regardless of the disparate contexts in which middle leadership occurs, there are many shared similarities in leadership practice between middle and senior leaders. Examining these practices further illuminates the challenges that are faced by middle leaders in their practice; these challenges are discussed below.

Middle leadership challenges

Research both internationally and domestically indicates that middle leaders face many challenges in their roles. Often middle leaders are appointed to their roles through demonstrating competence and capability in their teaching practice (De Nobile, 2018). However, teaching practice requires a different set of skill requirements than leading, therefore, new skills in leadership must be developed (Bennett et al., 2007; Irvine & Brundrett, 2016; Lipscombe et al., 2023). The investigation into these challenges reveals several significant themes, grounded in the diverse responsibilities these leaders fulfill in their roles. Understanding these challenges is crucial for schools leaders to ensure the adequate provision of support and development for their middle leaders.

Lack of Time and Workload

The intensification of accountability on school principals after education reforms in the 1980's and 1990's created expansion of responsibility and distribution of work into the lower levels of the hierarchy (Cardno & Bassett, 2015; Lipscombe, 2023; Youngs & Evans, 2021). An impact of this has been the workload overwhelm and lack of time that middle leaders experience in their roles in managing both leadership and teaching responsibility. The Lipscombe et al. (2023) review discusses middle leaders experiencing conflict in prioritising between their teaching and leading obligations when grappling with the time demands of their roles. This tension between teaching and leading is reinforced in the De Nobile (2018) review also, where some reviewed studies suggested leaders felt they were “not doing a good job with their student focused and administrative roles due to the priority they place in their teaching” (De Nobile, 2018, p. 407-408). Bassett (2016) also acknowledges this issue of time and workload in a New Zealand context suggesting the tension experienced by middle leaders in having to balance their leadership responsibilities alongside administrative duties and teaching obligations which often leads them to feel like they are under performing in both their leadership and teaching roles.

Relational and positional challenges

Another challenge faced by middle leaders exists in maintaining relationships while in a position of power or responsibility. Bennett et al. (2007), and Harris (2019) report that middle leaders often experience difficulty in fostering professional collegiality within their teams while simultaneously navigating the expectations of their senior leaders. Furthermore, Skerrit et al. (2023) positions middle leaders as a conduit of change or policy enactment and suggests grappling this responsibility while maintaining

relationships with their teams can also be a significant challenge for them. This highlights the importance of relational skills in leadership practice as middle leaders also face difficulties in maintaining collegiality with their peers while also being accountable for their managing their performance (Bassett & Shaw, 2018; Bennett et al., 2007; Cardno et al., 2018; Highfield & Woods, 2024; Leithwood, 2016). These findings highlight that middle leaders need appropriate preparatory frameworks to develop their leadership practice, particularly in developing relational trust. Bennett (2007) suggests “teaching expertise may not in itself be sufficient to establish a strong authority over a department” (p. 461). Indeed, the difference between leading and managing staff or colleagues, and managing students is noteworthy. In the face of these relational challenges, middle leaders often prioritise the responsibilities in which they are most competent and confident, that is, teaching practice. Irvine and Bundrett (2016) stated that new middle leaders “continued to emphasise their professional relationships with pupils rather than exploring their role as a leader of colleagues or subjects” (p. 88). Furthermore, Leithwood (2016) noted that some middle leaders did not see themselves as direct instructional leaders holding responsibility for improvements in their departments, while some were aware of this responsibility but had a reluctance or an inability to engage in that particular task. One could assume that reluctance or inability may stem from the tensions inherent in managing collegiality with their teams and reinforces the importance of leadership development including maintaining and managing relational trust when in a position of power or authority.

Professional development shortfalls

While multiple studies argue for leadership development as being of vital importance to middle leaders, shortfalls in middle leadership development are often reported. Often, a disconnect is experienced between the training they receive and what their actual leadership needs are (Bassett, 2016; Cardno & Bassett, 2015). The Lipscombe et al. (2023) review suggests “professional development offerings and research in middle leadership professional development are not yet sufficient to equip school ML’s for the complexity of their roles” (p. 283). Consequently, there are numerous appeals in the reviewed literature for middle leadership development practices to be improved and prioritised in schools, as reported by Gurr and Drysdale (2013), Cardno and Bassett (2015), Cardno and Robson (2016), Bassett and Shaw (2018), and Highfield and Woods (2024). Furthermore, along with appeals for middle leadership development as a priority, some studies argue that better preparatory frameworks for the development of aspiring leaders is a moral imperative (Basset & Shaw, 2018; Irvine & Brundrett, 2017). Highfield and Woods (2024) also reinforces this appeal, stating “professional development for teachers who aspire to leadership needs to be instituted prior to middle leader promotion and continue when these individuals

are in their position so that they are able to gain support with their problems of practice” (Highfield & Woods, 2024, p. 105). The challenges faced by middle leaders may also have adverse on their overall wellbeing. The NZCER National Survey in 2015 showed curriculum middle leaders reported inconsistencies in support and access to resources that are essential for effective job performance, while they also indicated higher levels of workload stress, and issues in fairness and manageability when compared to senior leaders and teachers (Wylie & Bonne, 2016). These findings may suggest that the demands of the middle leadership role are resulting in negative wellbeing outcomes for middle leaders themselves. This lends additional support to the argument for better preparatory frameworks for middle leaders in schools, and consequently, the need for middle leadership development that is fit for purpose and effective. Both to ensure middle leaders' wellbeing is preserved and also maximise their impact on the improvement of student and school outcomes.

Considerations for middle leadership development

The assumption that good teachers will automatically make good leaders has evolved (Odhiambo, 2014). Accordingly, the development of leadership practice is becoming increasingly important to schools. Cardno (2005) identifies the development of leaders and managers as being of high importance and states “in New Zealand it has taken a long time for the system to recognise the need for induction training for new principals” (Cardno, 2005, p. 301). The same can be suggested for middle leadership as this review could not find any evidence of national initiatives for middle leadership development in New Zealand. While there have been national development programmes for principals, one could suggest that given middle leadership has been shaped by the distribution of leadership responsibility from expanding principal roles (Cardno & Bassett, 2015; Youngs & Evans, 2021), and considering the Ministry of Education's (2012) siloing of middle and senior leadership practices, professional development guidelines aimed at principals may well be applicable to those in middle leadership roles as well. In line with this thinking, in 2009 a Ministry of Education initiative provided first time principals with a leadership development programme where part of the vision was to extend this kind of leadership development to all middle leaders in the country. Unfortunately, this plan did not become a reality, and therefore, with the absence of a national initiative for middle leadership development it has fallen on the schools to provide their own leadership development programmes (Cardno & Bassett, 2015). However, as reinforced throughout this review, this approach is currently leaving middle leaders underserved and ill-prepared for their roles. This

illuminates a gap in the New Zealand research on middle leadership development, centering on the factors that influence schools' enactment of these practices.

The design of professional development for middle leaders is important to consider. The literature reviewed identifies middle leadership as contextually diverse, which makes the broad prescription of professional development challenging. This supports the argument of leadership development needing to be tailored to individual needs (Cardno & Bassett, 2018). Van Velsor et al. (2010) suggest that, in the interest of student learning most development programmes are focused primarily on operational and transactional matters. However, they recognise additional capabilities absent from these programmes which are central to effective leadership such as “self-awareness, leading change, managing conflict, understanding power, politics and influence, using teams, and building capacity in others” (Van Velsor, et al., 2010, p. 187–192). Many of these capabilities are aligned with middle leadership practice identified in a New Zealand context through the Ministry of Education (2012) as well as the leadership capabilities framework developed by Wiley and McKinley (2018). Additionally, Van Velsor et al. (2010) offers a view of leadership development which suggests that leaders develop through assessment, challenge, and support and that “any type of developmental experience, from training to job assignments, is most effective when all three are present” (Van Velsor et al., 2010, p. 37). Of further interest in the field of principal development, Cardno and Youngs (2013) provided insight into the Experienced Principals Development Programme in New Zealand over a period of 18 months. In their discussion they suggest that the effectiveness of the development programme is dependent on how responsive it is to individual needs, and should also vary in its format over a longer duration for it to be “reflective, applied and sustained” (Cardno & Youngs, 2013, p. 267). Given the similarities in leadership practice, one could assume these findings could also be applicable to middle leadership development.

Practices for middle leadership development

The need for intentional middle leadership development in education cannot be ignored. Many schools have recognised this and taken the initiative to prioritise it within their own schools. However, as suggested by Lipscombe (2023) and Highfield and Woods (2024), there are often inconsistencies in how development is received by middle leaders and how effective it is in developing their practice. The reviewed literature has identified many recommendations for effective middle leadership development. One strong theme emanating from multiple New Zealand based studies is that leadership development needs to be individualised to the needs of middle leaders to be effective (Bassett & Shaw, 2018; Cardno

& Bassett, 2015; Cardno & Youngs, 2013; Youngs & Ogram, 2024). To understand what those needs are, knowledge of context is imperative, as well as where middle leaders' gaps in knowledge are. This reinforces the importance of critical reflection and self-awareness for middle leaders, which is identified as a fundamental skill to develop by Cardno and Bassett (2015), Irvine and Brundrett (2016), and Wiley and McKinley (2018). This also reinforces the recommendations for assessment of leadership practice to identify areas for development by Van Velsor et al. (2010).

The idea of engaging in leadership development exposes a potential challenge for middle leaders who already grapple with time and workload demands. That is; where does one find the time for reflection and development of leadership practice? While many schools have professional development policies and build it into their operations in a variety of ways. This is often aimed at the improvement of teaching practice whereas the development of leadership practice is often less recognised (Cardno, 2005). Furthermore, with government-driven agendas influencing curriculum reform and re-shaping, schools are often inundated with additional policy work which takes up a lot of the professional development time and resource. As a result, middle leaders who are often conduits of policy change and enactment (Skerrit et al., 2023) can be overloaded with learning new ways of thinking, administrating and practicing, leaving less room for developing leadership practice (Lipscombe et al., 2023).

While development practices do exist for middle leaders, multiple studies challenge their effectiveness. Gurr and Drysdale (2013) reported in their Australian study that the apprenticeship model was dominant for middle leaders. Indeed, learning on-the-job or through experience appears often to be relied on as a primary method of development for middle leaders. Bassett (2016) reported that most middle leaders in their study felt they learned their role through trial and error rather than formalised planned leadership development. Though they also noted that the majority of middle leaders “do receive a measure of leadership development to carry out their roles effectively, despite their perception to the contrary” (Bassett, 2016. p. 104).

In addition to learning through experience, some studies also report on schools relying on mentoring to develop their middle leaders (Bassett, 2016; Edwards-Groves et al., 2023; Gurr & Drysdale, 2013; Lipscombe et al., 2023). The impact of mentorship is reported as a positive experience by some middle leaders (Bassett & Shaw, 2018; Thorpe & Bennett-Powell, 2014). However, relying on this method also concedes limitations. Bryant and Walker (2022) suggest individual coaching or mentoring is time intensive and that many experiences that could culminate in professional learning are dealt with ad-hoc or inconsistently. Ehrich et al. (2004) explored formal mentoring in education and noted while mentoring does impact leadership development positively, this is contingent on the mentor having a number of

requisite skills in effective mentoring, such as; professional expertise, personality alignment, and relevant training to meet the needs of the mentee. These limitations need to be considered when reliant on mentoring as a primary form of middle leadership development. Mentoring is not limited to developing middle leaders; Nirit and Dorit (2026) report its use in cultivating principal practice. Despite smaller sample sizes, the method showed clear benefits for newer principals, including improved communication, fulfillment of role obligations, and emotional support. However, they also note flaws, particularly limits in diagnostic skills and inferring lessons from past events, indicating that mentoring, like other leadership development approaches, has its limitations.

Cardno (2005) discusses leadership development practices in New Zealand, distinguishing between two primary approaches. The first, management training, encompasses structured courses or longer-form qualifications aimed at specific skills. The second, management support, includes coaching or mentoring from experienced leaders and opportunities to learn and grow through job promotion. Together, these methods illustrate the range of ways leadership development can be enacted, while highlighting that it can be intentional and proactive or reactive in nature. Though it is interesting to note that despite middle leadership roles and practices evolving for almost two decades (Harris, 2019) many development practices remain the same.

When considering these leadership development practices in context, some patterns begin to emerge. Among these, the prevalence of reactive development approaches where development is assumed to be happening through trial and error, apprenticeship models, mentoring and operational support in their roles (Bassett, 2016; Bassett & Shaw, 2018; Gurr & Drysdale, 2013). However, Van Velsor et al., (2010) challenge this, stating “we know that although leaders learn primarily through their experiences, not all experiences are equally developmental” (Van Velsor et al., 2010, p. 36). This reinforces appeals for development that is intentional, proactive and individualised (Bassett, 2016, Bassett & Shaw, 2018, Gurr, 2024) to ensure that development is effective and not just left to chance.

More recent publications in middle leadership development reveal innovative practices emerging. In Australia, research commissioned by the Association of Independent Schools Leadership Centre in New South Wales into a school based strategy for middle leaders, highlighted that when middle leaders were engaged in inquiry-based practices that were reflective in nature and contextually designed, there were positive impacts on the practices of middle leaders. Furthermore, this was enhanced when middle leaders were connected to a professional learning community engaged in the same development, (Day & Grice, 2019). They reported that the programme helped middle leaders reframe their roles from being largely administrative in function to becoming more focused around the leadership of people. This conceptual

reframing was supported by principals and acknowledged as being necessary for school improvement. This signals a shift from operational support and traditional apprenticeship and mentoring models to development practices that are more reflective, applied, and long term. But also highlights that support from principals is vital, especially in creating the conditions for, and resourcing longer term development models.

Additionally, a long term multi-level leadership development programme reported by Youngs and Ogram (2024) in New Zealand emphasised the benefits of co-constructed, collaborative, and holistic leadership development involving inquiry-based practices. Interestingly, development aimed at principals requesting leadership development and networking “soon spread to include assistant and deputy principals, who were then joined by an increasing number of middle leaders who mainly had coaching roles with teachers as well as team leadership roles” (Youngs & Ogram, 2024 p. 13). The research suggests the programme was perceived favourably by the senior leaders, resulting in its extension to middle leaders. This may further reinforce similarities in middle and senior leadership practices. Youngs and Ogram (2024) concluded that effective leadership development requires a long-term commitment, and that collaborative, reflective, and adaptive processes that move beyond conventional training programmes should be considered. In this study, middle and senior leaders working collaboratively on inquiry-based practice was deemed as effective and more responsive to the needs of the school, which diverges somewhat from the commonly used approaches reported in the reviewed literature, but further illuminates the importance of senior leadership support in the development of middle leaders. Youngs and Ogram’s (2024) study highlights new innovations in middle leadership development in New Zealand but also highlights the limitations of the literature base in New Zealand which lacks reporting of middle leadership development practices on a wider scale. Instead, we are left to make assumptions about what practice occurs and its effectiveness in developing middle leaders.

The role of senior leaders

Many studies are highlighting how vital the support of senior leaders is for middle leadership practice and development. Cardno (2005) suggests the principal’s prioritisation of leadership development at both middle and senior management levels is “critical to the distribution of effective leadership development across the organisation (Cardno, 2005. p. 294). Gurr (2024) also highlights the importance of principal support as a key factor to effective middle leadership practice, and suggests through clear role expectations and the setting of cultures which prioritise middle leadership development this can be

achieved. They go on to describe this as occurring through providing professional learning opportunities, as well as the release-time and resources to engage in them. Symbiotically, recent studies are suggesting that effective leadership of school principals is also reliant “on the engagement of other leaders, mainly of middle leaders” (Altonen, 2024. p. 664). Altonen (2024) asserts that senior leaders are integral in the support and development of their middle leaders making a number of recommendations from their research and review that include formalising their roles and giving them autonomy, engaging them in decision making processes, establishing the knowledge and skills required of them and identifying and meeting their needs.

Further advocacy for senior leaders’ approach to middle leadership development being both proactive and collaborative is made by Gurr and Drysdale (2013) who also suggest organisational and policy considerations to strengthen their development. While Bassett and Shaw (2018) and Youngs and Ogram (2024) also relay the benefits of development programmes that involve both senior leaders and middle leaders working collaboratively and that meet the needs of both the individual and organisation. Arguably, there is evidence to suggest that effective middle leadership development requires backing from principals and senior leadership, and it thrives in a school culture which values leadership development.

Conclusion

Given the disparity in middle leadership development practices in New Zealand in the absence of national initiatives, the principal’s role in setting school culture around leadership development, and more specifically in the field of middle leadership cannot be understated. While Cardno and Bassett (2015) have explored multiple perspectives of middle leadership development in New Zealand, there is notable gap in the New Zealand-based literature that explores recent middle leadership development practices in New Zealand high schools and the influence of principals and senior leaders in shaping them. In the initial search for this review, literature based exclusively in a New Zealand educational context is hard to come by indicating research opportunities in middle leadership in education. A further identified gap exists in the exploration of factors which influence senior leaders to shape the conditions, cultures and practices of middle leadership development the way they do.

Chapter Three: Research Methodology

Research question

In line with the identified gaps in the research, this study aims to examine how senior leaders and principals' formative middle leadership development experiences influence the leadership development opportunities at their schools.

Chapter overview

The remainder of this chapter discusses the research design outlining the ontological and epistemological positioning, as well as the design framework. The methodology follows with data collection and analysis outlined, as well as how trustworthiness was established. Considerations for ethical principles are also included in the chapter, including ethical approval.

Research design

This research is a qualitative study. Creswell (2013) describes the characteristics of qualitative research, one of which includes a focus on the meanings that participants' ascribe to their experiences, while also considering the existence of multiple subjective realities. Furthermore, Creswell (2013) suggests that qualitative research is best used when individual experiences are best positioned to explore a particular problem or issue. Lipscombe et al. (2023) state “middle leadership is best understood as a social construct which varies according to the context and those who experience it” (p. 282). Therefore, due to the middle leadership development being contextually diverse, qualitative research enables different contexts and participant experiences to be considered in the research methodology and design.

The research paradigm that framed this inquiry is interpretive. Scotland (2012) states “interpretative methodology is directed at understanding phenomenon from an individual’s perspective” (p. 10). The literature reviewed in chapter 2 argues that principal and senior leader support is vital for effective middle leadership development. This research sought to examine the middle leadership development experiences of principals or senior leaders who oversee middle leadership development at their schools. To understand how their historical experiences of leadership development shape the cultures and opportunities for leadership development that occur within their schools, with a specific lens on what this looks like for the development of middle leaders in their leadership practice. Understanding senior leaders' unique development experiences and exploring how these experiences might shape

middle leadership development at their schools may then illuminate unknown or unexplored barriers to effective middle leadership development. This may also expose opportunities for future research to explore how these barriers can be addressed in the interest of improved leadership development outcomes.

A relativist ontology assumes the variability of truths across contexts (Denzin et al., 2024). This study is focused on the different experiences of school leaders and how that forms their realities. Therefore, this research adopts the ontological position of relativism. This rejects universal truths and assumes each individual's realities will differ. Furthermore, this study adopted a constructionist epistemology recognising that leadership development is socially constructed through the individuals' experiences, their contexts, and the meanings they ascribe to them. Understanding this enables links to be made from their previous experiences of middle leadership development, to the beliefs and assumptions they may now hold about leadership, and the way this shapes how they develop their middle leaders.

A generic qualitative inquiry formed the research design framework of this study. The flexibility and adaptability this provides is beneficial to the study as it allows the ability to explore both the participants prior middle leadership development experiences and the current development cultures and practices they enact for their own middle leaders without being bound to one particular focus. Through its methodology of semi-structured interviews, it provides flexibility to explore links that might appear between past experiences and current cultures or practices in greater detail. The main focus of the interview was not to exclusively explore principal or senior leaders past experiences in middle leadership development, but to understand if and how these experiences influence their beliefs about what effective middle leadership development is, and how this extends to the current culture and practice of middle leadership development occurring at their schools.

Ethics

This study required ethical approval as it involved participant contributions. Mutch (2005) considers researchers to be in a position of power and provides ethical considerations to ensure participant welfare is given priority. These considerations were presented to AUT ethics committee and ethical approval was granted on the 17th of October 2025. Ethical approval can be found in Appendix 1.

Data collection

A selection of schools was identified through professional networks of the researcher as currently engaging in, or having had in the past, a focus on leadership development. Additional schools were selected due to the geographical location as being in travel proximity to the researcher. Ten schools were approached as it was determined that 5-7 responses would be adequate for a 60-point dissertation. Four schools agreed to participate, which given the time constraints for this research was deemed to be an acceptable number. Participants in the study were either principals or senior leaders who have oversight of middle leadership development in their area of responsibility. Principals were approached initially for consent to access and were able to participate themselves, or elect to pass the participant information on to the relevant senior leader if that person had middle leadership development as part of their responsibility or portfolio. Principal information sheet and consent to access, participant information sheet, and participant consent form can all be found in Appendix 2, 3 and 4, respectively.

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews of 45-60 minutes. Three interviews were conducted in person, and one was conducted online via Microsoft Teams. Both in-person and online interviews were recorded and transcribed in Microsoft Teams. The questions were themed to first establish demographic information, then explore the current middle leadership development practices at their school. Then to discuss their own formative leadership development experiences, and finally to explore any links between their past experiences and their current practices. The questions can be found in Appendix 5. While these questions were established as a base, many follow-up questions were asked to expand their answers or seek further understanding.

Data Analysis

The data was analysed by the researcher using thematic analysis, which is a method for identifying patterns or themes within data, describing the data set in rich detail (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis can report the “reality of participants, or can be a constructionist method which examines the ways in which events, realities, meanings, experiences, and so on are the effects of a range of discourses operating within society” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 81) This method of analysis aligns with interpretivist paradigms and the general qualitative methodology of semi-structured interviews. The 6 phases of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) were used to identify repeated patterns of meaning across the information gathered, aiming to explore the connection between past leadership development

experiences of senior leaders and the current practices they enact. These phases are; familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006. p. 87). Initially, in phase 1, interview transcripts and recordings were read and listened to repeatedly for familiarisation. In phase 2, codes were labelled onto a large mind-map (appendix 6). These codes were current practices and formative experiences. Themes then emerged and were labelled for phase 3 as “leadership conceptualisation, mentoring, support vs development, relationships, and appraisal/professional growth cycles”. In phase 4, themes were reviewed; transcripts were read again with supporting quotes and language relating to the themes being colour-coded to establish significance to the over-arching research question. Similarities and differences were explored between participants and put into tabular form with critical questions developed to promote discussion and findings (appendix 7). Phase 5 involved defining the themes in relation to the research question and reviewed literature. From this, sub themes emerged and provided the framework for phase 6, producing the report.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is increasingly seen as an alternative lens for evaluating research quality to traditional positivist notions of reliability and validity (Bryman, 2012). In qualitative inquiry, validity concerns how accurately findings reflect the studied phenomena, supported by appropriate methodological choices, while qualitative reliability emphasizes consistency and transparency in the approach (Creswell, 2014). Trustworthiness, in turn, embodies the integrity and confidence stakeholders' place in both the researcher and the study (Hammond & Wellington, 2012). Within interpretivist research, traditional notions of reliability rooted in positivism are inappropriate due to the existence of multiple realities and the active role of the researcher in interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Instead, the aim is to establish trustworthiness. I approached this by attending to all phases of the research process; data collection, analysis, interpretation, and the presentation of findings, as outlined by Merriam and Tisdell (2015). To promote dependability, I maintained thorough records of each research phase in an accessible format. Throughout this process, my research supervisor had access to all documentation including interview transcripts and all written drafts. I met with my supervisor fortnightly throughout the majority of the data analysis and write-up phase, testing my thinking and facilitating interpretation to be free of potential bias. Additionally, throughout the data analysis and write up phases of the research, I continually returned to the transcripts to scanning for ambiguity in the language and checking for my own biases in the interpretation of the data.

Chapter Four: Research Findings

Introduction

Four participants were selected from New Zealand high schools. Selected schools were a mix of state and private, three were co-educational and one was single sex. The schools ranged in socio-economic positioning and were large in student cohorts (1400 – 2900 in total). Two of the participants were principals, each with over 25 years' experience in education and over 10 years of principal experience across two or more schools. The other two participants were a deputy and associate principal, one with 5 years of senior leadership experience at their school and the other with just over 10 years of senior leadership experience across two schools. Given the small number of participants, additional demographic information about age, gender or ethnicity has been omitted to strengthen participant confidentiality and given that it would not influence the findings of this research. New Zealand schools vary in size, structure, decile, culture and character; these variations mean there are limitations in this research sample. Given the small number of participants, the findings are not representative of all New Zealand high schools.

There were broad similarities in all the middle leadership development cultures and practices within the four schools. However, one school does run a specific and targeted leadership development programme for their staff. While this was not exclusively for middle leaders, it was a point of difference from other schools and was specifically targeted at growing leaders in their school and is discussed further throughout this section. Transcripts of the interviews with the senior leaders were analysed with themes emerging about the middle leadership development practices and cultures at their schools, and links to their own middle leadership development emerging, these themes are explored in detail below.

Theme 1 explores what leadership appears to mean to the participants, considering the values and assumptions they may hold and how these influence middle leadership development. Theme 2 will explore how these views are expressed through development and what role mentoring and relationships play in leadership development. Theme 3 will explore what leadership development looked like in practice, considering the participants' previous experiences and their current practices.

Theme One - What is leadership?

This theme suggests that the type of development that is provided for middle leaders is contingent upon how the senior leader conceptualises leadership and how that forms their leadership values. Participants used language in their interviews which suggests the leadership values and assumptions they hold about leadership may form how they conceptualise leadership as practice and therefore what they prioritise the development of their middle leaders. Additionally, they are able to draw connections to their own experiences suggesting that these values and assumptions have been formed through their own development.

1.1 - Leadership is about trust and autonomy

Some of the participants framed effective leadership as grounded in trust and autonomy. Through their own experiences of middle leadership, autonomy in practice also transferred to autonomy in their own development as middle leaders.

"I was always empowered to be creative..." "He checked up on me, but he didn't micromanage" **Participant 1.**

"Mostly, you just talk to your colleagues and figure it out for yourself" **Participant 2.**

Both participants acknowledge that being given autonomy in their formative development experiences impact their current practice as leaders, and the way they develop their middle leaders;

"what I've tried to do when I appoint people to positions is allow them to be them, rather than micromanage them". **Participant 1.**

"I actually don't think that was a bad way of doing it" **Participant 2.**

1.2 - Leadership is about context expertise

Participants also suggest that context expertise is important for middle leadership and that participants saw building their own expertise as an important leadership function. **Participant 1** valued development experiences that built expertise in a range of areas. When discussing the experiences that were valuable in building their expertise, they mentioned;

"marking external examinations", "developing NCEA materials", "curriculum groups", "timetabling" and "getting connected to organisations outside of my school" **Participant 1.**

As a senior leader, **Participant 1** is supportive of their staff developing through experience and encourages this in areas outside of their core responsibilities, as they strongly believe;

“it will benefit us in the rigour of the thinking”.

Participant 3 shared similar preconceptions around the value of context expertise as an important facet of leadership. When describing middle leadership development, they described their desire for middle leaders to become subject and administration experts. They mentioned their new middle leaders joining the curriculum association, getting to the headspace of;

“writing and moderation” as well as “networking groups”

While largely operational Participant 3’s push to “break down silos” and leverage long-serving staff reflects trust in context specific knowledge;

“there's a lot of staff here who have been here a long time so carry a lot of knowledge, that collegiality makes a massive difference” **Participant 3.**

As a point of difference from the other participants, there was no mention of subject or administrative skillsets as being an important factor for leadership from **Participant 4**, and indeed the leadership development practices enacted at their school did not involve their middle leaders seeking to further their knowledge in these areas. This suggests participant 4 holds different assumptions about leadership and leadership values.

1.3 - Leadership is about role modelling and high performance.

Some participants also suggested that leadership is framed through high standards, credibility, and visible role modelling. **Participant 2** described their own formative journey as one which benefited from demonstrating these values as they were “shoulder tapped” into leadership positions which they also assumed was from demonstrating competency in other roles.

“I got some runs on the board early enough with my team and built credibility”.

However, they also identify this has influenced them to be more transparent in their practices. Though they were a beneficiary of being shoulder tapped into leadership, **Participant 2** noticed some people felt alienated by that process;

"because good people do get overlooked, I want a transparent process of how middle leaders are identified and advanced in the organisation"

Competency in leadership is acknowledged by **Participant 1** also who balances autonomy for his middle leaders, but also has high expectations of performance,

"I've probably got better at high trust in setting expectations...I'm going to lay out at the front end what I expect by the end of the year and let you be you and get on with it"
Participant 1.

Participant 2 also lays out the importance of high performance and alignment with strategic goals of the organisation.

"these are the priorities in our school, so this is how you need to behave to be a successful person that is advancing our tone of culture and strategic plan... you need to act this way, teach this way, this is the professional conduct we expect". **Participant 2.**

This reinforces the importance of high expectations, professionalism and role modelling in leadership to this participant and relates to the development practices they enact through facilitating or mandating professional development opportunities in areas they want to see demonstrated in their school. Though, by their own admission this is largely based around teaching and learning, and not specific to leadership development.

1.4 - Leadership is about relational trust and growth

The relational aspect of leadership was a significant feature among the participants' understanding of leadership; however, it was more prevalent in some participants' language than others. **Participant 4** spoke often of growing capacity, and a lot of their language suggested that professional growth of oneself and those who they lead was highly valued in their idea of leadership. Additionally, the role of relational trust in this process was clearly important through this participants' language. They mentioned terms and phrases such as;

"Encouraging new learning and reflection" "building capacity" and "growing leaders"

Participant 4 was also very clear in articulating the role of the line managers in their development of middle leaders through their formalised meeting times, with the aim being;

"focusing on the growth of our HOF's, rather than just having those meetings about staff.."

This suggests the participant holds a contrasting view of leadership development being framed through growth of leadership as practice instead of being exclusively operationally or administratively focused.

Participant 1 mentioned relationships as being an integral value that forms their leadership views, and there were links between their current practices and prior experiences. In their past experiences, they spoke of having strong professional relationships that helped in their development. They valued leaders who;

“recognise the human side of their team”.

These experiences create a desire for **Participant 1** to reciprocate;

“I was well supported by good people which makes me want to support good people”.

Participant 1 further reinforced the importance of relationships in their practice when talking about connection with their teams across the whole school;

“that regular connection, whatever that looks like, is really important”.

Growth was also acknowledged by **participant 3**, however it was equated to status or experience, not necessarily growth of leadership practice;

“We would always lean towards upskilling and giving the leadership opportunity to a potential candidate internally, as a means to give them some status, some learning, give them some skills” **Participant 3.**

Participant 3 also suggested professional development in “effective conversations” would be offered to new middle leaders. This was identified by this participant as an area important to leadership of teams, but where they lacked development in their formative years, indicating a link between their own experiences and current practices.

Participant 4 held a firm focus on developing middle leaders based on a leadership capabilities framework developed by NZCER in 2018. This is the same framework discussed in the literature review section of this dissertation by Wiley and McKinley (2018);

“Everyone who has a middle leadership, or leadership role needs to have a leadership goal which is connected to this framework”.

These leadership goals were guided by SLT to have a strong strategic focus and were often in the areas of leading professional learning or development of their staff. This suggests that this participant conceptualises leadership as growth-orientated and development focused, which relates to their formative leadership experiences. This participant highlighted one of the most effective methods in their own development being their relationship with;

“Someone you’re able to be quite authentic and vulnerable with, but that can also support you to grow”

For this participant, this was most often a senior leader, and at one stage in their career as a senior leader, the absence of this relationship for them has been a catalyst for a job change;

“So, having that significant person that’s really invested in your growth, I think has been, for me, one of the key things”.

This highlights the significance of positive relationships that enable professional growth for **Participant 4** in their formative years, and how it translates into their current assumptions of leadership and subsequent middle leadership development strategies.

Theme 1 - Conclusion

Each of these senior leaders spoke differently about leadership, suggesting that they hold their own different views on leadership as a construct. This is important to consider, as how they view leadership may influence what they perceive to be the important qualities of leaders and subsequently the ways in which they develop their leaders. With middle leadership development reported in literature as being insufficient, understanding these views is imperative to identifying the limitations of viewing leadership through particular or different lenses.

Theme Two - The perceived impacts of mentoring and relationships in leadership development

Senior leaders often speak very positively about their formative development experiences in leadership being linked to strong mentorship and positive professional relationships. This theme emerges from the experiences of all participants who consider themselves very fortunate to have had influential people mentoring them throughout their leadership journey. While the participants recognise that often these

relationships occurred organically in their own experiences, they attempt to recreate these relationships formalising them through systems in their current practices.

“the most effective (development practice) that I have found through my career is having that personal relationship with someone you trust, but also that can support you to grow”

Participant 4.

“the big difference was I had two very good heads (of school) that were basically invaluable mentors.... I had a good personal relationship with them, and they therefore could see I had potential and they took it upon themselves to mentor me” **Participant 3.**

“The single most useful thing that happened was working with other experienced Deans”

Participant 2.

“I was fortunate enough to luck into some really awesome influential principals at the time.. They always sort of allowed me to be me” **Participant 1.**

There appears to be a link between this important part of their formative development and the current practices they enact. All have a mentorship or a buddy system that exists in their current development practices for middle leaders at their schools. All have a formalised relationship between middle leaders and a line manager who is most often a senior leader, with two participants talking about how this links to appraisal. While **Participant 3** also mentions they will often “buddy up” new middle leaders with experienced ones as a form of support into their roles.

There is some variation in the participants' current practices about the intent of these formal relationships. **Participant 4** relates this strongly to the growth and development of the middle leader in relation to a leadership goal which has been built into their professional growth cycle. **Participant 3** relates this to a mix of operational support and career progression which stems from appraisal conversations. **Participant 1** relates this more to ensuring transparency and support to middle leaders in their areas of responsibility, and similarly, **Participant 2** also relates this to the operational and support of middle leaders in their areas of responsibility.

The formalised mentor relationships that these senior leaders had in their formative years were of mixed value, but they also had other significant relationships in an unofficial capacity which were influential in their development.

“So, the mentor thing was probably more covert than overt” **Participant 1.**

“Mostly, you just talk to your colleagues and figure it out” **Participant 2.**

“What was incredibly strong was that horizontal support” **Participant 3.**

“People will find their person if they feel like they need that person” Participant 4.

Of note, is that **Participant’s 2 and 3** spoke strongly about the horizontal support being influential in their formative development. **Participant 3** has also enacted this in their current middle leadership development practices with a horizontal “buddy system” for newly appointed middle leaders. Whereas **Participant 2** does not have this system embedded in their current leadership development, in their own experiences their horizontal support was driven by;

“Me, seeking out folks to talk to” Participant 2.

This may suggest that this participant assumes their middle leaders are doing the same.

Interestingly, all used words such as “luck” or “fortune” when describing the relationships that were influential in their development, as they were most often not formalised. **Participant 4** reinforced this stating;

“the person that looks after them directly might not be the person; they might do a fine job being their line manager, but for their own leadership growth, that might not be their person”.

Given the association of luck and fortune to this phenomenon, this might go some way to explain why it is not explored more fully in Participants 1,2 and 3’s schools. However, **Participant 4** has been intentionally developing the effectiveness of their formalised mentoring by engaging their senior leaders in professional learning that develops their own coaching skills to grow their middle leaders more effectively.

Theme two - Conclusion

The power of effective mentoring in developing leadership cannot be understated. However, all participants have indicated that they were “lucky” to have significant relationships in their formative years, many of these being informal relationships. This heightens the probability of leadership development being left to chance if it is contingent on a mentoring relationship for development to occur and further questions begin to emerge about the difference between support and development, and what constitutes effective mentoring. Finally, worth further consideration, if a mentor is responsible for the development of a middle leader, whose ideas or values of leadership are being developed?

Theme Three - Support and Development; are they the same?

When considering support and development, it becomes important to differentiate between the two. Participants often use the two words interchangeably, although support seems to be referred to as something that comes as response to a need, while development in most cases refers to a change in practice over time through experience or learning. All participants indicated several ways in which their middle leaders are supported in their roles, though less could be said about how they are developed in their leadership practice. The following subsections unpack the support and development experiences of the participants and their current support and development cultures.

3.1 - Structured versus unstructured development

When participants considered their own middle leadership development experiences, the term ‘unstructured’ was quite common. Along with their development occurring through experience and significant relationships, participants often described their leadership development as being self-directed and absent of structure. When asked how they would describe their leadership development and who was responsible, **Participant 2** described it as;

“Very (unstructured)” and driven by “me, seeking out folks to talk to”.

This approach appears to share commonality with their current development structures. When describing effective leadership development practices, they went on to say;

“Adult learners learn best when stuff is needed now... I also think learning by making a few mistakes, provided you’ve got a support network... is not a bad way of learning”
Participant 2.

This shares similarities to their current development cultures in which one aspect involves relying on mentoring relationships and support from colleagues to support and develop their middle leaders. But also begins shows an alignment with experience as a method of development discussed in 3.3 below.

Participant 1 described their own development as;

“Mostly (self-directed), but supported”

This participant indicated that they were fortunate to have good principals and line managers who supported their development, which when combined with their own motivation to develop a wider range of experiences, was quite effective in their mind. They did this mostly by;

“Putting my hand up when something comes along”

This meant they felt they were able to progress in their career and therefore develop through these experiences which were often not for intentional development, but useful in developing new skills. There were again links to the cultures they now enact in their school reinforcing their stance on wanting to support opportunities for their staff to learn in the same way. **Participant 1** stated;

“I've pretty much got an open book when it comes to PLD”

This participant also endeavours to provide opportunities for leadership development through experience. When leadership opportunities arise in their middle and senior leadership teams, they have been creative in making these opportunities accessible to a wider number of staff by prioritising internal appointments and distributing portfolios to enable more staff to develop experience in that area. This reinforces the construct of experiential development discussed in 3.3 below and highlights the reliance on an individual's motivation for development or career progression that this participant identified in their formative experiences. Additionally, **Participant 1** also stated in their development years, that their senior leaders;

“Allowed me to be me”

This experience has influenced their own approach, in the way they give autonomy to their staff, including middle leaders, to be themselves and find their way. They further stated that they;

“Appoint people to positions to be themselves, rather than micromanage them”.

Participant 4 described their own development as;

“definitely driven by a person”

but was the only participant to de-silo support and development, indicating they saw them as two different constructs. In their own experiences they were;

“well supported but didn't really have leadership development”.

They also spoke of their middle leadership development being unstructured, but at times driven by others;

“my principal said, one of the things you have to do is your Masters (in Educational Leadership)”.

Interestingly, the differentiation of support and development as two separate constructs is evident in this participant’s current development practices. As a point of difference from the other participants, **Participant 4** spoke of middle leaders receiving operational support through their mentoring, collegial relationships and short courses;

“but nothing is really structured about you as a leader”

This may explain why this participant has created an intentional leadership development programme aimed at growing leadership capacity with their staff who hold leadership responsibility. This reinforces the importance of understanding how leadership is conceptualised by senior leaders and the impact that may have on the development practices and cultures they enact.

3.2 - Less effective development practices

When asked “what were the least effective practices in their formative development experiences?” There were a range of answers which illuminated links to the participants' current practices in most cases.

Participant 1 noted the least effective practice was appraisal stating;

“not once did I do anything meaningful in my career that was stimulated by appraisal”

Interestingly, as a process in their school now, appraisal or the professional growth cycle is a

“devolved process” and “very light touch”, as “in my experience, it isn’t what gets people motivated”.

Participant 2 stated that;

“given their wasn’t very much (middle leadership development) it would be hard to say” but “I’m quite content with the fact that most of my learning was just from experienced colleagues and trial and error... because I operated that way and it worked, I guess I’m quite happy to, at the moment, let that same model exist now”.

Participant 3 indicated that they felt their development lacked relational development;

"I was always left going, "that could have gone better" and for me that was an area I've got to focus on and come from a different angle".

While they also indicate this something that is important to their current middle leaders, the development practices they are prioritising in the current development of their middle leaders tend to be based around the operational support in their role.

Participant 4 showed a strong link between their formative development experiences and that which they enact. The least effective practice for them was;

"When no-one has those really rich conversations with you, that made me feel someone saw what I was trying to do and also encouraged me to be reflective or seek some support or understanding, or just a different perspective on those things I was working on"

This appears quite evidently to impact their current development practices. Firstly, through their formalised development programme, they are aiming to build capacity over time exposing middle leaders to learning in areas such as; Social styles, leadership styles, leading meetings, open to learning behaviours, and relational trust to name a few. The nature of these sessions is to encourage new learning and reflection in that space. Secondly, those formalised mentor relationships explored earlier also follow a *"growth coaching model"* format. Where the intent is to use these conversations to develop their middle leaders;

"So specifically, how I can, and how we can, as senior leaders, grow our middle leaders rather than just meet with them and support them and manage them, but actually how we grow leadership capacity"

3.3 - Leadership development occurring through experience

When considering the middle leadership development experiences of the participants, there is language from all participants that suggests that the learning they received through experience in their roles was a common and highly efficient method of developing their leadership practice. In their roles there was a range of new experiences and opportunities which brought about new learning. Some of these came through individual motivations for improvement or solving problems of practice, others came from organisational change or delegation from senior colleagues;

Participant 1;

"I was always keen to be involved in stuff";

"that's something I did myself because it was something I was interested in"
"It was about throwing myself into the wider life of teaching"

Participant 2;

"The most useful thing in my development as a dean, was talking to other deans"
"Mostly, you just talk to your colleagues and figure it out"
"I actually don't think that was a bad way of doing it"

Participant 3;

"You don't know you do it, but basically you go out of your way to do extra"
"I just learned heaps in that space"
"They could see I had some type of potential that they started adding this other aspect to my portfolio"

Participant 4;

"I sort of had quite a few experiences, curriculum, pastoral and that career's role, you're really across school, it was always really cool"
"They said, "hey do you want to do this" and being young and stupid, "yes, I'll re-write the whole (junior curriculum) programme"

This method of leadership development which was experienced by these senior leaders seems to exist in the middle leadership development practices or cultures they enact also. When asked "can you explain what Middle leadership development looks like" at their schools; **Participant 1** attempts to create opportunities for their staff to take on leadership responsibility.

"the shortest answer to that is continuing to provide opportunity to those that are ready for it"

While **Participant 2** said;

"I'm a realist in that it's probably pretty informal and I think how people reveal themselves as being ready for middle leadership is that they are competent in their core role of classroom teaching"

Participant 3 indicated;

"the HOF's at this school very much share the vision of promoting and upskilling staff within their faculty into middle leadership positions"

The first three participants spoke of informal and experiential development practices mostly. When referring to full school professional development at their schools, most were based around the practice of teaching and learning and not based around leadership practice. Middle leaders would also participate in this structured development and may be expected to lead this with their faculties, which provides an example of leadership development occurring through experience.

However, **Participant 4** spoke of a formalised professional development programme based on growing leaders within their school. The intention of this programme was “building capacity over time” in areas such as “leading meetings, open to learning behaviours and conversations, building trust, leading change, decision making delegation and time management”. Despite the uniqueness of this program when compared to other participants, there was no similar programme in their formative experiences. However, this participant had completed their Masters in Educational Leadership, and much of their programme was designed around similar but significantly watered-down chunks of learning with practical application. This is where there are links to their Masters experience as the applied nature of their masters “really hit the mark” for them.

Theme Three – Conclusion

This section has highlighted some of the disparities in leadership development practices and cultures among our participants. While all offer support to their middle leaders, only one school is engaged in a structured and intentional development programme. This comes despite several similarities in the participants' formative experiences, and begins to ask questions about why their current structures are so diverse.

Chapter Summary

The data revealed links between the participants' formative experiences and the practices they now enact in their schools. It suggests that assumptions about what leadership is and what counts as effective development are grounded in those early experiences. The findings point to varied and personal conceptions of leadership among these leaders, which in turn influence how they develop middle leaders. Mentoring emerges as a common practice, but its reliance on informal, fortunate relationships raises questions about equity of development. The chapter also highlights differences in development practices across these schools, with only one school offering a structured programme. These findings are discussed in relation to the literature from chapter 2 in the following chapter.

Chapter Five: Discussion

Introduction

This chapter unpacks how formative middle leadership development experiences of school leaders influence the middle leadership development cultures and practices they enact at their schools. The discussion chapter will integrate literature from Chapter 2 with thematic findings from Chapter 4 and is organised into four discussion themes.

Discussion theme 1 will discuss how the participants' formative experiences shape their implicit leadership theories, and through this theoretical lens will explore the impact this has on their development practices. **Discussion theme 2** will discuss how the participants' development experiences have been predominantly reactionary and framed through on-the-job experiences, and that these experiences have shaped their contextual understandings of leadership development. **Discussion theme 3** will discuss how participants appear to reproduce, formalise and compensate for their own development and explore what this actually looks like in practice. **Discussion theme 4** will discuss what this means for senior leaders, and what recommendations could one take from the findings of this research.

Discussion Theme One - How implicit leadership theories shape development priorities

The findings of this study suggest that senior leaders do not all conceptualise leadership in the same way, and that these differences influence what they prioritise as worthwhile or necessary in the development of their middle leaders. These conceptualisations do not emerge in isolation. They appear to have been shaped and reinforced through the senior leaders' own formative leadership development experiences. Implicit leadership theory (Rush et al., 1977) provides a useful lens for understanding this relationship, as it helps explain how prior experiences inform assumptions about what leadership is, how it should be enacted, and what kinds of development are seen as effective. In this way, senior leaders' formative experiences and beliefs about leadership appear to shape the development priorities and practices they now enact in their schools.

1.1 - Different conceptions of leadership shape different development priorities

Implicit theories of leadership shape not only how senior leaders imagine and enact leadership but also how they design and implement development for their middle leaders. Across the participants, leadership appears to be interpreted through distinct but overlapping schemas that shape their development priorities. The breakdown below shows how differing conceptions of leadership appear to influence how leadership development is enacted in practice.

Participant 1:

“I don’t employ good people to tell them what to do”

This participant conceptualises leadership as autonomous, relational, and expertise-building. They value trust, self-direction, and learning through authentic work. This translates into development that prioritises autonomy in one’s role, access to real tasks (for example; timetabling, NCEA materials, external examination marking), and encouragement to connect with external professional communities. Development is therefore largely experiential, self-driven, and trust-based rather than intentionally programme-based.

Participant 2:

“most of it comes down to if I think they’ve got good judgement, if I think they’ve got a good work ethic, if I think they’re going to learn and adapt”

Leadership to this participant appears to be conceptualised as high-competency, professional role modelling aligned to school values. They emphasise credibility as important, earned through performance, and acknowledged through career advancement. Development leans toward mandated professional learning in areas aligned with what senior leadership wants modelled accompanied by clear expectations about conduct and performance. Leadership development is therefore framed through experience and career advancement, performance alignment, and visible standards.

Participant 3:

“That’s not going to help you develop leadership because they’re usually your equivalent or whatever. But, you know, that collegiality makes a massive difference”

This participant conceptualises leadership primarily as subject/content and administrative expertise, supported through collegiality. Development emphasises entry into curriculum associations, assessment

writing and moderation, and operational support through collegial networking. They identify a gap in their own formative experience, that is, having “effective conversations” and now encourage training in that area. Leadership development emerges as more operational than practice based.

Participant 4:

“How we can, as senior leaders, grow our middle leaders rather than meet with them and support them and manage them, but actually grow their leadership capacity”

This participant appears to conceive of leadership as growth-oriented, capability-based, and relational. Development is intentionally structured around a leadership capabilities framework (Wiley & McKinley, 2018), with every leader holding a leadership inquiry linked to annual school goals, and with mentoring/coaching relationships that promote authenticity and vulnerability. Emphasis is on building leadership practice, for example; leading professional learning as opposed to subject or administrative expertise.

Leadership development is not a homogenous process; contextual disparities in conjunction with individual needs reinforce the need for individualisation in developing middle leaders (Bassett & Shaw, 2018; Cardno & Bassett, 2015). This study suggests that the participants' understanding of development is historically and contextually shaped by their beliefs about leadership. Those beliefs are, in turn, shaped by their formative experiences. ILT helps illuminate these underlying assumptions, showing how senior leaders' mental models of leadership influence both what they value in leaders and the forms of development they prioritise for middle leaders. When leadership is framed as autonomous and trust-based, development tends to be shaped in this way, favouring self-directed, experiential approaches. By contrast, a growth oriented, relational framing grounds development in the individual growth of leadership practice supported through authentic relationships. Ultimately, ILT clarifies the internal schemas about who leaders are, what effective leadership looks like, and which qualities matter most. These schemas, in turn, determine the way that middle leadership development is shaped. Examining the distinct yet overlapping schemas across participants, underscores that development practices are filtered through senior leaders' beliefs about what leadership is, how it is done, and how it becomes effective. Furthermore, when these schemas are considered alongside their own formative leadership development experiences - clear links emerge. Reinforcing how ILT's become embedded in context, drawing connections between how they were developed, and how they now develop others.

1.2 - Entitative assumptions: when advancement becomes the marker of development

The participants' implicit leadership theories appear to extend beyond assumptions about effective leadership values and behaviours. The findings suggest that several participants understand leadership development through an entitative lens, where progression into formal leadership roles becomes a key marker of successful development. This matters because when advancement is treated as evidence that development has occurred, leadership growth can become tied too closely to hierarchical movement rather than to the ongoing development of leadership practice. When reflecting on leadership development in a larger sized school, participant 2 stated;

"Here's more thoughts on it, who do you advance in a full staff of 250 something?"
Participant 2.

This shows that when advancement is seen as synonymous to leadership development, difficult decisions may need to be made about who has access, and who misses out. In chapter 2 we draw on Youngs and Evans (2021) who suggest that leadership can be positioned ontologically as both an entity and a process. Examining the leadership development experiences of the participants reveals an entitative understanding of leadership, in which their development has been framed through hierarchical advancement tied to formal roles. An entitative view implies that development for the participants has been effective as they have progressed up the hierarchical ladder, potentially leading them to replicate practices from their own development that align with this understanding of leadership. However, when advancement becomes the marker of development, leadership growth can become too closely tied to formal roles, restricting the development of leadership practices to those who hold or attain formal positions. When considering how leadership development is occurring at their school participant 1 stated;

"We've experienced a little bit of roll growth, so there's opportunities for us to create some new Middle leadership positions" **Participant 1.**

This suggests a view is held where leadership development and hierarchical advancement are one in the same. However, this perspective may hinder the design and implementation of effective preparatory development frameworks, a central recommendation in middle leadership development literature (Highfield & Woods, 2024). Furthermore, if career progression serves as the sole barometer of effective leadership development, it may discourage individuals who do not aspire to hierarchical ascent from engaging in development of their leadership practice and may inadvertently signal that those who are not progressing hierarchically are disengaged or unmotivated to develop their leadership practice.

1.3 - From roles to practice: rethinking what counts as development

If leadership development is understood only in relation to formal roles and hierarchical advancement, then what counts as development becomes narrowly defined. A leadership-as-practice lens offers a different way of thinking, where development is understood as the growth of leadership capability and practice, rather than movement into or through formal positions. The participants' ILTs shape not only what they believe leadership should look like in practice, but also how they conceptualise leadership as a theoretical framework which influences how development is imagined. This has clear implications; if leadership is imagined solely as an attribute of roles or titles, development programmes may privilege those in formal positions and overlook the preparatory work needed to cultivate leadership capability within an organisation. Additionally, if implicit leadership theories are taken as fixed truths, development may inadvertently constrain alternative leadership models, values or behaviours that could be effective in differing contexts, restricting leadership practice and limiting organisational learning (Cardno, 2012). Conversely, when leadership is understood as practice (Raelin, 2016) and as something that can be cultivated through intentional development regardless of an individual's current role, development efforts can be broadened to include non-hierarchical pathways and distributed leadership opportunities. This approach makes leadership more accessible and aligns with process thinking which shifts the focus of leadership on traits of individuals and onto the practice itself (Youngs & Evans, 2021).

1.4 - Discussion Theme Summary

This section demonstrates that the previous development experiences of the participants contribute to the development of their ILT's in an educational context, and these varied schema shape how leadership is theoretically constructed, how it's developed and what is prioritised. Viewing leadership through either an entitative or a practice lens suggests implications for how development occurs; an over reliance on formal advancement can restrict development to a select group which may limit organisational leadership growth and constrain practice-based development from occurring. Furthermore, assuming leadership development is occurring as a result of hierarchical advancement ignores those who demonstrate leadership in practice and have responsibilities through distribution without a formal role or title (Youngs, 2022).

Discussion Theme Two - Reactionary and intentional development in practice

This section examines the participants' experiences of leadership development, framing it in three distinct ways. Firstly, as a pathway of career advancement that occurs through gaining practical

experience alongside access to support that is reactive in nature. Secondly, through a leadership as practice approach, where development is focused on leadership practice and is generally intentional, proactive and longitudinal, and thirdly that leadership development exists as a hybrid of the two. Table 1 presents a heuristic distinction emerging from the findings between practices that are primarily reactive, those that are intentionally developmental, and those that may function as either depending on how they are enacted. These are explored further below.

Table 1.

Development practices that are reactive in nature

May consist of

- Short courses and professional development workshops which are accessed as a strategy to solve a problem of practice or deemed useful for operational support.
- Formal and informal conversations through a line manager or peer/buddy mentor which is often about operational support or benefitting from the experience of others.

Development practices that are proactive and intentional

May consist of

- Long courses, longitudinal development, or qualifications through tertiary institutions are most often completed to intentionally upskill in practice over time.
- Appraisal, leadership inquiry or communities of learning can be used to develop leadership practice through longitudinal or cyclical inquiry.

Development that can be either proactive or reactive

May consist of

- Formal mentoring relationships without structure often prioritises operational support as a way of solving problems of practice. However, with structure and intentionality this can take a proactive development focus.
- Learning through experience or trial and error is also developmental based on change occurring over time; however, it assumes that change in practice does occur, and without structure or intent, it may not be as effective.

2.1 - Participants' formative experiences of leadership development

The participants in this study have described their own leadership development as predominantly aligning with reactive development approaches. Where their development has occurred through on-the-job experience alongside access to support when problems arose. For example, **Participant 2** described leadership development as;

“just talk[ing] to your colleagues and figure it out for yourself” and as responding to “a problem to solve... right now”

This reflects a reactionary approach, where development opportunities may be spontaneous and reactive to problems as they arise. While the literature appeals for proactive approaches to develop leadership the participants perception is that learning through experience alongside reactionary support has generally been effective as it has resulted in their own hierarchical advancement. This suggests that through the repetition of daily routines and practices, fulfilling their responsibilities, and accessing support they were developing leadership as practice (Raelin, 2016). This conceptual approach appears to have been replicated in the current practices of participants also; all referring to regular connection to line managers or more experienced colleagues to “support them” into a new role, along with access to courses aimed at developing areas of practice that may identified along the way. Developing leadership as practice through experience may be an effective method of leadership development. Indeed, the literature reveals this approach being common in middle leadership development (Bassett, 2016; Gurr & Drysdale, 2013) However, this approach lacks the intentionality and targeted development the literature appeals for and has additional limitations.

2.2 - Limitations and assumptions in reactionary leadership development

Relying primarily on experience for development of leadership as practice alongside reactionary support as being effective for middle leadership development has its limitations, in that it rests on a number of assumptions;

Firstly, this approach assumes that the middle leader will be able to identify problems of practice as they occur, and as problems that can, and need to be solved. Furthermore, one could extrapolate from this that if problems are not identified then the middle leader might perceive development as of less importance, and this may lead to the prioritisation of operational or administrative support at the expense of developing leadership practice.

Secondly, it assumes that problems are solvable through the support mechanisms available to the middle leader. This may therefore shift the responsibility for change towards external structures rather than towards the leadership practice itself. Additionally, while these support mechanisms can often be effective for operational or transactional matters, more complex problems might require more critical analysis and complex solutions. This approach may be problematic because it can reinforce single loop learning (Cardno, 2012), creating alternate actions, but not alternate ways of thinking. Complex problems exist where the underlying causes of a problem might not be evident, and routine solutions do not yield satisfactory results. One such complex problem postulated by Cardno (2012) involves navigating the tension of achieving organisational goals while maintaining positive relationships with colleagues. A resounding theme that emanates from the reviewed literature in chapter 2.

Thirdly, this approach may reinforce a linear progression of development of middle leadership practice, whereby over time as middle leaders are becoming more experienced alongside access to support, they are being 'developed'. This suggests that as middle leaders' experience in their role grows and the need for support becomes less frequent, they no longer need leadership 'development'. Participant 4 noted a reluctance from more experienced leaders to engage in their leadership development programme. One might assume if subscribing to this linear conceptualisation of middle leadership development that experienced leaders who are a long way down that metaphorical line may feel threatened by recommendations they should engage in intentional leadership development. When their experiences of development have in the past been a result of a problem or issue that has arisen and needs addressing. This may inadvertently constrain leadership practice and result in stagnancy in leadership growth. Furthermore, the assumption that experience equals expertise may be reinforced through buddy mentoring, a common support mechanism experienced by our participants, and that is used by participants 2 and 3 in their current practices.

Figure 1 provides a conceptual representation of reactionary model of leadership development that appears to underpin many of the participants' formative experiences. This conceptualisation has been depicted as a linear journey through middle leadership to a point where hierarchical advancement may occur. The purpose of this figure is not to suggest that leadership development always occurs in this way, but to illustrate the assumptions embedded in a model where development is largely driven by experience, problem-solving, and access to support as issues arise.

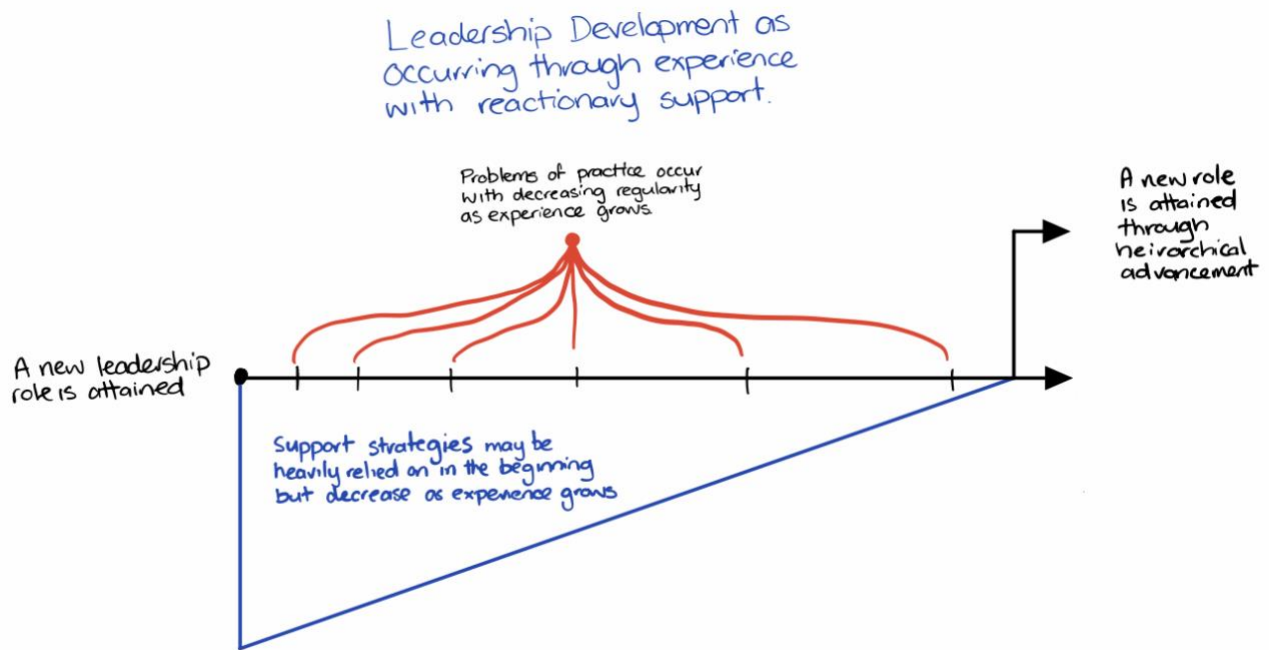


Figure 1. A linear journey of leadership development through experience.

2.3 - Intentional leadership development as a point of contrast.

While the participants describe their middle leadership development experiences similarly, that is; predominantly through experience with reactionary support. They also tend to replicate this in their current development practices, though with some considerations which are discussed further in section 3. By contrast, however, participant 4 offers a point of difference. Rather than relying primarily on informal support, problem-solving, and leadership learning through role experience, this participant describes a more structured and longitudinal approach to developing leadership. In this case, development is framed less as something that occurs incidentally through progression and more as something that can be deliberately cultivated through formal programmes, reflective inquiry, and growth-oriented mentoring. This aligns with a leadership-as-practice approach (Raelin, 2016) by building shared practices of leadership among participating staff, and with appeals for better preparatory leadership development frameworks (Highfield & Woods, 2024). The programme operates longitudinally across the school year and provides “bite-sized chunks of learning” drawn from a Master's in Educational Leadership programme. It blends critical reflection with leadership practices discussed by Van Velsor (2010). However,

it does not achieve full individualisation as urged by the literature and remains opt-in; consequently, some middle leaders may miss out and rely on reactionary approaches to their development. Participant 4 also formalises leadership development within the school's middle leadership appraisal and support programme by attaching middle leadership practice to the Leadership Capabilities Framework (Wiley & McKinley, 2018). Intentionally designed proactive middle leadership development practices do not come without considerations. Additional resourcing is required to implement the programmes and participating middle leaders face further time pressures given their existing demands. Furthermore, while the programme adopts a leadership as practice orientation, lack of individualisation may privilege an organisational status quo, potentially reinforcing existing power structures and inhibiting individual growth.

2.4 - Discussion theme summary.

The findings in this theme suggest that most participants largely understood leadership development through experience, access to support, and progression into formal roles, rather than through intentionally designed development of leadership practices. This appears to have shaped their perceptions of what effective development looks like, with career advancement often functioning as evidence that development has occurred. However, as this theme has shown, reactionary approaches to development have limitations, particularly when they rely on middle leaders identifying their own needs, accessing variable support, and learning primarily through immediate problems of practice. Participant 4 provides a point of contrast, demonstrating that more intentional and structured approaches to leadership development are possible, although these too raise questions of resourcing, access, and implementation. This theme suggests that what counts as leadership development is strongly influenced by whether development is imagined as reactive support within roles, or as the intentional growth of leadership practice over time.

Discussion Theme Three - Reproducing, formalising, and compensating for formative experiences

Although participants were often critical of their own formative leadership development experiences, the findings suggest that these experiences continue to shape the practices they now enact for their own middle leaders. This occurs in three main ways; through reproducing what was perceived as effective for them, compensating for gaps or frustrations in their own development, and formalising practices that

were previously informal or inconsistent. As discussed in theme 2, participants largely described their own middle leadership development as unstructured, reactionary, and embedded in on-the-job experience. They also suggested that what did occur, was generally through their own pursuits or motivations, and not provided by their schools with any structure, intent or longitudinal focus. Responsibility for development therefore often fell to the participants themselves, either through accessing available support or through pursuing development independently, for example through tertiary education. It is interesting to note that despite a critical view of their own leadership development experiences, the practices they enact for their current middle leaders share similarities. As the previous sections have shown, these formative experiences appear to have shaped both how participants frame leadership development and the leadership values and behaviours they now prioritise. This study also suggests that senior leaders' formative experiences have shaped their current leadership development practices through processes of reproduction, formalisation, and compensation.

3.1 - Senior leaders are reproducing what worked for them

Learning through experience and by trial and error emerges as a strong theme that emanates from this data. This approach is replicated in their current practices; with participants orienting development for their middle leaders through hierarchical progression and on-the-job experience. Alongside this, they continue to provide reactionary support through mentoring, collegial support, short courses, or workshops. Further examples of reproducing what worked were recorded by participant 1 who valued the benefits of involvement in a range of professional learning communities and encourages and supports this practice in the development of their leaders. Participants 2 and 3 praised collegial support as being effective for their own development, and both replicate peer and buddy mentoring as a form of development for their middle leaders. Participant 4 regarded the longitudinal and intentional focus of their tertiary courses and have reproduced this as a form of intentional leadership development. Those practices that were deemed effective by the participants continue to be prioritised as effective practices for the development of their middle leaders.

3.2 - Senior leaders are compensating and formalising development practices

While the participants reproduce what has worked in their past, the findings suggest the participants also engage critically with these experiences, attempting to fill gaps in their own development by compensation or formalisation. Compensation occurs when participants appear to correct for past

frustrations or gaps in their development. For example, participant 2's experience of being shouldered into leadership and the consequent move toward more transparent processes of leadership opportunity and advancement. Participant 3 highlighted deficiencies in preparation for challenging conversations and has made this a priority in the development of their middle leaders. Participant 4, most notably spoke of their experience of a paucity of rich conversations leading to professional growth which has resulted in their upskilling of line managers in growth-coaching conversations to ensure that consistency exists for their middle leaders. Additionally, their formalisation of an intentional leadership development programme compensates for the absence of similar intentionality and structure in their formative years.

Formalisation is also found in structured mentoring practices. All participants described their informal mentor relationships as influential to their development and have attempted to increase the effectiveness of this practice by formalising peer-to-peer or line-manager mentoring. Although these relationships are often intended to develop middle leaders, in practice they can become focused more on operational support than on leadership growth (Van Velsor et al., 2010), with the addition of appraisal for line managers as a necessary component (Cardno & Robson, 2016). However, participant 4's embedding of the leadership capabilities framework and growth oriented approach within the mentoring process formalises a practice that was effective for them, and compensates for the inconsistencies in their formative experiences.

3.3 - Ongoing limitations in development practices

The experiences of our participants have shaped how they enact leadership development for their middle leaders. However, despite attempts to increase effectiveness, these practices still have limitations. Because participants continue to rely on mentoring and reactionary support, the limitations identified in the literature remain relevant here. Variations in mentor quality and availability are widely reported in the literature (Bryant & Walker, 2022; Ehrich et al., 2004). When mentoring is structured, it can become prescriptive or compliance based (Cardno & Robson, 2016). When unstructured, it risks inconsistency and can drift towards an operational focus or be ad-hoc (Bryant & Walker, 2022). Formalised mentoring also exists within current organisational cultures; power imbalances may affect who has access to mentors, what advice is given, and whose career is advanced. Moreover, mentors may need to grapple conflicting priorities between the needs of the mentee and the needs of the organisation. Reactionary approaches also risk limiting the effectiveness of leadership development. When learning is driven primarily by immediate operational problems and addressed in ad hoc ways, the scope of learning may narrow,

restricting the broader development of leadership as practice. Although on-the-job experience may build expertise, it does not guarantee leadership growth (Van Velsor et al., 2010). When it is not paired with reflection and structured learning, it may instead reinforce existing habits and biases.

3.4 - Discussion theme summary

This theme suggests that senior leaders' formative experiences continue to shape the development practices they now enact for their middle leaders. Across the participants, this influence is visible in the reproduction of practices they found effective, the formalisation of inconsistent support, and attempts to compensate for gaps in their own development. While these practices may strengthen middle leadership development in some ways, the findings also suggest that important limitations remain, particularly where development continues to rely heavily on mentoring, reactionary support, and learning through experience alone.

Discussion Theme Four - What these findings suggest for senior leaders

The findings of this research have been unpacked and discussed in relation to the central research question: how do the formative middle leadership development experiences of senior leaders influence the cultures and practices of middle leadership development at their schools. This discussion has illuminated potential implications for senior leaders to consider. Despite a smaller sample size that limits transferability, these implications are discussed below, with recommendations made in response to the findings of this study.

4.1 - Clarifying the language of support and development

Senior leaders need to be clear about whether they are developing middle leaders or supporting them in their practice. The terminology support and development have been used interchangeably by most participants in this study; although they may be synonymous, there is a need to differentiate between them. Clear, distinct terminology will enable senior leaders to tailor their approaches appropriately based on the needs of each individual. This may take the form of operational and administrative support, or more proactive and longitudinal approaches. Additionally, understanding how development occurs for their middle leaders - whether through on-the-job experience, access to support, intentional learning or a combination of all of these - will enable senior leaders to identify gaps and strengthen development practices.

4.2 - Building greater intentionality into middle leadership development

The literature on middle leadership development consistently argues for middle leadership development to be intentional and tailored to individual needs within the context that leadership is practiced (Gurr & Drysdale, 2013; Cardno & Bassett 2015; Cardno & Robson, 2016; and Bassett & Shaw, 2018). In this study, findings suggest that, when considered retrospectively, participants viewed their development as effective owing to the hierarchical advancement that they experienced. However, this diverges from recent New Zealand based literature over the last decade which advocates for more proactive approaches (Highfield & Woods, 2024). Consequently, senior leaders need to be critically reflective of their development experiences, and identify and test underlying assumptions about how effective leadership development practices are within their schools. Given this, schools that predominantly rely on reactive development approaches should consider building more intentionality into their middle leadership development practices, in line with recommendations from the literature.

4.3 - Strengthening mentoring without over-relying on it

Mentoring can be an effective mechanism for supporting and developing middle leaders. In this study, participants reported notable variability in the effectiveness of their mentoring experiences with several describing themselves as fortunate to have mentors that were genuinely effective. This suggests that, while the participants recognise the value and potential of mentorship, its impact may depend on factors outside the immediate control of the mentees, a finding supported by Ehrich et al., (2004). Participant 4, in particular, seeks to strengthen their mentoring process through mentor training in growth-orientated coaching, a recommendation also cited in the literature as a key contributor for mentor effectiveness (Gurr & Drysdale, 2013; Ehrich et al., 2004). Gurr and Drysdale (2013) further suggest senior leaders require their own development to better support the growth of their middle leaders. To enhance mentoring effectiveness, practices can be strengthened by distinguishing between developmental and operational support focuses. Ensuring both dimensions are addressed, without allowing one to be disproportionately prioritised. Additionally, mentoring effectiveness depends on adequate resourcing to overcome time and financial constraints (Thorpe & Bennett-Powell, 2014). These ideas should be considered to build mentoring effectiveness as a development tool for middle leaders.

4.4 - Creating broader pathways into leadership development

When leadership is reimagined to include process ontologies (Youngs & Evans, 2021; Youngs, 2022), leadership development can become more inclusive of individuals who do not hold formal roles or titles.

This approach aligns with a post-heroic view of leadership that is less concerned with ideal traits of a particular leader and more with leadership as a direction forming process or practice (Youngs & Evans, 2021; Raelin, 2016). Creating intentional leadership development that is not exclusive to those in formal roles may better serve a wider range of staff who nonetheless encounter leadership responsibility through distributed leadership. Van Velsor et al. (2010) also consider this dichotomy suggesting that what is often described as leadership development is directed towards the individual and therefore leader development may be a more appropriate term. However, they pose a broader concept of leadership development, where the target of development becomes the leadership culture rather than the individual. This type of thinking may make leader(ship) development more equitable, strengthening the preparatory pathways into leadership at all levels, a trend that literature increasingly supports. However, simply creating pathways for a broader range of staff does not come without considerations. Development pathways for those in formal roles have proven challenging, so expanding these pathways raises time and cost-related considerations. Moreover, unless leadership is understood through a practice lens, individuals who do not aspire to hierarchical advancement but do undertake leadership responsibilities may question the value in engaging in this form of development.

4.5 - Encouraging senior leaders' reflectivity

Development cultures for middle leaders are heavily shaped by principals and senior leadership (Cardno, 2005; Gurr, 2024). The literature argues that principals, in particular, set the cultures and conditions that enable development to occur by providing role clarity and ensuring time and resources are available for development needs to be met (Gurr, 2024). Within these cultures and conditions, a variety of development practices can occur. When senior leaders design or set these practices, it signals a need for reflection on their own experiences and on how those experiences shape their assumptions about practice effectiveness. Holding fast to assumptions of effectiveness or ineffectiveness based on personal experiences without applying a critical filter risks ineffective, inequitable or inconsistent development practices. Furthermore, it may limit innovation in the development space, preventing newer more accessible or effective practices from emerging.

4.6 - Discussion theme summary

This theme suggests that middle leadership development is strengthened when senior leaders are explicit, intentional, and reflective in how they design and enact it. The findings indicate that clearer distinctions

between support and development, more intentional development pathways, stronger more considered mentoring, and broader access to leadership development opportunities may all improve development cultures in schools. Underpinning these implications is the need for senior leaders to remain critically aware of how their own formative experiences and assumptions about leadership shape the practices they now privilege, reproduce, or formalise.

Chapter Summary

This chapter has provided a discussion of the research findings in relation to the literature base from chapter two in an attempt to explore the relationships between senior leaders' formative leadership development experiences, and the middle leadership development opportunities they now enact. Four discussion themes emerged; Theme 1 discussed how participants ILTs frame different conceptions of leadership and suggests this has implications for development practices. Theme 2 reveals a predominantly experience-based, reactive development approach has shaped participants' assumptions about middle leadership development in context. Theme 3 highlights how leaders reproduce, formalise or compensate for their own development experiences and theme 4 translates these insights into considerations for senior leaders to design more equitable, practice-based development approaches, while acknowledging limitations in generalising from a smaller sample.

Chapter Six: Conclusion and recommendations

Implications for practice

This study highlights that formative middle leadership development experiences of senior school leaders shape how they prioritise and implement middle leadership development across their schools. Integrating these findings with the broader middle leadership literature, which links effective middle leadership practice to student outcomes and calls for the improvement of middle leadership development, illuminates the importance of school leaders being cognisant of the factors that both enable and constrain middle leadership development. Practically, the findings suggest that senior leaders should ensure explicit reflection on their formative experiences when planning and designing middle leadership development. Critical reflection on their implicit theories of leadership can illuminate their beliefs and assumptions about what leadership is, and how it is enacted in the context of middle leadership in education. Additionally, clarifying the language of support and development, increasing intentionality into middle leadership, strengthening mentoring, and building broader pathways into leadership emerge as practical steps to address the barriers and limitations identified in development practices that have been shaped by senior leaders' formative development experiences. While these implications are informative, the study recognises its limitations and does not claim generalisability. These limitations are discussed further below.

Limitations of the research

This study focusses on senior leaders in Auckland secondary schools which limits generalisability to other areas, school levels (early childhood, primary and tertiary) or different educational systems. The qualitative design prioritises depth and the themes offer transferable insights about how formative development experiences influence development practices in similar contexts. With a small sample of four participants, the findings may not capture the full diversity of middle leadership experiences; a larger sample size would enhance depth and clarity. Semi-structured interviews provide rich detail, but are susceptible to interpretation bias and participants' desire to give favourable responses. Triangulation with observations or documentary analysis in future work could strengthen conclusions. Additionally, as the primary researcher who is currently in a middle leadership position, ongoing consultation with my research supervisor helped to mitigate bias, however, consideration of researcher positionality is important for readers when considering the transferability of these findings.

Further research recommendations

The literature base in middle leadership in New Zealand schools remains scarce, and there are many opportunities to expand the empirical knowledge base for scholars in this field. This study undertaken to fulfil the requirements of a 60-point dissertation in a master's in educational leadership qualification was deliberately bound in its scope. Nevertheless, there were further opportunities to explore additional discussion themes and ideas that emerged from the rich detail captured in the participants data. Therefore, further research recommendations based on the experiences of this research study would involve interpretive studies with larger participant numbers. Increasing the transferability of findings across New Zealand high schools. Moreover, it is important to note; while this study discussed middle leadership development practices, it did not evaluate their effectiveness by linking them to improvements in middle leadership practice, or other school improvement measures. future work could address this gap. Finally, earlier limitations have been noted through the absence of the concept *Ti Tiriti o Waitangi* in New Zealand middle leadership literature with the exception of the Ministry of Education, and leadership capabilities framework. Inclusion of this concept would not only strengthen our bicultural partnership but may also add the uniqueness and exceptionality that indigenous leadership models bring to our understanding of middle leadership in education.

Final thoughts

Going into this research process my preconceptions were that middle leaders were, by and large, being done a disservice in their development, or lack of. What I have learned is that middle leadership development happens in many ways, but has many gaps, and opportunities exist for development to be more meaningful and effective. My hope is that the research in this field continues to shed a light on an important part of the educational leadership hierarchy. That middle leaders are both supported and developed in ways that enable them to improve their practice, and ultimately improve student outcomes. Afterall, that is the point of educational leadership.

References:

- Aaltonen, E. (2024). How educational middle leaders should be best supported by their senior leadership. *International journal of innovative business strategies*, 10(1), 663-672.
- Bassett, M. (2016). The role of middle leaders in New Zealand secondary schools: Expectations and challenges. *Waikato Journal of Education*, 21(1), 97-108.
<https://doi.org/10.15663/wje.v21i1.194>
- Bassett, M., & Shaw, N. (2018). Building the confidence of first-time middle leaders in New Zealand primary schools. *International Journal of Educational Management*, 32(5), 749-760.
<https://doi.org/10.1108/IJEM-05-2017-0101>
- Bennett, N., Woods, P., Wise, C., & Newton, W. (2007). Understandings of middle leadership in secondary schools: A review of empirical research. *School Leadership & Management*, 27(5), 453-470, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13632430701606137>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2013). *Successful qualitative research: A practical guide for beginners* / Virginia Braun & Victoria Clarke. SAGE.
- Bryant, D. A., & Walker, A. (2022). Principal-designed structures that enhance middle leaders' professional learning. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 52(2), 435-454.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/17411432221084154>
- Bryman, A. (2012). *Social research methods (4th ed.)*. Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press.
- Cardno, C. (2005), Leadership and professional development: the quiet revolution, *International Journal of Educational Management*, 19(4), 292- 306. <https://doi.org/10.1108/09513540510599626>
- Cardno, C. (2012). *Managing effective relationships in education*. Sage.
- Cardno, C., & Bassett, M. (2015). Multiple perspectives of leadership development for middle-level pedagogical leaders in New Zealand secondary schools. *Journal of Educational Leadership, Policy and Practice*, 30(2), 30-38. <https://search.informit.org/doi/10.3316/informit.265350587913623>
- Cardno, C., & Robson, J. (2016). Realising the value of performance appraisal for middle leaders in New Zealand secondary schools. *Research in Educational Administration & Leadership*, 1(2), 229-254
- Cardno, C., Robson, J., Bassett, M., & Howse, J. (2018). Middle-level leaders as direct instructional leaders in New Zealand schools: A study of role expectations and performance confidence. *Journal of Educational Leadership, Policy and Practice*, 33(2), 32-47.
- Cardno, C., & Youngs, H. (2013). Leadership development for experienced New Zealand principals: Perceptions of effectiveness. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 41(3), 256-271. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143212474>
- Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches (3rd ed.)*. SAGE Publications
- Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches (4th ed.)*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

- Crevani, L., & Endrissat, N. (2016). *Mapping the leadership-as-practice terrain: Comparative elements*. In Leadership-as-practice (pp. 21-49). Routledge.
- De Nobile, J. (2018). Towards a theoretical model of middle leadership in schools. *School Leadership & Management*, 38(4), 395-416. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2017.1411902>
- Day, C., & Grice, C. (2019). Investigating the influence and impact of leading from the middle: A school-based strategy for middle leaders in schools. <http://hdl.handle.net/2123/19972>
- Denzin, N. K., Lincoln, Y. S., Giardina, M. D., & Cannella, G. S. (2024). *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research*: Edited by Norman K. Denzin, Yvonna S. Lincoln, Michael D. Giardina, Gaile S. Cannella (Sixth edition). SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Edwards-Groves, C., & Grootenboer, P. (2021). Conceptualising five dimensions of relational trust: implications for middle leadership. *School Leadership & Management*, 41(3), 260–283. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2021.1915761>
- Edwards-Groves, C., Attard, C., Grootenboer, P., & Tindall-Ford, S. (2023). Middle Leading Practices of Facilitation, Mentoring, and Coaching for Teacher Development: A Focus on Intent and Relationality. *International Journal of Education Policy and Leadership*, 19(1), 19 pp. <https://doi.org/10.22230/ijepl.2023v19n1a1327>
- Ehrich, L. C., Hansford, B., & Tennent, L. (2004). Formal mentoring programs in education and other professions: A review of the literature. *Educational administration quarterly*, 40(4), 518-540. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X04267118>
- Grootenboer, P., & Edwards-Groves, C. (2023). *Leading practices and middle leadership in education*. In Handbook on Leadership in Education (pp. 74-88). Edward Elgar Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781800880429.00012>
- Gurr, D. (2024). Teacher and middle leader research: *Considerations and possibilities*. *Education Sciences*, 14(8), 875. <https://www.mdpi.com/2227-7102/14/8/875>
- Gurr, D., & Drysdale, L. (2013). Middle-level secondary school leaders: Potential, constraints and implications for leadership preparation and development. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 51(1), 55-71. <https://doi.org/10.1108/09578231311291431>
- Hammond, M., & Wellington, J. (2012). *Research methods: The key concepts*. Routledge.
- Harris, A., Jones, M., Ismail, N., & Nguyen, D. (2019). Middle leaders and middle leadership in schools: Exploring the knowledge base (2003–2017). *School Leadership & Management*, 39(3-4), 255-277, DOI: 10.1080/13632434.2019.1578738
- Highfield, C., & Woods, R. (2024). Recent middle leadership research in secondary schools in New Zealand: 2015–2022. *New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies*, 59(1), 93–108. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40841-023-00304-4>
- Irvine, P., & Brundrett, M. (2016). Middle leadership and its challenges: A case study in the secondary independent sector. *Management in Education*, 30(2), 86-92. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08920206166643>
- Irvine, P. A., & Brundrett, M. (2017). Negotiating the next step: The part that experience plays with middle leaders' development as they move into their new role. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 47(1), 74-90. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143217720457>

- Leithwood, K. (2016). Department-Head Leadership for School Improvement. *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, 15(2), 117–140. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15700763.2015.1044538>
- Lipscombe, K., Grice, C., Tindall-Ford, S., & De-Nobile, J. (2020). Middle leading in Australian schools: professional standards, positions, and professional development. *School Leadership & Management*, 40(5), 406–424. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2020.1731685>
- Lipscombe, K., Tindall-Ford, S., & Lamanna, J. (2023). School middle leadership: A systematic review. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 51(2), 270-288. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143220983328>
- Lord, R. G., Epitropaki, O., Foti, R. J., & Hansbrough, T. K. (2020). Implicit leadership theories, implicit followership theories, and dynamic processing of leadership information. *Annual review of organizational psychology and organizational behavior*, 7(1), 49-74.
- Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2015). *Qualitative research : A guide to design and implementation*. Wiley.
- Ministry of Education (2012) Leading from the Middle: Educational leadership for middle and senior leaders. <https://www.educationalleaders.govt.nz/Leadership-development/Key-leadership-documents/Leading-from-the-middle>
- Mutch, C. (2005). *Doing educational research: A practitioner's guide to getting started*. Wellington, New Zealand: NZCER Press.
- Nirit, P., & Dorit, T. (2026). Signature pedagogies and professionalism: An exploratory study on novice principal mentoring. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 54(1), 112-129. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17411432241247295>
- Odhiambo, G. O. (2014). Squeezed? The Role, Purpose and Development of Middle Leaders in Schools. *Australian Association for Research in Education*. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED596743>
- Raelin, J. (Ed.). (2016). *Leadership-as-practice : Theory and application*. Taylor & Francis Group.
- Rush, M. C., Thomas, J. C., & Lord, R. G. (1977). Implicit leadership theory: A potential threat to the internal validity of leader behavior questionnaires. *Organizational behavior and human performance*, 20(1), 93-110. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0030-5073\(77\)90046-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/0030-5073(77)90046-0)
- Scotland, J. (2012). Exploring the Philosophical Underpinnings of Research: Relating Ontology and Epistemology to the Methodology and Methods of the Scientific, Interpretive, and Critical Research Paradigms. *English Language Teaching*, 5(9), 9.
- Skerritt, C., McNamara, G., Quinn, I., O'Hara, J., & Brown, M. (2023). Middle leaders as policy translators: prime actors in the enactment of policy. *Journal of Education Policy*, 38(4), 567–585. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02680939.2021.2006315>
- Thorpe, A., & Bennett-Powell, G. (2014). The perceptions of secondary school middle leaders regarding their needs following a middle leadership development programme. *Management in education*, 28(2), 52-57. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08920206145298>
- Van Velsor, E., McCauley, C. D., & Ruderman, M. N. (Eds.). (2010). *The center for creative leadership handbook of leadership development*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Wylie, C., & Bonne, L. (2016) Secondary Schools in 2015: Findings from the NZCER national survey. https://www.nzcer.org.nz/sites/default/files/downloads/NZCER%20Secondary%20Survey%202015_%20Full%20report_0.pdf

Wylie, C., & McKinley, S. (2018) Leadership Capability Framework. New Zealand Teaching Council.
https://teachingcouncil.nz/assets/Files/Leadership-Strategy/Leadership_Capability_Framework.pdf

Youngs and Evans in Courtney, S. J., Gunter, H. M., Niesche, R., & Trujillo, T. (Eds.). (2021).
Understanding educational leadership: Critical perspectives and approaches. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Youngs, H. (2022). *Variegated perspectives within distributed leadership: A mix (up) of ontologies and positions in construct development*. In The Palgrave Handbook of Educational Leadership and Management Discourse (pp. 261-281). Cham: Springer International Publishing.

Youngs, H., & Ogram, M. (2024). Multi-level leadership development using co-constructed spaces with schools: A ten-year journey. *Education Sciences*, 14(6), 599.
<https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci140605991>

Appendices

1. Appendix 1 - Ethics Approval
2. Appendix 2 - Principal Information Sheet and Permission to Access
3. Appendix 3 - Participant information Sheet
4. Appendix 4 - Participant Consent Form
5. Appendix 5 - Semi Structured Interview Questions
6. Appendix 6 - Thematic Analysis mind map
7. Appendix 7 - Thematic Analysis Table

Appendix 1 - Ethics Approval



17 October 2025

Melanie Drake
Faculty of Culture and Society

Dear Melanie

Re Ethics Application: **25/291 How the leadership development experiences of school leaders shape middle leadership support and development at their schools.**

Thank you for your responses to AUTEC's conditions.

Your ethics application has been approved for three years until 17 October 2028.

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.
2. All public facing documents must have the AUTEC approval number and be of a high standard of spelling and grammar. Dates on the Information Sheet(s) and Consent Form(s) must be consistent.
3. Any amendments to the project must be approved by AUTEC prior to being implemented.
4. A progress report is due annually on the anniversary of the approval date.
5. A final report is due at the expiration of the approval period, or, upon completion of project.
6. Any serious or adverse events must be reported to AUTEC, this includes unforeseen issues that might affect continued ethical acceptability of the project.
7. AUTEC grants ethical approval only. You are responsible for obtaining management permission for access 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.

The application number and title need to be referenced on all correspondence related to this project.

All forms are available online <http://www.aut.ac.nz/research/researchethics>

For any enquiries, please contact the Secretariat at ethics@aut.ac.nz
(This is a computer-generated letter for which no signature is required)

The AUTEC Secretariat
Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee

Cc: danielrattray10@gmail.com

Appendix 2 - Principal Information Sheet and Consent to Access



Date: 20th October 2025

Principal Information Sheet and permission to access:

Kia ora. My name is Daniel Rattray and I am undertaking research for a dissertation to complete my Masters in Educational Leadership at AUT. I am seeking the support of Principals and/or Senior Leaders who are responsible for the professional and leadership development in their schools to contribute to this research.

The title of this research is;

How the leadership development experiences of school leaders shape middle leadership support and development at their schools.

Your school has been chosen as one to represents the wide demographic of New Zealand High Schools, or as one who has been identified through professional networks as having engaged in leadership development at your school. As school principal, I am seeking your permission for either yourself or the appropriate senior leader to participate in this research. The appropriate person would be the senior leader who oversees, or has as an area of their responsibility, the professional and/or leadership development of staff at your school.

Other research team members include Dr Melanie Drake from Auckland University of Technology, New Zealand who is the research supervisor.

What is the purpose of this research?

This research aims to explore how the middle leadership experiences of school principals and/or senior leaders influence the development of middle leadership practices and opportunities within their schools. The study seeks to understand the ways in which prior leadership experiences shape the support and professional development provided to middle leaders, with a focus on identifying factors that contribute to effective middle leadership cultures.

The key outcomes of this research are to fill a gap in the current literature by revealing the relationship between senior leaders' past middle leadership roles and their subsequent support practices they enact at their schools. Findings are expected add to the discourse on what influences effective middle leadership development strategies across New Zealand schools.

Overall, the research will contribute to a deeper understanding of leadership development processes, informing policy and practice to enhance middle leadership support systems in schools. Participants' insights will help identify effective strategies and areas needing improvement, fostering leadership cultures that support student achievement and staff wellbeing.

The findings of this research may be used for academic publications and presentations.



What is required of you

As school principal I am seeking your permission for some organisational information to be shared with me as the primary researcher. Information will likely include organisational practices around professional and leadership development that your school engages in. Depending on your leadership structure, the best person suited to share this may be yourself or another member of your senior leadership team.

If this is yourself, I would appreciate your consideration of the information that is contained in the participant information sheet. Should you wish to participate in this research, all the information you will need is in that document.

If this is another member of your senior leadership team and you are willing to grant organisational permission for the researcher to invite eligible members of your senior leadership team to participate, please complete the Permission to Access section below.

Upon granting permission, please circulate the attached Invitation and Participant Information Sheet to your senior leadership team. Interested staff may then contact the researcher directly if they wish to take part.

You will not be asked to identify or name any staff member, and you will not be informed about who does or does not participate. Granting permission does not oblige any staff member to participate.

What will participation involve?

Participation in this research will involve **one interview of approximately 60 minutes duration**. This may be more or less depending on the amount of information shared. One follow up interview may be requested to clarify or expand on ideas if required. In total participation should not exceed two hours across the duration of the research period (one school term). Meetings can take place on-site (workplace) or online using the AUT Microsoft Teams Platform.

Questions will be semi structured in the following themes

- Demographic Questions
- Understanding current middle leadership development practices at your school
- Understanding participant middle leadership development experiences
- Exploring links between current practices and previous experiences.

What are the benefits?

Research findings will be summarised and shared with you, this may illuminate how personal, cultural, and historical factors influence current leadership development practices and organisational cultures. Findings could highlight how a senior leader's own experiences either enhance or constrain development opportunities for your staff, informing you as a policymaker on effective support structures. It may also reinforce the importance of reflective leadership practices and contribute to your own theoretical understanding of leadership.



How will organisational privacy be protected?

No one outside the research team will know who the participants or participating schools are. As principal, you will know who the participant is from your school only, and all participants and their schools will be given pseudonyms during the findings of this research. Given the smaller number of participants and contributing schools, some organisational practices may be identifiable by others from within your organisation.

Consent forms will be kept in a locked location, interview transcripts will be password protected in MS teams and will be destroyed after six years, as per AUT Ethics guidelines.

For a more detailed description of the data collection and management please see the participant information sheet.

Date that data collection will start:

Term 4 - 2025

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, *Melanie Drake*, melanie.drake@aut.ac.nz, 09 921 9999 ext 31183

Concerns regarding the conduct of the research should be notified to the Executive Secretary of AUTECH, ethics@aut.ac.nz, (+649) 921 9999 ext 6038.

Who 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:

Primary Researcher – Daniel Rattray Danielrattray10@gmail.com

Project Supervisor Contact Details:

Melanie Drake – melanie.drake@aut.ac.nz

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 17th October 2025. AUTECH Reference number 25/291



Permission for researchers to access organisation school staff.

Project title: *How the leadership development experiences of school leaders shape middle leadership support and development at their schools.*

Project Supervisor: Melanie Drake

Researcher: Daniel Rattray.

- ☐ I have read and understood the information provided about this research project in the Information Sheet dated _____
- ☐ I give permission for the researcher to undertake research within _____ (School)
- ☐ I give permission for the researcher to engage with staff members who choose to participate in the research

Principal's signature:

Principal's name:

Principal's Contact Details (if appropriate):

.....
.....
.....
.....

Date:

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 17th October 2025 AUTEK Reference 25/291

Note: The head of the organisation should retain a copy of this form.

Appendix 3 - Participant Information Sheet



Date: 20th October 2025

Participant Information Sheet:

Kia ora. My name is Daniel Rattray and I am in the process of conducting research for a dissertation to complete my Masters in Educational Leadership at AUT. I am seeking the support of Principals and/or Senior Leaders who are responsible for the professional and leadership development in their schools to contribute to this research. I would like to invite you to be a participant where your role would be to share your leadership development experiences and current practices via an interview with myself. Other research team members include Dr Melanie Drake from Auckland University of Technology, New Zealand who is the research supervisor.

Project Title:

How the leadership development experiences of school leaders shape middle leadership support and development at their schools.

What is the purpose of this research?

This research aims to explore how the middle leadership experiences of school principals and/or senior leaders influence the development of middle leadership practices and opportunities within their schools. The study seeks to understand the ways in which prior leadership experiences shape the support and professional development provided to middle leaders, with a focus on identifying factors that contribute to effective middle leadership cultures.

The key outcomes of this research are to fill a gap in the current literature by revealing the relationship between senior leaders' past middle leadership roles and their subsequent support practices they enact at their schools. Findings are expected add to the discourse on what influences effective middle leadership development strategies across New Zealand schools.

Overall, the research will contribute to a deeper understanding of leadership development processes, informing policy and practice to enhance middle leadership support systems in schools. Participants' insights will help identify effective strategies and areas needing improvement, fostering leadership cultures that support student achievement and staff wellbeing.

The findings of this research may be used for academic publications and presentations.

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

Your school has been chosen as one to represents the wide demographic of New Zealand High Schools, or as one who has been identified through professional networks as having engaged in leadership development at your school. You have been identified by your school principal as the Senior leader who oversees, or has as an area of their responsibility, the professional and/or leadership development of staff

How do I agree to participate in this research?

Your participation in this research is voluntary (it is your choice) and whether you choose to participate will neither advantage nor disadvantage you. You can withdraw from the study at any time by informing the Researcher. If you choose to withdraw from the study, then [information collected up until your withdrawal

from the study will continue to be used and included in the study to protect its quality / you can ask for information collected up until your withdrawal from the study to be deleted unless you withdraw after the study analyses have been undertaken]. You will have an opportunity to read over this information provided for two weeks to consider your participation. If you choose to participate in this study you simply need to reply to the email and a consent form will be sent to read over before we meet. I will be available, via email if you have any questions. The consent form may be completed and returned to me digitally before we meet, or I can bring a hard copy to sign before we begin the interview.

What will my participation involve?

Participation in this research will involve **one interview of approximately 60 minutes duration**. This may be more or less depending on the amount of information shared. One follow up interview may be requested to clarify or expand on ideas if required. In total participation should not exceed two hours across the duration of the research period (one school term). Interviews can be conducted at the participants workplace in-person, or digitally/online using the AUT Microsoft Teams platform at a time convenient to you.

Questions will semi structured in the following themes

- Demographic Questions
- Understanding current middle leadership development practices at your school
- Understanding participant middle leadership development experiences
- Exploring links between current practices and previous experiences.

What are the benefits?

Research findings will be summarised and shared with you, this may illuminate how personal, cultural, and historical factors influence current leadership development practices and organisational cultures. Findings could highlight how your own experiences either enhance or constrain development opportunities for your staff, informing you as a policymaker on effective support structures. It may also reinforce the importance of reflective leadership practices and contribute to your own theoretical understanding of leadership.

What are the discomforts and risks?

There is unlikely to be any discomfort or embarrassment during your participation of the research project. The risk as a participant is minimal.

How will these discomforts and risks be alleviated?

During the interview you can choose how to respond to any of the prompts, including not responding. You can terminate your participation in the project at any time. Once the meeting has taken place you will be offered the opportunity to check the accuracy of the transcripts of our interview.

How will my privacy be protected?

Participant identity and the schools they work in will be known only by those in the research team. The School principal will have given organisational access/permission to access. Some of these organisational practices may be identifiable by others from your school especially if they are unique to your school. However, all participants and their schools will be given pseudonyms during the findings of this research so there are no identifiable names.

Consent forms will be kept in a locked location, interview transcripts will be password protected in MS teams and will be destroyed after six years.

Data Collection

The data collection period will be during Term 4 of the 2025 school year. The date of data collection will depend on the availability of the participant to complete the interview. A date and time will be arranged between the participant and interviewer upon agreement to participate in this research.

- Recording & transcription (Microsoft Teams):

With your permission, the interview will be recorded in Microsoft Teams. Teams will create an automatic transcript of the audio. The researcher will check and correct the transcript for accuracy, and you may request a copy to review before analysis.

- How your data are stored:

The audio and transcript will be stored in AUT's Microsoft 365 environment (AUT-managed OneDrive/Teams). Only the researcher and supervisor will have access.

- How we will (and won't) use AI:

We will use Microsoft Copilot in Edge (AUT's High Trust AI Tool) to assist the researcher with parts of the analysis only on de-identified excerpts (names and direct identifiers removed). Copilot may help suggest possible themes or summaries of de-identified notes, and to tidy grammar in researcher-written text.

Koha

Each participant will receive a Koha in the form of a voucher to the value of \$50

What are the costs?

The interview will take place at your place of work or via Microsoft teams meeting. The cost to you will be in time only.

Will the results of the study be published?

The results of this research will be published in a Master's Dissertation. This dissertation will be available to the general public through the AUT library. Results may be published in peer-reviewed, academic journals. Results may also be presented during conferences or seminars to wider professional

What opportunity do I have to consider this invitation?

You will have two weeks from the date of receipt of this letter.

Will I receive feedback on the results of this research?

I will send a summary of the research to you at the end of the study.

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, *Melanie Drake*, melanie.drake@aut.ac.nz, and 09 921 9999 ext 31183

Concerns regarding the conduct of the research should be notified to the Executive Secretary of AUTC, ethics@aut.ac.nz, (+649) 921 9999 ext 6038.

Who 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:

Primary Researcher – Daniel Rattray Danielrattray10@gmail.com

Project Supervisor Contact Details:

Melanie Drake – melanie.drake@aut.ac.nz

**Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 17th October 2025. AUTEC
Reference number 25/291**

Appendix 4 - Participant Consent Form



Consent Form

Project title: How the leadership development experiences of school leaders shape the middle leadership support provided at their schools

Project Supervisor: *Melanie Drake*

Researcher: *Daniel Rattray*

Please tick the following:

- ☐ I have read and understood the information provided about this research project in the Information Sheet dated 20th October 2025
- ☐ 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-recorded and transcribed.
- ☐ I understand that taking part in this study is voluntary (my choice) and that I may withdraw from the study at any time 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's signature:

Participant's name:

Participant's Contact Details (if appropriate):

.....
.....
.....
.....

Date:

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 17th October 2025. AUTEK
Reference number 25/291

Appendix 5 - Semi structured interview questions

Establishing demographic understanding of the participant

- *How long have you been in your current role at this school*
- *What other senior leadership roles have you held and what were the main responsibilities in these roles.*

Understanding current middle leadership practices at their school

- *What does middle leadership development look like at your school*
- *How has this developed over time*
- *What practices or policies exist that enable middle leadership development at your school*

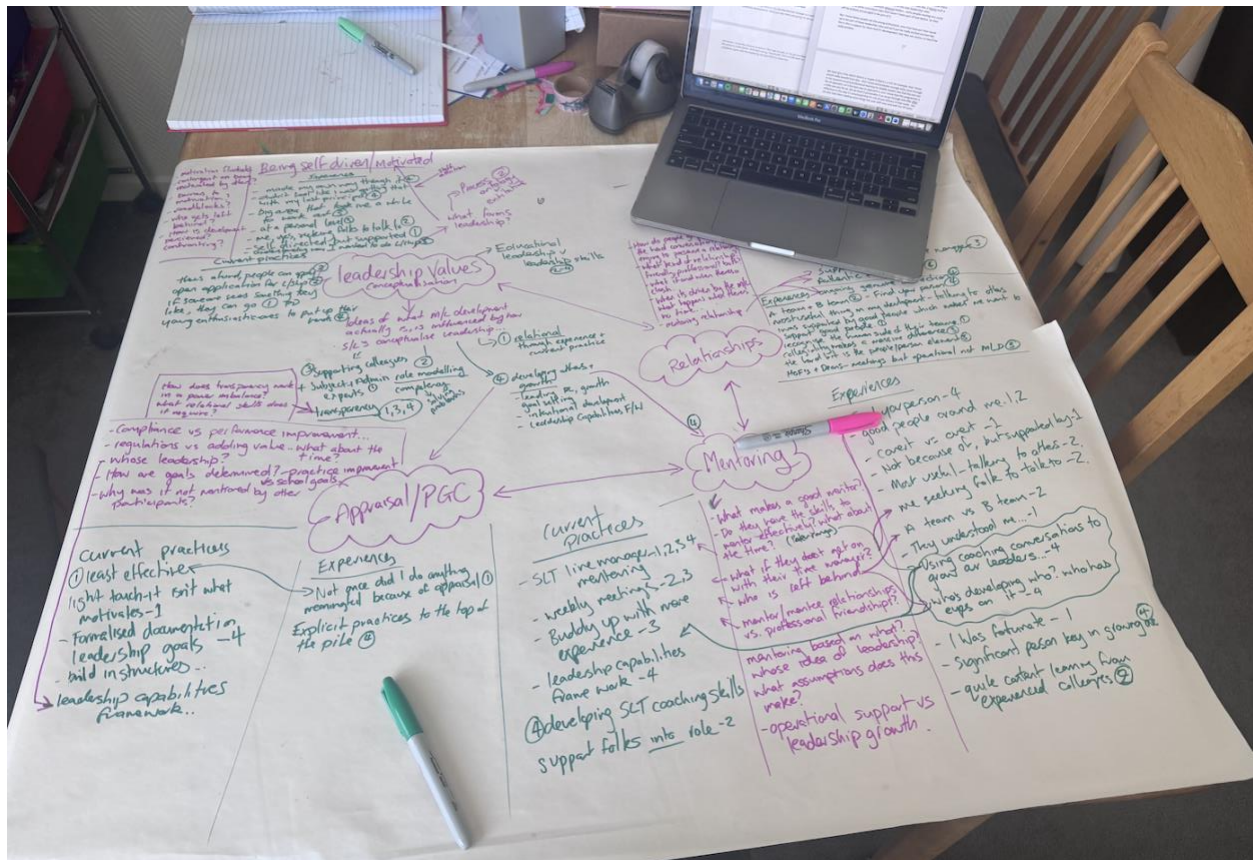
Understanding the middle leadership development experiences of the participant

- *How long were you a middle leader for and in which role(s)*
- *What were your experiences of middle leadership development*
- *What practices did you find most effective and why*
- *What practices did you find least effective and why*

Exploring links between principal and SLT experiences and current practices

- *Can you describe ways in which your experiences of middle leadership development have either enhanced or inhibited the culture and practice of middle leadership development at your school*

Appendix 6 - Thematic Analysis Mind Map



Appendix 7 - Thematic Analysis Table

Overarching idea/Theme	Critical questions/statements	Literature relevance
Mentoring: There is a strong theme of the mentor playing a huge role in the development of these SL's and plenty of quotes to reinforce this has been significant to participants. Out of this falls relationships and the effectiveness of mentoring as a leadership development method. All talk about the buddy or mentoring system as a primary form of development in their schools. Either as a line manager vertically, or a horizontal buddy for new ML's.	What makes a good mentor and how do they know they are being a good mentor? Whose idea of leadership is being given priority? Do they have the skills to be a good mentor? Is it about leadership development or maintaining a relationship? Are they mentoring for development of the individual or in pursuit of school goals? Who gets left behind? How do they know mentorship is effective? What is the barometer of success in this relationship? What are they mentoring towards? Individual growth? School Annual Goals/strategic plan? What about a buddy vs a mentor and operational support vs leadership growth. Much current practice seems in the field of operational support, but SL's have highlighted more pastoral support as being valuable Is it a role model as well as a mentor? Does that person role model to them leadership is that the person they find (4)	Ehrich et al Thorpe and Bennet Powell Gurr Irvine and Bundrett Nirit and Dorit Edwards-Groves et al
Leadership Values and conceptualisation of leadership There is a theme that suggests the type of development that is provided for ML's is contingent upon how the SL's conceptualise leadership and how that forms their values. There is	Ideas of what constitutes ML development seems to be influenced by the S/L's values and how they conceive leadership 1 - relational, high trust models, autonomy, networking, role modelling, connected 2 – Role modelling, high competency, high performance, experienced	Implicit leadership theory Rush

language to suggest where their leadership values lie and in some cases links to how that shapes their development 4 in particular seems to have given real thought to what leadership is, and it is evident in their programme and development. Leadership vs management theme arises in some interviews. 1 and 4 made specific references to student outcomes. Whereas 2 and 3 did not but mentioned other leadership values and practices. Noted this wasn't explicitly asked. In all interviews, there is also a theme of being highly motivated individuals who found themselves being promoted or given more responsibility. This seems to be reflected in how they select their own leaders as well.	3 – Subject and Admin expert, management expertise, 4 – Growing capacity in others, autonomy, growth of self, Are their leadership practices and values grown through their own MLD or other formative experiences? Educational Leadership vs other leadership – 4 talks about growth to develop others to improve student outcomes, 2 talks about corporate models and acting a certain way aligned with SL values (ILT) 2 Mentions demonstrating competency into roles ie; process ontology vs entitative ontology Transparency comes as a theme that participants value. What does this look like in a power imbalance relationship? And how does this impact relational trust? Espoused transparency vs authentic transparency (2) Are there hidden agendas at play about encouraging and inhibiting certain behaviours or values (1)'s 'left leaning' and (2)'s 'rock-star teaching'	Grootenboer (practice architectures) Distributed leadership (Youngs)
Relationships There is a link between mentoring and relationships. All speak of having good mentors or people in their formative years, people who supported them, who role modelled to them etc. They speak of collegiality and relate it to development. There are a number of quotes to reinforce the importance of these relationships in their own development, and also the want to be approachable in their roles as SL's. Like a need to model the relational approach they valued as ML's. The same existed in opposite – some mentioned what they didn't want eg	Creating collegiality for operational support sake vs development of practice Why is this important, do they want good professional relationships, or good personal ones, are they one in the same? Is support the same as development? These two words might be worth exploring further.	Irvine and Bundrett Piggott-Irvine Large Scale reviews – relational considerations

Shoulder tapping (2) and lack of compassion (1) or lack of growth (4)		
Conceptualising MLD There are themes of what has been effective for SL's in their development which transfers to how they develop their ML's. I also think their own ILT or leadership conceptualisation feeds into this. The mentoring system has worked for them mostly. (2) discussed the negative side of this (shoulder tapping). Most don't speak too highly of their experiences of short term PD and it doesn't feature in their offering as a priority. (4) speaks of masters level longitudinal development and applied learning and it forms part of their structured MLD offering.	What forms the ideas on what effective MLD is? Own experiences and school needs – does this neglect the ML 's voice or needs? The one-size-fits-all approach is noted here Funding and resourcing is available, how does that get spread and is it based around leadership or management. For 1 it is decentralised and self-selected. What does this mean for where it goes and who misses out?	Bassett Cardno Van Velsor Large scale reviews – De Nobile, Harris, Lipscombe, Bennett,
Appraisal and PCG There is split consensus on this. No SL's mention PCG or appraisal as a valuable part of their formative MLD. 1 is quite firm in their opposition to its effectiveness with good language to reinforce this POV. 4 has used it to lean into the leadership development space through creating leadership goals.	Asks questions about policy and how it helps or inhibits leadership development. No interviewee's spoke of specific leadership development policy. How are goals determined? Is it something that is based around leadership growth or about the school strategic plan. Compliance and regulation (1) vs professional growth linked to school strategy (4) means growth is related to school goals – perhaps not leadership goals – though this is tied back in through the Leadership capabilities framework	Cardno and Robson Wiley and McKinley
Self Directed vs School Directed All have suggested their development in ML was self-directed but supported and generally by a	High levels of motivation seem to be contingent upon support from others in all interviews.	DeNobile, Harris, Bennett Van Velsor

mentor or senior member of staff which ties to mentoring and relationships All participated in short term courses that were operationally based and of mixed value. Some continue to offer to their current ML's but it is not mandated or prioritised. This self-direction might be a form of demonstrating competency which links to research around how ML's are generally selected – strong links to interview 2 here Themes of 'figuring it out for themselves' emerge from 1 and 2. This is articulated in having confidence in their teams and leaders. But this assumes that teams or leaders are capable of developing themselves. This indirect leadership assumes that development is adequate. Research suggests not. 'not a bad way to do it' (2)	Courses that have been recommended were in mostly relation to operational practices specific to roles. What does motivate leadership progression? Is this left to chance? What about 'roadblocks (3)' or the A and B team as noted by (2) School directed – what is the purpose of development MLD vs School Needs/Annual Goals – are they the same? (4) seems to attempt to amalgamate these Links to challenges of time and workload when it is self-directed, links to research here (Bassett) How much of a priority is it for schools who are pursuing other priorities and what does that mean for intentionality in this space (4) Do ML's have voice in the school based development or is it done to them? How are long term staff implicated in this? (4) mentions staff not engaging in the intentional development who should be. (3) also talks about changes to staffing meaning development can now occur. Does this suggest a window of time exists for MLD? (4) also speaks of 'young enthusiasm'	Day and Grice Gurr and Drysdale
---	---	---