

JUST “A NICE IDEA” OR A NECESSITY? MIDDLE LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT IN NEW ZEALAND SECONDARY SCHOOLS

A position paper by Vicki Tahau-Sweet

Overview

The complexity of middle leadership roles continues to gain widespread acknowledgement as being ambiguous and demanding (Cardno, 1995; Fitzgerald, 2000; Bassett, 2012; Peak, Middle leadership of teams in large New Zealand secondary schools, 2010; Brooks & Cavanagh, 2009) yet at the same time considered crucial to the improvement of student learning and achievement (Bassett, 2012). Deemed as being the “conduit” (Feist, 2008, p. 60) between senior leadership and teaching staff, middle leaders shoulder significant responsibility for implementing school-wide goals and strategies within the context of their departments (Peak, 2010). These responsibilities are sometimes at odds with the goals and aims of their department, or area of responsibility, and the expectations of their staff team (Craggs, 2011). Nonetheless, there appears to be no requirement or expectation for middle leaders to possess anything other than an ability to teach in the classroom, both prior to and throughout their appointment as a middle leader (Gurr & Drysdale, 2013).

This paper argues for the requirement of middle leaders to undertake leadership development prior to their appointment and in on-going manner throughout their tenure. In support of my position, I highlight the insufficiency of an ability to teach in the classroom as a qualification for appointment to middle leadership roles in New Zealand secondary school contexts. I also discuss the challenges and complexities of middle leadership and the need for leadership development training prior to their appointment to ensure they possess the capability and capacity to fulfil such a multifaceted role.

While the literature base for middle leadership development in the New Zealand secondary school context is somewhat limited, it echoes similar sentiments described in international literature. Middle leaders are uniquely positioned to enact leadership that contributes to the educational goals and aims of their school (Brooks & Cavanagh, 2009). Yet they are expected to do so with little to no leadership development prior to or during their engagement as middle leaders (Bassett, 2012). My own experiences as a middle leader have caused me to question what the absence of middle leadership development might say about the value we accord to the middle leaders in our secondary schools. This prompts me to ask the question: “Is middle leadership development just a ‘nice idea’ or a necessity?”.

Introduction

My work as a middle leader in a large New Zealand girls secondary school has not been without its challenges and my wonderings about how I ended up in such a difficult and seemingly untenable situation. From the beginning to the end of my tenure as Head of House, my journey was fraught with inconsistencies, confusion, ambiguities, continually changing expectations and requirements, and no useful or meaningful support from senior leaders in terms of developing my leadership capacities and capabilities. On a daily basis, I struggled with a sense of being stuck between the senior leadership team and my team of twelve tutor group teachers. More often than not, I felt like a puppet on a string, doing as commanded by the senior leadership team. Armed with little more than my experience and knowledge as a technology curriculum teacher, but with determination and passion to be a good leader, I embarked on what was to be a difficult two years of middle leadership. As a result of the demands and challenges of the role, and the difficulties encountered in acting as a “go-between” between the senior leadership team and my team of tutor group teachers, I resigned from my position. Fortunately, I worked as part of a team of five Head of Houses who were highly supportive of one another. However, by the time I submitted my resignation, four of my colleagues had already resigned. By the end of my two-year tenure, all of the original Head of Houses had been replaced.

What follows in this paper is an interweaving of the ideas and understandings I have gleaned from my professional experiences as a middle leader and the literature focused on middle leadership within secondary school contexts. My hope in articulating my ideas and understandings is to shape an informed argument for an imperative shift in our thinking with regards to middle leadership development in New Zealand secondary schools. In structuring this paper, I begin by contextualising middle leadership in New Zealand secondary schools through a brief exploration of middle leadership roles and responsibilities. The relevance of contextualising middle leadership lies in the need to provide some clarity as to the where middle leaders fit in a school organisation and the existing ambiguities around their role definition. Next, some light is shed on the work of a middle leader as a means of exploring the capabilities and capacities required for such a role. The purpose of this section is to make some attempts to describe the complexities involved in being a middle leader. The hope in taking this approach is that I render apparent how the ability to teach in the classroom is in no way related or adequate preparation for the work of a middle leader. The focus of this paper then shifts to the question of whether middle leadership development is necessity or just a “nice idea” often talked about, sometimes attempted but rarely acknowledged as a necessary requirement for middle leaders (Bassett, 2012; Chetty, 2007; Peak, 2010). Finally, I offer possible approaches for middle leadership development that might more adequately prepare and support middle leaders in their roles.

The face of middle leadership in 21st century New Zealand secondary schools

Middle leadership in New Zealand schools has a long and chequered history significantly shaped by the effects and demands of the Tomorrow’s Schools reform of the late 1980’s (Fitzgerald & Gunter, 2006; Fitzgerald, School middle managers: the frequently forgotten tier in schools, 2000). Originally, middle leaders were referred to as ‘middle managers’ consisting primarily of those responsible for subject areas (Heads of Department (HOD)) or faculties (Heads of Faculty (HOF)) tasked with managing the daily requirements of their departments or subject areas (Cardno,

1995; Earley & Weindling, 2004). However, the Tomorrow's Schools reform ushered in radical changes, reshaping the way in which schools operated; shifting the responsibility for school leadership, management and governance from a national to local level (Fitzgerald & Gunter, 2006). A consequence of this 'reshaping' was the development of a "two-tiered management structure" (Fitzgerald, 2000, p. 5) positioning middle managers beneath the senior management team as a second layer in the organizational and management structure of a school. Yet, at the same time remaining responsible for their subject areas (Fitzgerald, 2009) or areas of responsibility within their school. But more than just a shift in position there was also an increase in responsibilities for middle managers. The devolution of school administration and management meant that middle managers, among other things, were also now responsible for appointing and appraising staff, quality assurance procedures, evaluation of teaching programmes, developing and implementing plans, participation in school-wide decision making, monitoring student achievement, and participating in the development of school plans and policies (Fitzgerald, 2000; Cardno, 1995).

With an increasing resemblance to the organisational structure found in the business world, secondary schools in New Zealand adopted similar ways of referring to those leading from the middle level. Middle managers becoming more commonly referred to as middle leaders, suggesting a shift in the role, responsibilities and expectations of those leading from the middle level. Despite differing opinions and ideas around the significance of this the change from 'manager' to 'leader' (Chetty, 2007; Fitzgerald & Gunter, 2006), it was a clear indication of a more strategic and forward focused 21st century education view of those leading from the middle. The significance of this change lay in the expectation that middle leaders enact and embrace 'management and leadership' through their role as a means to improving student learning and outcomes. Middle leaders were no longer merely "keeping the ship going" on a day to day basis. Interestingly, there were already those highlighting the need for middle leadership development

yet there seemed to be very little response both at a national and local level (Cardno, 1995; Fitzgerald, 2000).

Another important change as a result of the educational reforms was an increase in the scope of those who were considered to be middle leaders. Originally, described as academic leaders (HOF's or HOD's) middle leadership began to incorporate those who held non-academic positions of responsibility such as team and syndicate leaders, pastoral leaders (career, guidance or counselling). or those responsible for sports or information technology (Bassett, 2012; Peak, 2010; New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2012). The significance of middle leadership evolving to include academic and non-academic leaders lay in its contribution to the increasing role diversity and ambiguities often associated with attempts to clearly define and describe the role of a middle leader. Such role diversities and ambiguities have been noted in the literature (Bassett, 2012; Chetty, 2007; Craggs, 2011; De Nobile & Ridden, 2014) as a significant issue in terms of middle leaders receiving adequate and relevant leadership development. This begs the question of whether role diversity and ambiguities have contributed to the lack of middle leadership development in New Zealand secondary schools.

In terms of contextualising middle leadership in New Zealand schools, we can turn to the document produced by the New Zealand Ministry of Education (MOE) 'Leading from the Middle' (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2012). 'Leading from the Middle' identifies middle leaders as those who are:

- Pedagogical leaders at subject, curriculum and faculty levels such as heads of department of heads of faculty
- Leaders of school year levels and/or house groups such as deans or heads of houses
- Co-ordinators of school based activities such as sports, music and the arts
- Leaders of educational initiatives such as assessment, information technology, mentoring, numeracy, literacy and special education
- Coaches and mentors who lead professional learning groups
- Pastoral and guidance leaders or facilitators such as career/guidance counsellors, counsellors

(New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2012)

It seems evident from the document 'Leading from the Middle' and the research of Peak (2010), Chetty (2007), Craggs (2011) and Bassett (2012) that middle leaders in New Zealand secondary schools have hugely varying leadership and management roles. They are expected to assist in shaping innovation and leading change within their schools that supports improved learning outcomes for students.

On the face of it – what do middle leaders do?

Defining exactly what a middle leader does in their role is a difficult, if not impossible task. As previously discussed, role ambiguity and diversity contributes to the inherent difficulty faced when attempting to succinctly describe the work of a middle leader (De Nobile & Ridden, 2014; Gurr & Drysdale, 2013). There is also the constant evolutionary nature of middle leaders' roles and responsibilities, as was evident in the research findings of Peak (2010), Bassett (2012), Craggs (2011) and Chetty (2007). In the previous section, some attention was brought to a range of commonly carried out tasks by middle leaders. However, given the variety of school and department contexts across New Zealand secondary schools, it seems more useful to consider the work of middle leaders by employing a framework that broadly categorises their tasks and responsibilities. De Nobile and Ridden (2014) along with other authors (Brooks & Cavanagh, 2009; Bassett, 2012; Cardno, 1995; Chetty, 2007; Craggs, 2011; Fitzgerald, 2000; Gurr & Drysdale, 2013) suggest a framework that describes middle leader's roles using categories such as management, administration, supervision, staff development and leadership. For the purposes of this paper, I draw on Sergiovanni's model of leadership forces as a means of capturing the multi-faceted nature of middle leadership roles. This model seems to usefully incorporate the categories described by De Nobile and Ridden (2014) and others (Brooks & Cavanagh, 2009; Bassett, 2012; Cardno, 1995; Chetty, 2007; Craggs, 2011; Fitzgerald, 2000; Gurr & Drysdale, 2013). At the same I will endeavour to describe their work within these broad categories to extend an understanding of their leadership development needs and the pivotal role they play in the leadership of their

school contexts. In particular, the technical, human and educational leadership aspects of Sergiovanni's (1984) leadership forces most often required by middle leaders are drawn on as a framework (Brooks & Cavanagh, 2009) of understanding their roles.

Technical leadership

Middle leaders frequently engage in a wide range of management and administrative tasks within their specific area of responsibility. Technical leadership, as Sergiovanni (1984) describes it, pertains to the role of a "management engineer" (p. 5), aptly describing the expectation upon middle leaders in terms of their management and administrative responsibilities. On a daily basis, middle leaders are tasked with ensuring the effective and efficient running of their area of responsibility and ultimately the school as an organisation. As technical leaders, middle leaders must coordinate and manage a range of tasks such as the activities of their team, delivery of academic or non-academic programmes, running staff meetings, developing and implementing structures and processes for evaluating teaching and assessment practices, monitoring of student assessment processes and achievement, teacher evaluation and appraisal, participation in school-wide planning and decision making, and effectively communicating with their staff and the senior leadership team (Bassett, 2012; Chetty, 2007; Craggs, 2011; Cardno, 1995; Fitzgerald, 2000). Though not exhaustive, this list is representative of the management and administrative tasks middle leaders are expected to undertake.

Human Leadership

The work of a middle leader is invariably located in the context of working with others, with an emphasis on building collaborative working relationships. As a human leader, middle leaders require interpersonal competencies and capabilities (Sergiovanni, 1984) if they are to effectively engage with students, their teams and senior leadership. They are also tasked with the responsibility of managing conflict in terms of their teams, students, or in relation to parental concerns. There is also the aspect of human leadership that requires a middle leader to actively

build and maintain morale as well as facilitate the growth and development of their team. Middle leaders must develop and foster collaboration, and collegiality within their area of responsibility and across the whole school. Supporting and encouraging team work within their teams is also a crucial aspect of a middle leader's human leadership role. Fitzgerald, Gunter and Eaton (2006) highlight the "complex and messy" (p. 4) nature of "working with and through others" (p. 5) emphasising the importance of effective human leadership in the daily work of middle leaders.

Educational leadership

At the crux of Sergiovanni's (1984) concept of educational leadership is the expectation that a middle leader brings relevant expert specialist knowledge and skills that contributes to both their area of responsibility and the wider school context. Given the dual nature of their role as both a classroom teacher and a middle leader, middle leaders are in the precarious position of having to possess expert knowledge and skills relevant to their teaching and leadership responsibilities some of which might be:

- being able to demonstrate effective teaching practice
- a depth and breadth of their particular subject area knowledge
- professional and educational knowledge that enables them to design effective educational programmes and/or curriculum based documents
- effective staff appraisal and evaluation that leads to improvement
- a sound knowledge of pedagogical and assessment practices
- providing support and guidance to improve the teaching practice of their staff where necessary
- identify the professional development needs for their staff and opportunities to undertake relevant professional development

These described aspects of 'expert knowledge and skills' begin to paint picture of what is required of a middle leader who might be a curriculum area leader. They also highlight the focus of an educational leader as being able to contribute to the educational needs of both their staff and students. However, there is the matter of middle leaders who may be responsible for other areas

in the school that are not so easily defined or are areas of responsibility across the whole school. An example of this is my work as one of five Head of Houses who were tasked with the responsibility of raising student achievement by developing and implementing a school-wide academic mentoring programme. Though we were each considered to be master teachers in our curriculum areas, none of us had any knowledge or experience relating to academic mentoring. We were left to our “own devices” and to “figure things” out as we went along.

Middle leadership development – a necessity or just a nice idea?

Reflecting on my experience as a Head of House (in a team of five Head of Houses), I am drawn to recollections of our supervising deputy principal often alluding to the need for and provision of professional development focused on supporting our leadership roles in the development and implementation of a school wide academic mentoring programme. This eventuated in the form of a handout of notes and a series of brief informal conversations. At the time, we questioned the efficacy of this approach in light of what we considered to be a significant initiative given its aim of improving student achievement across all levels of our school. Such conversations had no impact on the provision of professional development or on-going support. Yet what remained was the expectation that as middle leaders we would develop and implement an effective and successful initiative. In light of this experience and others similar, as I began to explore literature for this paper, I wondered to what extent these experiences might be commonplace in other New Zealand secondary schools. Frankly, it came as no surprise to me to discover that the findings and conclusions drawn from New Zealand based thesis work supported my growing concern that middle leaders rarely received leadership preparation or on-going development (Bassett, 2012; Chetty, 2007; Craggs, 2011; Peak, Middle leadership of teams in large New Zealand secondary schools, 2010). Thus further supporting my growing suspicion that in practice middle leadership development is considered more of a ‘nice idea’ than a necessity. Concerning as this notion might be, of perhaps even greater concern is the idea that classroom teaching sufficiently qualifies and

prepares a middle leader for the inherent complexities and challenges of middle leadership (Adey, 2000; Gurr & Drysdale, 2013).

The insufficiency of classroom teaching experience and qualifications as relevant and appropriate experience and preparation for middle leadership is a commonly asserted belief in the literature and has been for almost two decades (Bush, 2008; Adey, 2000; Gurr & Drysdale, 2013). The capabilities and capacities (as described in the previous section of this paper) required of middle leaders in 21st century secondary school contexts are not provided for in graduate level courses offered through New Zealand tertiary institutions. A brief survey of secondary teaching graduate courses revealed that most commonly teaching and learning focused on the following areas:

- Classroom management
- Curriculum and assessment
- Adolescent learning and psychology
- Cultural/linguistic diversity
- Professional teaching practice
- Subject specialisation
- Teaching and learning
- Tiriti o Waitangi

It is confounding to me that within the New Zealand secondary education context teaching qualifications are perceived as sufficient for middle leaders to effectively fulfil the expectations and responsibilities of their roles. How likely would it be for a school board of trustees to appoint a candidate to a principalship role based only on their classroom teaching experience and qualifications? Yet, middle leaders are consistently appointed on this basis (Gurr & Drysdale, 2013).

Of course the question can be asked: "If middle leaders have managed this far without leadership development, why does it matter now?". On the surface, it may appear that middle leaders have

been managing over the past twenty or thirty years. There is a dearth of literature pertaining to middle leadership development in secondary school both here in New Zealand and internationally; what is available quite unanimously supports the argument that middle leaders are inadequately prepared and developed for their roles. What is also apparent is the raft of challenges and difficulties experienced by middle leaders that consequently interfere with their effectiveness and efficacy in their roles. Several authors argue this would be less problematic if middle leaders were adequately prepared and supported in their roles (Fitzgerald, 2000; Gurr & Drysdale, 2013; Cardno, 1995). Another growing concern for us in New Zealand secondary schools is the increasing difficulty in both retaining middle leaders and the reduction in teachers willing to take on middle leadership roles (Peak, 2010). Based on my own experiences and that of my colleagues, I would strongly suggest that lack of leadership development and on-going support were the primary reasons for our resignations. We each embraced our roles with passion and an expectation that would we make a difference in the lives of our students. But, like many other middle leaders before us, we were constantly trying to learn and figure out what we were doing while we were “on the job” (Bassett, 2012; Chetty, 2007). And, in the end, this became an untenable situation for us.

Based on the literature and my own experiences, it seems quite evident that there are a range of factors in support of middle leaders being required to undertake leadership development (preparation for leadership and as on-going support). Such leadership development would more adequately provide them with the capabilities and capacities required of a middle leader in comparison to their graduate teacher qualifications. The provision of leadership development would also better equip leaders to deal with the day to day challenges described by Fitzgerald (2009) as “people work vs paper work” (p. 61), a sentiment echoed by middle leaders participating in New Zealand based research (Bassett, 2012; Chetty, 2007; Craggs, 2011; Peak, Middle leadership of teams in large New Zealand secondary schools, 2010).

Conclusion - where to from here?

Though the school principal is widely acknowledged and seen as the key driver of effective and successful educational outcomes, we must remind ourselves of those who are at the face of teaching and learning. It is impossible for a principal, on a daily basis, to impact or influence every staff member and student in their school. This is the work of middle leadership. For they are the ones who on a daily basis are uniquely positioned to significantly impact and influence the work of their staff, contribute to the school wide goals and aims, and ultimately the success of our students. What will it take for us to acknowledge the significant role middle leaders play in our secondary schools? When will we realise that middle leaders are frequently inadequately prepared and under-supported in their roles?

If education in New Zealand is to truly be in the service of our students and their learning success, at what point will those at a national and local school level be willing to shift their perception of middle leadership development to that of it being a necessity and not just a “nice idea”? It is abundantly clear that graduate teaching training and/or qualifications are in no way sufficient preparation for those in middle leadership positions. Even more so considering the variability in roles and responsibilities across the secondary school context in New Zealand. Aspiring principals have available to them a relevant and appropriate leadership development programme through the National Aspiring Principals Programme. At what point will something similar be made available for middle leaders? There are range of tertiary post-graduate educational leadership qualifications that middle leaders could be supported in undertaking that would provide them with a strong foundation in educational leadership and management theory. Currently, Westlake Boys High School provides the Middle Leadership Programme (MLP) for their leaders that has been running since 2012 (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2014). This school based programme was developed in response to Rachel Peak’s (2010) research findings that highlighted the need for leadership development and support for middle leaders within their

school contexts. The MLP includes workshops, focus group sessions, content specific to WBHS's context, coaching/mentoring and internal/external speakers covering topics such as:

- Leadership and social styles
- Effective communication with parents and colleagues
- Appraisal
- Budgeting
- Management systems
- Time management
- Effective team work
- Reflection logs
- Presentation skills

Peak found that the learning experiences offered through the MLP encourage collaborative practice and learning across departments within the school (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2014). Opportunities were also provided for participants to explore and evaluate their own leaderships styles a practice vital in shaping leadership for learning that positively impacts student success (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2014; Peak, 2014). This type of in-school programme could be investigated as an option for middle leadership development by the New Zealand MOE and secondary school principals.

Drawing on my experience as a middle leader I would recommend a leadership development programme that combines a tertiary qualification with in-school leadership development training as an approach to providing leaders with a sound understanding of the technical, human and educational aspects of middle leadership. As previously mentioned, at the time of my initial appointment as Head of House I did not have any previous educational leadership experience or knowledge. Towards the end of my first year I realised I needed to take my leadership development into my own hands. At the beginning of 2015 I enrolled in the Master of Educational Leadership (MEdL) programme offered at the University of Waikato in the hope that I could access the leadership knowledge and skill base I believed my role required. This programme was

invaluable in terms of providing me with a foundational understanding of the human and educational leadership skills required from a middle leader. As a direct result of this programme my educational leadership capacities and capabilities significantly evolved. This in turn positively impacted my work with my team of staff and the students I was responsible for. Another important benefit of the MEdL programme was the national and global perspective it provided in terms of educational leadership which in my experience is often less of a focus in a school context. However, it is my belief that the technical aspects middle leadership may be best learned within a middle leader's specific school context allowing for the variability in terms of processes and procedures across a range of secondary schools. In my particular context it has taken several years to learn the preferred management and administration processes described as technical leadership in this paper.

Looking forward into the very near future I strongly advocate for a shift in our thinking with regards to middle leaders and their leadership development. A shift that acknowledges and supports sound leadership preparation and the on-going development of middle leaders. We must move away from viewing middle leadership development as just "a nice idea". It is a necessity!

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