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Middle-level leaders as direct instructional leaders in New Zealand schools: A study of role expectations and performance confidence

Carol Cardno[1], Joanne Robson[2], Arun Deo[1], Martin Bassett[1] and Jo Howse[1]
[1]*UNITEC Institute of Technology, Auckland, New Zealand;* [2]*Leading Learning Ltd, Auckland, New Zealand*

Abstract
The literature on instructional leadership consistently assigns this role to school principals whilst indicating that it can be spread amongst others. Recently the spotlight has moved to middle leadership involving a focus on classrooms through direct instructional leadership. The purpose of this study was to add to a small but growing body of literature that centres on middle-level leadership in schools. The research aims were to conceptualise the nature of the direct form of instructional leadership that has been devolved to the middle leadership level; investigate perceptions of expectations held of middle leaders in schools; and investigate their perceived confidence in performing the role. An on-line survey of 185 primary and secondary school middle-level leaders confirmed strong agreement with the role expectations described in terms of a conceptual framework of direct instructional leadership. The results indicated that whilst overall confidence in performing these tasks was high, gaps existed between role expectations and performance confidence, with the function of "having difficult conversations" being the largest gap for both primary and secondary school middle-level leaders.

Keywords: *Middle leadership; instructional leadership; quantitative study; primary and secondary schools; New Zealand*

Introduction

In New Zealand schools today, there is a strong emphasis on creating the conditions that support and enhance student achievement. The quality of the teacher is without doubt the strongest single influence on student learning and their engagement in learning and consequent achievement has been linked directly to factors associated with quality teaching activity (see for example Australian Government, Department of Education and Training, 2016; Hattie, 2014, 2015; Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010). To a moderate, but no less important extent, the research base provides proof of the impact of school leadership on student learning outcomes. This is evidenced by effect-size calculations that confirm a 0.25 effect size (Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2004), an effect size of between 0.25 and 0.30 (Robinson, Hohepa, & Lloyd, 2009) and a 0.33 effect size reported by Hattie (2015) showing the degree to which principals and school leaders can influence the quality of teaching and learning. Instructional leadership theory is an educational leadership theory with a major focus on creating a learning climate conducive to the achievement of student learning outcomes. In short, the focus of instructional leadership is teaching and learning through the "guidance and direction of instructional programmes" (Elmore, 2004, p. 13). This concept has long been associated with the work of school principals but what must be noted is that much of this work is now spread to other leaders at the middle of school hierarchies who, in reality, interact directly with teachers. The purpose of the study reported in this paper was to examine the extent to which middle-level leaders in New Zealand primary and secondary schools perceived they were expected to perform the role of instructional leadership and to determine their confidence performing the associated tasks.

The concept of instructional leadership

According to Gumus, Bellibas, Esen and Gumus (2018) "the idea of instructional leadership was ambiguous until the 1980s, when concrete models were introduced" (p. 29). These authors identify Hallinger and Murphy's

(1985) model as the most cited in relation to explaining the concept of instructional leadership. The Hallinger and Murphy (1985) model was used as the basis for capturing evidence of principals' practices in over fifty studies by the turn of the century. The three dimensions of this model are:

1. Defining the school's mission – framing clear school goals, communicating clear school goals
2. Managing the instructional programme – supervising and evaluating instruction, co-ordinating the curriculum, monitoring student progress
3. Promoting a positive learning climate – protecting instructional time, promoting professional development, maintaining high visibility, providing incentives for teachers and learning, developing high expectations and standards.

The elements of this model remain fundamental to the concept of instructional leadership that has withstood a test of time spanning four decades of research. Two decades later, a best evidence synthesis (meta-analysis) of more recent studies (Robinson, Hohepa, & Lloyd, 2009) proposed five dimensions of school leadership, spread across all levels of a school, as being significant in relation to impact on student learning outcomes. These dimensions are: establishing goals and expectations; resourcing strategically; planning, co-ordinating and evaluating teaching and the curriculum; promoting and participating in teacher learning and development; and ensuring an orderly and supportive environment. It is clear from this list that there are strong similarities to elements already identified in previous models.

Instructional leadership requires both leading and managing (Bendikson, Robinson, & Hattie, 2012; Bush, 2011; Cardno, 2012). Leadership, on the one hand is fundamental in the form of direction-setting focused on improving student learning outcomes through establishing academic tone and goals, and the creation of conditions that are conducive to achieving these goals (Robinson et al., 2009). These are distinctive leadership functions associated with influence and strategic planning (Cardno, 2012). On the other hand, the central functions of instructional leadership require management through activity that involves operational planning, co-ordinating, supervising, developing and evaluating (Drucker, 1955; Hallinger, 2005). Therefore, the models of instructional leadership encompass both leadership and management tasks that may be performed by the same person or shared. When performed from a distance, the functions involve leading, as in setting direction, and have been identified as a form of *indirect* instructional leadership. Louis et al. (2010) refer to this form as a concern with instructional climate as opposed to instructional activities which are performed as a *direct* form of instructional leadership: close to teachers and the classroom involving day-to-day interactions and inter-relationships. In describing the work of school principals as instructional leaders, there was always an assumption that in smaller (predominantly elementary) schools, principals were "hip-deep in curriculum and instruction" (Hallinger, 2005, p. 224) and that the hands-on direct version of the model was prominent in practice. Role expansion and school size have contributed to a mainly *indirect* form of instructional leadership being observable in the practice of principals, particularly in secondary schools (Cardno & Collett, 2004; Louis et al., 2010). Secondary schools and large primary schools are structured to allow for responsibility to cascade from the principal to other levels of leadership through structural distribution and overlap (Cardno, 2012; Southworth, 2004), which places the leaders of curriculum in the middle of the hierarchy where they are well positioned to perform instructional leadership activities (Bendikson et al., 2012).

Middle-level instructional leaders

Although now an old notion, the concept of instructional leadership can be seen in a new light when it is viewed from the angle of middle-level leadership. Using the Hallinger and Murphy (1985) model as a template, it could be conjectured that principals now indirectly lead instruction. They do this by performing two broad, school-wide leadership tasks of (1) defining the school's mission through framing and communicating clear school goals, and (2) promoting a positive learning climate which involves protecting instructional time, promoting professional

development, maintaining high visibility, providing incentives for teachers and developing high expectations and standards. Middle-level leaders have, however, assumed a role of direct instructional leadership because they are more likely to perform the work associated with the third dimension of the Hallinger and Murphy model: (3) managing the instructional programme by supervising and evaluating instruction, co-ordinating the curriculum, and monitoring student progress. It is also worth noting that the two dimensions of leadership practice that Robinson et al. (2009) identified as having high impact rates imply management rather than leadership functions. These are: planning, co-ordinating and evaluating teaching and the curriculum, and promoting and participating in teacher learning and development. Because these require close and regular interaction with teachers, they constitute a form of direct instructional leadership that can be performed by middle-level leaders. This supposition about the direct nature of middle-level instructional leadership is supported in the view of Grootenboer, Edwards-Groves and Ronnerman (2015) who assert that:

> They [middle leaders] have close connections to the sites where student learning occurs (e.g. classrooms) and to the sites where professional learning happens (e.g. localised study days, staff professional development meetings). By and large, this influence is not available to the principal or other positional heads. (p. 512)

In New Zealand primary and secondary schools, middle leaders are those who hold positions at the middle-level of the school organisational hierarchy between the senior level leaders (principals and deputy or assistant principals) at the top of the hierarchical structure and the teachers who form the operating level below. Bassett (2016) states that the literature includes several terms such as middle leader, middle manager, mid-level manager and mid-level leader. This may also be an historical matter as whilst the term middle manager was commonly used in the 1980s, the popularity of the term leadership evident from the 1990s has resulted in recent use of the notion of *leadership* in the middle of the organisation. One could say that a level of middle leadership has become ubiquitous in educational organisations in terms of the structural distribution of both leadership and management roles (Cardno, 2012). We have used the term middle-level leader in this study to include primary school positions such as syndicate, curriculum and team leaders, and secondary school positions such as head of department or faculty and subject or curriculum leaders. Because the focus of our inquiry is on the leadership of instruction (teaching and learning, curriculum and subject leadership), the study does not extend to those holding middle-level leadership positions related to pastoral care (such as deans) or non-teaching, administrative roles.

Expectations and challenges of the role

There is a growing body of research evidence that points to the range of responsibilities and tasks of middle leadership. While much of this literature centres on secondary schools and in particular on the role of the head of department or subject leader (see for example, Bennett, Woods, Wise, & Newton, 2007; Busher & Harris, 1999; Gurr & Drysdale, 2013), some studies focus on middle leadership in primary schools (see for example, Hammersley-Fletcher & Kirkham, 2007; Ministry of Education, 2012). A common theme in this literature is the nature of the position because middle-level leaders have a dual role of engaging in teaching themselves and leading teaching in their area. Hence, first and foremost, they are expected to be knowledgeable about teaching and learning, and secondly, they are also the curriculum or pedagogical leaders of their subject team, or level team which involves all the management tasks related to programme planning, co-ordinating, monitoring, developing and evaluating (Cardno & Bassett, 2015).

Because of the breadth of responsibilities that middle-level leaders are expected to perform, the role is a large one, with multiple facets that often make it overwhelming (Bassett, 2016). It is a role that has been described as "complex and ambiguous" (Gurr & Drysdale, 2013, p. 57) and one that shows increasing complexity as a consequence of task distribution to the middle level (Thorpe & Bennett-Powell, 2014). Literature that highlights

the challenges of leadership in the middle of the school organisation consistently points to the concern that curriculum leadership functions have often been delegated or distributed to the middle level without adequate clarity or support for those performing these functions (Cardno & Bassett, 2015; Gurr & Drysdale, 2013; Thorpe & Bennett-Powell, 2014).

One of the most challenging aspects of the role is performing as the line manager in a hierarchical structure. As line managers (Bennett, Woods, Wise, & Newton, 2007), they are expected to take responsibility for the work of other teachers. This requires both formal and informal activity. Formal delegation of teacher appraisal to middle managers is evident in research from around the world. In New Zealand this task appears to challenge the capabilities of middle-level leaders and, according to a study by Cardno and Robson (2016), middle-level leaders avoid both formal and informal aspects of this expectation. They avoid carrying out appraisal processes because they feel untrained and unprepared and they find it difficult to have conversations with their staff about performance. Bennett et al. (2007) report that expectations held of middle managers in the United Kingdom in relation to evaluating and developing staff were also fraught with difficulties. They comment on the stress experienced by a middle leader because of the tension between being a professional colleague and a line manager who must monitor their colleagues performance.

An associated and demanding aspect of middle-level leader responsibility is the need to build effective relationships with teachers in their subject or curriculum teams and to conduct conversations in the processes of planning, co-ordinating, monitoring and evaluating related to the work of teachers, programmes and student progress. Bennett et al. (2007) refer to research that has established that many subject leaders believe their authority rests on their subject or classroom knowledge and expertise rather than their official status and consequently feel that, "this does not give them the right to observe or criticise colleagues' professional practice or subject knowledge" (p. 464). This reticence to engage in subject knowledge and performance appraisal conversations may not only be deeply ingrained in professional behaviour, as suggested by Bennett et al. (2007), but may also be a consequence of uncertainty and a lack of confidence. Cardno and Robson (2016) allude to the fact that middle-leaders' avoidance of the appraisal task might be connected to their own experience and a lack of appraisal of themselves by the senior leaders responsible for this task.

Our research interest lies in being able to confirm responsibilities and to provide some substance to the conjecture that middle-level leaders are carrying out many of the functions previously associated with the concept of principal instructional leadership. For example, a study by Salo, Nylund and Stjernstrom (2015) confirms that principals expected to act as instructional leaders do not engage in the direct form of this task. Furthermore, these authors strengthen our assumption of a scarcity of literature on direct instructional leadership. Although middle-level leaders are now referred to in current literature as *instructional leaders* (Bassett, 2016; Bendikson et al., 2012; Grootenboer et al., 2015; Gurr & Drysdale, 2013), we were unable to locate any studies that investigated the range of middle-level leadership functions against a backdrop of models of instructional leadership – normally defined as the role of the school principal. We wanted to know whether our conjectures about a model of *middle-level instructional leadership* expectations could be checked out, and at the same time used to examine how middle-level leaders in New Zealand schools felt regarding their confidence to meet these expectations.

Conceptualising middle-level instructional leadership

For the purpose of this study, a conceptual framework (see Figure 1) was designed to capture the nature and scope of direct instructional leadership as it could be practised by middle-level leaders. This framework derives from synthesis of the theory base outlined in the early sections of this paper.

This conceptual framework has six dimensions bound together by a tight connection to what goes on in and near classrooms to foster student learning. In this conceptual framework, the first dimension, *curriculum,* is

the starting point as it is synonymous with the term instruction confirming the emphasis on the core business of teaching and learning and the importance of the instructional leader's expertise in the pedagogy and assessment within the teaching area. The second dimension, *teaching arrangements*, covers the middle-level leader's involvement in appointing, scheduling, resourcing and interacting daily with teachers. The third dimension, *teacher appraisal*, involves curriculum expertise, system and procedural understanding, direct monitoring of performance including professional conversations with teachers, classroom observations, appraisal interviews and reports, and providing productive feedback. The fourth dimension, *teacher development*, includes identifying needs and planning assistance, promoting and participating in professional learning and development, providing mentoring/coaching, encouraging inquiry practices and communicating opportunities. The fifth dimension is *evaluation of learning and programmes* through monitoring and communicating about student assessment, understanding the school self-review system and arranging regular curriculum review, seeking student evaluation of programmes and communicating results to teachers. The sixth dimension, *planning*, is linked to all of the other dimensions and is about being knowledgeable about and contributing to the school's strategic plan, developing a departmental/team plan, setting academic goals and targets, and involving teachers and community in departmental planning.

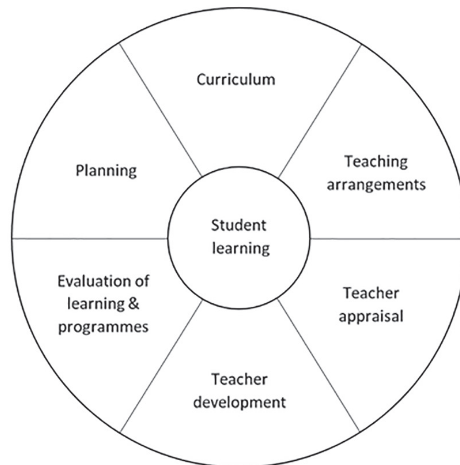

Figure 1: A conceptual framework for middle-level instructional leadership

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to test a hypothesis about the nature of the work of middle-level leaders in New Zealand primary and secondary schools being similar to the concept of direct instructional leadership, as conceptualised broadly in the literature and specifically for this study. To date, no quantitative studies have been undertaken to define the role of the middle-level leader in terms of the expectations held of them. Furthermore, the study allowed us to gather data about the perceptions of middle-level leaders in relation to their level of confidence in performing the nominated expectations in order to discern whether gaps existed between what was expected of them in the role and their confidence in performing this role. In summary, the study aimed to:

- confirm assumptions of the direct instructional leadership aspects of the role of middle-level leaders
- analyse the association between these expectations and their performance confidence in order to identify gaps.

Participants

The intention of this research was to survey school middle-level leaders directly, which required the recruitment of a sample representative of both primary and secondary schools and the wide range of positional nomenclature that identified teachers who were also performing additional responsibilities as leaders at the level below senior leadership in schools. It was important to invite participation from individuals rather than follow a traditional trend of sending out blanket surveys to schools or asking principals to distribute surveys to their middle-level leaders because this means of assembling a sample is not guaranteed to reach a target audience within schools. In New Zealand, schools are deluged with requests to participate in surveys and therefore unlikely to respond positively to such invitations.

In order to identify potential participants for this research, a sampling-based recruitment process was adopted using purposive sampling and efforts were made to establish a participant database of those who self-identified with this role and were willing to receive the survey. To begin with, we communicated with the Alumni of the *Master of Educational Leadership and Management* programme at Unitec Institute of Technology, that comprised school principals and senior leaders known to the research team; and subject specific networks, in order to locate middle-level leaders. A link to a recruitment survey was emailed to ask these middle-level leaders to indicate their willingness to participate in the study. In addition, Twitter feeds and a New Zealand Education Gazette advertisement were utilised during the recruitment phase. This is a form of homogenous sampling because participants belong to a particular sub-group in which all members are similar, such as a particular occupation or level in an organisation. Participants were asked to provide their email address, however, no other personal information was collected. The recruitment phase ran between November 2016 and January 2017. A total of 185 participants were recruited for the administration of an electronic questionnaire. At this stage it was not known whether participants would identify with either primary or secondary school roles.

The questionnaire

An electronic questionnaire was organised into six sections, based on our conceptual framework's six dimensions: curriculum; teaching arrangements; teacher appraisal; teacher development; evaluation of learning and programmes; and planning. For each dimension a number of statements were assigned to unpack the associated functions. In all, 49 statements were arranged in two columns so that responses for role expectations and performance confidence could be measured beside one another on a 6-point scale, ranging from low (1), through to high (6). Respondents were asked to rate the extent to which they were expected to carry out each function as middle-level leaders, and were also asked to rate the extent to which they were confident to carry out each function. The questionnaire link was sent to the 185 recruited participants who nominated themselves during the recruitment phase, and was in field for a period of one month. Two email reminders were sent out in the third and fourth week. As a result, 130 respondents (whose position designations matched the requirement that they were engaged in leading teaching and learning) answered the questionnaire, with a response rate of 71%. These respondents comprised 37 (29%) primary school middle-level leaders and 93 (71%) secondary school middle-level leaders. The manner in which recruitment was conducted was not conducive to achieving equal samples of primary and secondary school participants. This was disappointing given that primary and secondary teachers constitute 50% each of the teacher headcount across New Zealand.

Descriptive and inferential analysis

In relation to the first aim of this study, which was to test an assumption that the role expectations of middle-level leaders did indeed align with a conceptualisation of the role as direct instructional leadership, we needed to establish the degree of agreement of respondents with the function statements specified in the questionnaire (49 statements). Descriptive statistics were used to analyse the strength of agreement by respondents in relation to

both role expectations and performance confidence. Frequencies of responses were analysed using both Excel and Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software percentage calculations.

The second aim of the study was to locate gaps between the expectations of the role and respondents' perceptions of their confidence in performing specific aspects. In order to conduct an inferential analysis of the data related to role expectations and performance confidence, ordinal form (categorical), Chi-Square tests were used to statistically determine whether there was an association between role expectation and performance confidence. A total of 49 separate Chi-Square tests were performed using the SPSS software. The Chi-Square tests were conducted using the method of cross tabulations between role expectations and performance confidence. The observed and expected frequencies, along with the generated Chi-Square value and p-value were noted. In this study, the following conventions for interpreting p-values were utilised:

p-value < 0.001 Very highly significant association between role expectations and performance confidence.
p-value < 0.010 Highly significant association between role expectations and performance confidence.
p-value < 0.050 Significant association between role expectations and performance confidence.
p-value ≥ 0.050 Non-significant association.

A significant association between role expectation and performance confidence indicates a correlation between these features. A non-significant association indicates a lack of correlation, which is referred to in this paper as a gap between these features.

It was essential to conduct tests of association significance in this study to determine correlations between the functions of direct instructional leadership described as statements of expectation in the questionnaire and the respondents' perceptions of their confidence in performing these expectations. The statistical confirmation of non-significance is of particular relevance in this study as it draws attention to the gaps between role expectations and performance confidence viewed subjectively by the respondents.

Results

In this section, the results of the questionnaire are displayed to show, firstly, the degree of agreement that all middle-level leaders in this study have expressed in confirming that their role expectations fit closely with the aspects of instructional leadership as a direct activity conveyed in the 49 statements of the questionnaire. Secondly, the gaps between role expectations and performance confidence are displayed separately for primary schools and secondary schools.

Table 1 illustrates the strength of agreement related to the role expectations of middle level leaders and their performance confidence. Descriptive data displayed as percentages is based on response aggregation of the three upper scales (4–6) showing high agreement for each question. This was a pragmatic decision taken firstly, because the data overall was skewed to the higher end and secondly, in order to limit the amount of data displayed to a manageable level. The first two columns present data related to the overall sample; the third and fourth columns data for primary schools (n=37) and the final two columns relate to secondary school respondents (n=93).

Generally speaking, there was remarkably strong agreement (averaging 74% in the overall results) that the statements in the questionnaire reflected the nature of the work of middle-level leaders. Primary school participants' average agreement across all results was 71% whilst secondary school participants averaged 76%, showing a trend that continues throughout our analysis of the results. Even at this level of simple results quantification, the alignment of secondary school participants with the functions that comprise direct instructional leadership as conceptualised for our study is stronger than that of primary school participants. Across both sectors, respondents' perceptions of confidence were surprisingly strong; averaging 80% in both cases and the overall result average was also 80%. Although eliciting expressions of confidence in the performance of each function was important to conduct association calculations, these figures (Table 1) neither confirm nor disconfirm the hypothesis that the role of the

middle-level leader in New Zealand primary and secondary schools can be described in terms of functions that relate to the concept of direct instructional leadership.

Table 1: Role expectations and performance confidence – strength of agreement

Statements	Overall		Primary		Secondary	
	Role Expectation	**Performance Confidence**	**Role Expectation**	**Performance Confidence**	**Role Expectation**	**Performance Confidence**
Curriculum						
Demonstrating pedagogical leadership	93%	90%	97%	92%	94%	89%
Meeting professional standards for subject management	92%	91%	94%	89%	92%	91%
Providing curriculum (subject) expertise	94%	95%	86%	92%	98%	96%
Developing curriculum	88%	90%	72%	81%	96%	95%
Setting up assessment systems	86%	83%	76%	84%	91%	82%
Facilitating curriculum discussion with teachers	91%	87%	86%	84%	93%	88%
Collaborating in order to integrate curriculum	70%	79%	84%	97%	66%	72%
Teaching arrangements						
Appointing teaching staff	44%	71%	30%	72%	50%	70%
Involvement in the appointment of teaching staff	60%	77%	41%	73%	66%	78%
Negotiating subject time	48%	61%	43%	68%	50%	58%
Allocating teaching schedules	49%	70%	31%	62%	56%	73%
Securing teaching resources	82%	81%	76%	76%	84%	83%
Running team meetings	93%	94%	92%	97%	93%	92%
Communicating with teachers	98%	96%	100%	100%	97%	95%
Daily interactions with teachers	96%	97%	97%	100%	96%	96%
Enabling teacher collaboration	85%	88%	92%	97%	83%	84%
Teacher appraisal						
Understanding the school's appraisal system	88%	82%	86%	78%	89%	84%
Having relevant curriculum expertise to appraise	82%	86%	86%	78%	81%	89%
Directly monitoring the performance of teachers	75%	75%	84%	78%	73%	73%
Writing job descriptions	29%	50%	22%	43%	31%	52%

Being familiar with standards for quality teaching	83%	85%	95%	89%	80%	85%
Conducting classroom observations	83%	88%	84%	94%	85%	86%
Conducting appraisal interviews	73%	77%	59%	76%	80%	79%
Providing productive performance feedback	79%	84%	84%	86%	77%	82%
Having professional conversations with teachers	87%	90%	86%	86%	88%	91%
Having difficult conversations with teachers	79%	64%	81%	65%	79%	64%
Writing appraisal reports	69%	74%	54%	65%	75%	77%
Discussing appraisal reports with teachers	69%	73%	62%	68%	71%	75%
Teacher development						
Identifying appropriate professional learning and development	73%	82%	69%	83%	73%	81%
Assisting with professional learning and development planning	68%	80%	67%	78%	69%	82%
Promoting professional learning and development	78%	90%	78%	86%	77%	91%
Participating in professional learning and development	88%	95%	92%	97%	87%	94%
Providing mentoring/coaching for teachers	78%	87%	81%	89%	78%	87%
Encouraging teacher inquiry practices	82%	83%	86%	83%	82%	83%
Communicating professional development opportunities	65%	83%	64%	83%	66%	83%
Evaluation (of learning and programmes)						
Monitoring student assessment	89%	91%	84%	95%	92%	89%
Communicating about assessment with teachers	86%	88%	81%	92%	89%	86%
Understanding the school’s self-review system	74%	68%	70%	62%	76%	71%
Arranging regular curriculum review	65%	67%	43%	62%	74%	70%
Seeking student evaluation of programmes	73%	76%	59%	65%	77%	80%
Communicating results of evaluation to teachers	70%	78%	59%	76%	75%	78%

Planning						
Knowledge of school's strategic plan	85%	77%	76%	84%	89%	73%
Contributing to the school's strategic plan	59%	65%	62%	76%	57%	60%
Development of annual department/team plan	80%	83%	67%	78%	85%	85%
Setting of academic goals and targets	77%	83%	68%	81%	81%	84%
Overseeing individual teacher plans	53%	75%	68%	92%	47%	68%
Involving teachers in department/team planning	75%	87%	76%	89%	75%	86%
Involving students in department/team planning	39%	56%	35%	57%	40%	55%
Involving community in department/team planning	25%	36%	24%	38%	25%	35%
Average (all responses)	74%	80%	71%	80%	76%	80%

In relation to ***curriculum,*** primary school middle-level leaders indicate that *developing curriculum* and *setting up assessment systems* may not be a strong expectation, yet this is strongly confirmed as a role expectation by the secondary school respondents. In relation to ***teaching arrangements,*** the primary cohort shows very low agreement with expectations related to *appointing teaching staff* and *allocating teaching schedules,* both of which are moderately high expectations in the perception of the secondary cohort. This suggests that secondary school middle-level leaders might be allowed more authority in appointing and scheduling teaching staff. In relation to ***teacher appraisal***, the function of *writing job descriptions* is accorded exceptionally low agreement across both cohorts and there is considerable similarity in agreement data related to all other aspects. ***Teacher development***, in general, also shows moderate to high similarity of agreement across both primary and secondary school respondents. In relation to the dimension of ***evaluation (of learning and programmes)*** primary school middle-level leaders are consistently lower in their agreement about several aspects than are their secondary school counterparts, in particular related to the aspects of *arranging regular curriculum review, seeking student evaluation of programmes* and *communicating results of evaluation to teachers.* It could be construed that in primary schools, which are normally much smaller units than secondary schools, these functions are performed across the school by senior leaders, while there is more autonomy to perform these functions at department level in secondary schools. In the ***planning*** dimension, primary school middle-level teachers agree strongly with the task related to *overseeing individual teacher plans* whilst the secondary school cohort in this instance accords lower agreement to this task. In the case of both cohorts, the aspects of *involving students and involving community in department/team planning* are accorded extremely low agreement. The respondents (both primary and secondary) show a markedly high agreement in relation to their performance confidence in all aspects of the role with the exception of *Involving community in department/team planning.* Surprisingly, they are also relatively confident about the area of *writing job descriptions* even though this task is not accorded high agreement.

In Tables 2 and 3, the p-values generated from the Chi-Square tests are used to interpret the non-significant correlation between role expectations and performance confidence by establishing that where there is a p-value greater than 0.05 there is a gap that should be examined. All gaps over a p-value of 0.05 are listed in the following Tables. A gap would indicate that an expectation of the role was perceived as challenging. These gaps are identified separately for primary (Table 2) and secondary (Table 3) school middle-level leaders.

Table 2: Primary middle-level leadership gaps between expectations and performance

	Dimensions	Statements	Chi-Square value	p-value
1.	Curriculum	Demonstrating pedagogical leadership	15.508	0.078
2.	Curriculum	Setting up assessment systems	26.169	0.155
3.	Curriculum	Facilitating curriculum discussion with teachers	16.025	0.190
4.	Teaching arrangements	Negotiating subject time	37.159	0.056
5.	Teacher appraisal	Understanding the school's appraisal system	30.792	0.058
6.	Teacher appraisal	Having relevant curriculum expertise to appraise	17.129	0.145
7.	Teacher appraisal	Directly monitoring the performance of teachers	20.865	0.184
8.	Teacher appraisal	Being familiar with standards for quality teaching	15.569	0.077
9.	Teacher appraisal	Having professional conversations with teachers	11.422	0.248
10.	Teacher appraisal	Having difficult conversations with teachers	13.939	0.603
11.	Teacher appraisal	Writing appraisal reports	36.204	0.069
12.	Teacher development	Identifying appropriate professional learning and development	16.314	0.362
13.	Teacher development	Participating in professional learning and development	12.117	0.207
14.	Teacher development	Providing mentoring/coaching for teachers	21.724	0.115
15.	Teacher development	Encouraging teacher inquiry practices	27.006	0.135
16.	Evaluation	Understanding the school's self-review system	36.963	0.058
17.	Planning	Knowledge of school's strategic plan	34.585	0.096
18.	Planning	Involving community in department/team planning	27.706	0.322

In all, there are 18 gaps identified in relation to primary school middle-level leaders that span all six dimensions of the conceptual framework used to construct the questionnaire. There were seven gaps that might be considered marginally significant as they are below p-value 0.100. For example, these gaps covered ***curriculum*** *(1. demonstrating pedagogical leadership) and* ***planning*** *(17. knowledge of the school's strategic plan)*. We consider that gaps between p-value 0.100 and 0.200 are significant in terms of signalling that attention needs to be paid to these issues because they are identified as important performance expectations in which the respondents claim they lack confidence. Six gaps were isolated in this range covering areas of ***curriculum*** *(2. setting up assessment systems, 3. facilitating curriculum discussion with teacher;* ***teacher appraisal*** *(6. having relevant*

*curriculum expertise to appraise, 7. directly monitoring the performance of teachers); **teacher development** (14. providing mentoring/coaching for teachers, 15. encouraging teacher inquiry practices).* A further five gaps of critical interest are those of a very significant size, clustered in the areas of teacher appraisal and development. The large gaps related to ***teacher appraisal*** are in the areas of *9. having professional conversations with teachers* and *10. having difficult conversations with teachers,* by far the most significant of all. Those related to ***teacher development*** include *12. identifying appropriate professional learning and development* and *participating in professional learning and development.* A final large gap exists in relation to the ***planning*** dimension in the area of *18. involving community in department/team planning.*

Table 3: Secondary middle-level leadership gaps between expectations and performance

Dimension		Statements	Chi-Square value	p-value
1.	Curriculum	Developing curriculum	18.927	0.090
2.	Curriculum	Facilitating curriculum discussion with teachers	15.480	0.494
3.	Teaching arrangements	Daily interactions with teachers	10.525	0.310
4.	Teacher appraisal	Having difficult conversations with teachers	20.077	0.631
5.	Teacher development	Encouraging teacher inquiry practices	26.804	0.366
6.	Evaluation	Monitoring student assessment	17.654	0.613
7.	Evaluation	Arranging regular curriculum review	31.625	0.169

In relation to secondary school middle-level leaders there are far fewer gaps identified than there were for their primary school counterparts. The seven gaps span five of the six dimensions. What is interesting to note about these gaps is that five of them are highly significant numerically (above p-value 0.300) and are closely related to interactions with teachers, the activity at the very core of direct instructional leadership. The gaps relate to: *2. facilitating curriculum discussion with teachers; 3. daily interactions with teachers; 4. having difficult conversations with teachers; 5. encouraging teacher inquiry practices;* and *6. monitoring student assessment.* A simple comparison between the gaps evident for primary school participants and their secondary school counterparts identifies the function of *having difficult conversations with teachers* as the largest gap for both.

In the next section, we discuss the implications of these results for the practice of effective middle-level leadership when it is conceptualised as a form of direct instructional leadership.

Discussion

The results of this survey enable us to conduct a close study of the nature of middle-level leadership in New Zealand schools by using the concept of instructional leadership performed in its direct form as a framework. An instructional leadership role implies a strong emphasis on managing the instructional programme through direct interactions with teachers (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Louis et al., 2010). Thus, middle-level leaders performing the role are leaders of curriculum and subjects and will directly perform delegated tasks associated with managing the work of other teachers and monitoring student progress (Bendikson et al., 2012; Bennett et al., 2007; Thorpe & Bennett-Powell, 2014).

Primary school middle-level leaders in this study

With the small number of primary school respondents (n=37), we need to be cautious in making any strong claims about the nature of the middle-level leaders' roles in these settings. Whilst on the surface, using the descriptive analysis figures, primary school participants affirm that the description of the role is something they strongly agree with and feel confident performing, the fact that so few middle-level leaders responded to the invitation to participate could be related to the evidence in the literature that describes middle-level leadership in primary schools as encompassing a very broad and somewhat vague spectrum that spans leading small teams in positions of syndicate leadership to holding across-school leadership positions as assistant and deputy principals (Ministry of Education, 2012). The dearth of specific studies on the nature of this level of leadership in primary schools adds to our wariness in using such a small sample to adjudge whether the role in these schools can be described in terms of direct instructional leadership. We believe that this stance is justified when the inferential data is taken into account, showing that 18 of the 49 functions are not performed with confidence. The large number of gaps gives credence to the assumption that in primary schools the middle-level leaders may not be familiar with these functions, may not have the authority to carry them out, or may lack confidence in their own performance of the function. If such a large number of gaps exist between role expectation and the confidence with which this is performed, then it is essential to question whether this way of describing the role is feasible.

The gaps themselves indicate concerns that are particular to functions related to involvement in staff management and interpersonal relationships. A consistent message in the literature (mostly related to secondary schools) is that involvement in the appointment of staff, arranging their teaching schedules and appraising them is essential to performing the role of a direct instructional leader (Cardno & Bassett, 2015). Interpersonal relationships are at the core of performing the role because in a direct form of instructional leadership regular interactions with teachers close to the classroom are essential (Cardno, 2012; Grootenboer et al., 2015). If these functions are not delegated to middle-level leaders, they may not be permitted to perform the role as conceptualised for this study.

Whilst middle-level leadership in secondary school settings (often described in terms of the role of the head of department) has attracted a considerable amount of attention over several decades (see for example, Busher & Harris, 1999; Gurr & Drysdale, 2013), there is a comparative paucity of attention paid to the emergence of this phenomenon in primary schools. A limitation of this study is that it may not be possible to describe or investigate the role of middle-level leaders in both primary and secondary schools simultaneously because each is structured and practised in ways that do not allow direct comparisons to be made.

Secondary school middle-level leaders in this study

With a total of 93 secondary school middle-level leaders responding to the survey, we feel confident in proposing that this cohort's perceptions of the role aligns strongly with direct instructional leadership as we have conceptualised it. Overall agreement with role expectations was 76% and these practitioners indicated a very high level of confidence in performing the role (80%). Nevertheless, there were seven gaps revealed in the analysis. Five of these gaps are at a significant or very significant level (above p value 0.300) and need to be explored in depth because they have implications for areas of practice that indicate important development needs. The literature on middle-level leadership in secondary schools abounds with conclusions about a lack of appropriate leadership and management development for practitioners in the middle of the school hierarchy upon whom great responsibility rests in terms of achieving successful learning outcomes for students (Bassett, 2016; Bennett et al., 2007).

In the ***curriculum*** dimension, there was a significant gap in relation to *facilitating curriculum discussion with teachers*. Given that managing the instructional programme is a fundamental aspect of direct instructional leadership hinging upon subject knowledge and on the interactions with teachers related to this specialist

expertise (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Robinson et al., 2009), this is of major concern. In the dimension of ***teaching arrangements***, the significant lack of confidence identified in relation to *daily interactions with teachers* could be seen as an extension of concerns about facilitating discussion and could also be related to the time demands associated with regular face-to-face engagement with teachers. The challenge of time is well documented in the literature (see for example, Cardno & Bassett, 2015; Gurr & Drysdale, 2013). In particular, the lack of time to perform tasks adequately and a lack of confidence in the ability to perform demanding tasks requiring interpersonal skills are challenges identified in the literature. Cardno and Robson (2016) draw attention to these challenges in relation to expectations held of middle-level leaders to appraise teachers in their subject teams. This study shows that in the dimension of ***teacher appraisal***, a very significant gap is associated with a lack of confidence in *having difficult conversations with teachers*, which is reported as the greatest challenge faced by middle-level appraisers (Cardno & Robson, 2016). According to Robinson et al. (2009), effective educational leaders must be able to engage in constructive problem talk and, as Grootenboer et al. (2015) remind us, these conversations in secondary school settings occur close to the instructional programmes involving those who have daily interactions with the teachers. Cardno (2012) asserts that the most important work of an educational leader lies in recognising and resolving complex problems through productive dialogue. In the final dimension of ***evaluation***, the function of *monitoring student assessment* has a significant confidence gap which is of critical concern as it is one of the key direct tasks delegated to middle-level leaders in secondary schools and is at the heart of leadership of instruction (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Weber, 1987).

Conclusion

It has not been possible to conclude that primary school middle-level leaders are generally performing a role that can be described as direct or delegated instructional leadership. What we can conclude is that they have identified expectations of the role that at a superficial level align to a high degree with the conceptual framework we have devised to describe the dimensions and functions associated with direct instructional leadership. However, the large number of gaps between role expectations and performance confidence surfaced by deeper statistical testing suggest our original hypothesising was faulty. From this study, it is not possible to confirm that middle-level leadership in primary schools can be conceptualised as a form of direct instructional leadership. We need to test a further hypothesis that in the small units of primary schools, the senior leaders perform both the direct and indirect functions to a much higher extent than in secondary schools. What the study has revealed, however, is that the greatest number of gaps appear to be in the dimension of teacher appraisal and that the function of having difficult conversations with teachers has a very significant gap, indicating a high development need. The function of monitoring student assessment has the most significant gap. Both of these functions also appear as very significant gaps for the secondary school cohort in this study.

We conclude that it is feasible to view middle-level leadership in the secondary schools sector as a form of direct instructional leadership delegated to subject leaders in the middle of the hierarchy. The gaps related to having difficult conversations and monitoring student assessment identified by primary school participants also feature in the secondary school middle-level leaders' perceptions and consequently warrant critical attention. If the work of these knowledge (subject or curriculum) leaders is to focus on improving learning outcomes for students, they must interact productively with teachers and engage in dialogue to surface and address key problems. Yet, it is evident that this work elicits expression of concern. It is recommended that all middle-level leaders of teaching and learning would benefit from targeted leadership and management development that focuses on ways of appraising teacher performance that enable engagement in productive conversations about the fundaments of effective teaching and learning.

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Authors

Carol Cardno QSO is Professor of Educational Leadership and Management at Unitec Institute of Technology, Auckland, New Zealand. Her passion is the development of leadership capability in relation to improving managing, teaching and learning in educational organisations. Carol is a companion of the Queen's Service Order for services to educational administration and management, and a Fellow of NZEALS and CCEAM.
Email: ccardno@unitec.ac.nz

Joanne Robson is an experienced senior education consultant at Leading Learning Ltd with over 20 years teaching and leading. Joanne works alongside Kāhui Ako, school leaders and teachers to deliver high-quality professional learning and development. Her research and focus areas include middle leadership, collaboration, and future-focused education.
Email: joanne.robson@leadinglearning.co.nz

Arun Deo has a statistical background with almost 20 years of experience and proven record of excellence in teaching and data analysis in the tertiary sector. He currently works as a statistical advisor in the Research Office and also teaches in the Master of Applied Practice programme at Unitec Institute of Technology.
Email: adeo@unitec.ac.nz

Martin Bassett is Academic Leader of postgraduate educational leadership and management programmes at Unitec Institute of Technology. He has many years of teaching and leadership experience, both in pastoral and curriculum areas, across a number of New Zealand secondary schools. His current research interests include the professional development of middle leaders.
Email: mbassett@unitec.ac.nz

Jo Howse (corresponding author) is a senior lecturer in educational leadership and management at the Unitec Institute of Technology. Jo has served as the National President of NZEALS and as International President of CCEAM. Her research interests are in the compulsory and tertiary sectors of education strategy and policy related to leadership and management.
Email: jhowse@unitec.ac.nz