



Middle-level secondary school leaders

Secondary school
leaders

Potential, constraints and implications for leadership preparation and development

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Abstract

Purpose – The aim of this paper is to bring together for the first time three studies of middle-level leaders in secondary schools in Victoria, Australia. The studies span more than a decade and allow consideration of the progress in developing middle-level leadership roles.

Design/methodology/approach – All studies followed a consistent approach using multiple perspective interviews of middle-level curriculum and subject leadership in government and Catholic secondary schools in Melbourne, Victoria, Australia. Principals, senior leaders, middle-level leaders and teachers were interviewed to gain their perceptions on middle-level leadership. Interviews were supplemented with school document analysis.

Findings – The work of middle-level leaders is heavily dependent on how their roles are constructed and the capacities, abilities and attitudes of the leaders. Some are expected to be leaders that influence teaching and learning, and they may be developed and supported to do so. Too often, however, teachers in these key roles have few expectations or opportunities to exercise leadership. Whilst many have the capacity to be leaders of teaching and learning, others are not sure about their ability to influence teaching and learning. Suggestions are made for how leadership might be structured in schools to emphasise the importance of middle-level leaders, and how these leaders can be better prepared and supported.

Research limitations/implications – Observational studies, studies of primary school contexts and cross-country comparisons would extend this research.

Practical implications – Middle-level school leaders need to be seen as key personnel in improving teaching and learning, school structures need to reflect this, and developing leadership capacity needs to be prioritised.

Originality/value – This paper highlights continuing issues with how the work of middle-level school leaders is conceptualised and supported, and makes suggestions for leadership structure and the preparation and development of school leaders.

Keywords Middle-level school leadership, School leadership preparation and development, Leadership, Schools, Australia

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

There is increasing research evidence about the prevalence and impact of dispersed forms of school leadership. Of course, schools have for many years had positions of leadership in what have been termed middle-level leadership roles, with many of these teachers leading curriculum areas. In this era of dispersed leadership and school change focused on the personalisation of learning and employing twenty-first century curriculum and pedagogy, their role should be crucial. The potential for teachers in these roles to change teaching and learning is exciting, but unfortunately, too often the expectations and support for these roles is lacking. This paper reports on a decade of research that we have conducted on middle-level curriculum and subject leaders in



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Australian secondary schools, and which shows both the potential and the constraints of these roles. Implications for leadership preparation are considered.

Researching school leadership: principals, dispersing leadership and middle-level leadership

How leadership is structured in schools is gaining considerable research and reflection in the education community. Principal leadership research remains prevalent because of the importance of this role to school improvement (e.g. Hallinger and Heck, 1998; Leithwood *et al.*, 2004, 2006; Leithwood and Riehl, 2005; Robinson *et al.*, 2008). Leithwood *et al.* (2004, p. 70) claimed nearly a decade ago that the weight of evidence indicated that of “all the factors that contribute to what students learn at school, present evidence led us to the conclusion that leadership is second in strength only to classroom instruction”. This assertion could be used to support the importance of more dispersed views of leadership, yet Leithwood and colleagues made it clear that it was principals (and superintendents in the North American context). That principal leadership is important has been confirmed in the decade-long research of the International Successful Principalship Project (ISSPP) which has produced more than 100 case studies of successful principal leadership (see Leithwood and Day, 2007a; Moos *et al.*, 2011; Ylimaki and Jacobson, 2011a). The ISSPP has confirmed that leadership by successful principals comprises the four core dimensions of setting direction, developing people, redesigning the organisation and managing the instructional programme articulated by Leithwood and colleagues (e.g. Leithwood and Riehl, 2005; Leithwood *et al.*, 2006), and that there are additional practices such as strategic problem solving, articulating a set of core values, building trust and being visible in the school, building a safe and secure environment, introducing productive forms of instruction to staff, and coalition building (Leithwood and Day, 2007b). Given their importance to schools, we have argued elsewhere (Gurr, 2008) that those in principal roles need to accept the expectations, responsibility and privilege that go with this role. Having said this, it does not mean that principals are the only leaders in a school and so ways of thinking about how leadership is dispersed are important.

Wahlstrom *et al.* (2010) describe three ways of dispersing leadership in schools: collective (goal-directed mutual influence attributed to all participants in an educational situation); shared (a group-level mode in which principals and teachers share responsibility for leadership); and distributed (patterns of leadership practices). An extreme example of collective leadership is that of the college of teachers leadership structure found in many Steiner/Waldorf schools (Richards, 2005) in which all teachers are part of the leadership and decision-making processes. Explicit examples of shared leadership are found in Lacey and Anderson's (2009) research in which they describe four models of co-principalship: both principals full-time, both part-time, one full and one part-time, and a model that has no positional principal but where the responsibilities are shared by some or all teachers (with this last model an example of collective leadership). Most of the research on dispersing leadership has, however, been centred on the conceptual development, and empirical evidence for, distributive leadership (e.g. Gronn, 2008; Hargreaves and Fink, 2008; Harris, 2009; Lakomski, 2005; Leithwood *et al.*, 2007; Robinson, 2008; Spillane, 2006; Spillane *et al.*, 2007). Distributed leadership remains an appealing concept in terms of the distribution of power and sharing of expertise (Harris, 2009), and it reflects the reality of the operation of schools (Gurr, 2008; Robinson, 2008; Spillane *et al.*, 2007), but it is unclear to what extent it matters in terms of student learning (Robinson, 2008). Despite the uncertainties about

the efficacy of distributed leadership, Harris (2009, p. 18) reminds us that in this changing world we need new ways “of thinking about leadership practice in our schools and alternative models of school leadership”. For Harris, distributed leadership is “an organisation wide phenomenon in which flatter organizational structures and distribution of leadership take precedence over more formal, traditional models” and in which the “the practice of leading and managing is more important than the nature of the roles and responsibilities associated with leading and managing” (Harris, 2009, p. 3). What the interest in distributed leadership typically ignores is the middle-level leaders that already exist in schools, people such as heads of departments/programs, curriculum coordinators, year-level coordinators and so forth. These people are the subject of this paper.

A definition of middle-level leaders is not simple (Kemp and Nathan, 1989). In corporate and much of the earlier education literature, the more common term is middle managers. They are those people who have formal responsibilities and duties of leadership and management and sit between senior leadership and teachers. As Blandford (1997, p. 3) suggests, with a devolved school structure they often have a hybrid of responsibilities, with roles that are complex and ambiguous. Increasingly in education the term used is middle-level leaders, yet who are defined as middle-level leaders can depend on the context and structure of the school or school system. For example, in a secondary school a head of a department would be a middle-level leader, yet within a school system, it could be argued that school principals are themselves middle-level leaders (Crow, 1992). Many teachers also have formal responsibilities and leadership expectations, and might be described as middle-level leaders, although we argue that their role is less clear or substantial than that of formal middle-level leaders. For this paper, focused on secondary schools, we have defined middle-level leaders as those leaders who have significant responsibility for specific areas within a school. They will likely have position titles such as director of teaching and learning, curriculum coordinator, subject coordinator, head of department, student well-being coordinator or year-level coordinator. Our definition is aligned with the teacher leader definition used in an OECD report on teacher preparation and school leader development in which teacher leaders are described as those responsible for teams, year levels, or curriculum areas (Schleicher, 2012, pp. 21-2). Whilst the alignment of the description with ours is encouraging, it further illustrates the complexity in describing middle-level leaders when multiple terms are used to describe similar roles. We exclude deputy principals, or those with similar overseeing roles such as a head of a campus or school section; these people we would include in a senior leadership category.

When White (2000) reviewed the literature on middle-level leadership in schools he noted emerging interest evident in the research of the 1990s, due in part to the realisation from school improvement research that middle-level leaders were important to improving schools. Yet, middle-level leadership has not captured the research interest it deserves. For example, Turner described much of what was known about heads of department in a book (Turner, 2005) and special issue of the *School Leadership & Management* (Vol. 27 No. 5, 2007), noting that “the literature on middle leaders and middle leadership in primary and secondary schools is still relatively sparse, if growing [...]” (Busher *et al.*, 2007, p. 405).

Our definition of middle-level leadership excludes some important Australian research such as that of Cranston, even though his research is often labelled middle-level leadership. For Cranston (2009, p. 218) middle-level leadership consists of roles such as “deputy principal, assistant principal, heads of school, deans of study and so on”.

Cranston has studied this group in Australia (Cranston, 2006, 2009), and New Zealand (Cranston, 2007), and focused on the related areas of the senior management teams (Cranston and Ehrich, 2009) and deputy principals (Cranston *et al.*, 2004). Cranston (2009) provides a summary of this research, much as this paper summarises our own research. Conclusions largely focused on aspects that would encourage this group of senior school leaders to be promoted to the principalship; this is something that is not strongly evident in middle-level leadership as defined by us because these true middle leaders are usually at least one promotion step away from even considering being a principal. Improving work life balance and resolving tensions between leadership and management concerns were other aspects mentioned.

Nevertheless, in Australia, there have been several examples of research on middle-level leadership, and here we explore two. In what was termed the AESOP Project, Dinham (2005, 2007) made a substantial contribution through exploring the impact on student learning of the leadership of 50-subject departments and cross-school programmes (e.g. student welfare) across 38 secondary schools (Dinham, 2005, 2007). All schools were able to demonstrate outstanding educational outcomes over at least a four-year period. Multiple-perspective interviews were used involving the principal, head teacher/leader of the outstanding department/programme, staff group forum, student forum, parent forum, classroom observation and document analysis. Principal leadership (Dinham, 2005), and leadership of the heads of department/programs (Dinham, 2007) were both important for student success. The middle-level leaders were found to promote success through:

- a focus on students and their learning;
- high-level interpersonal skills, and generally being well-liked and trusted;
- high-level professional capacity and strategic resource allocation;
- promotion and advocacy of their departments and maintaining good external relations with the school;
- influencing department planning and organization;
- developing common purpose, collaboration and sense of team within their department;
- fostering teacher learning, and developing a culture of shared responsibility and trust; and
- clear vision, high expectations of themselves and others, and developing a culture of success.

The other major source of Australian research on middle-level research is from a decade interest that we have had, and which is expressed here through the work of three of our doctoral students – Cotter (2011), Keane (2010) and White (2000). It is this research and its implications for future development that we capture in this paper. We provide summaries of these theses, and in the case of Cotter (2011) and Keane (2010), publish the findings for the first time in an academic journal. We then explore the leadership role and leadership development implications of this research, linking the findings to our own model of successful school leadership in Australia.

Methodology

Details of the research methodologies are fully described in Cotter (2011), Keane (2010) and White (2000), but all followed a consistent approach using multiple perspective

interviews of middle-level leadership in government and Catholic secondary schools in Melbourne, Victoria, Australia. Principals, senior leaders, middle-level leaders and teachers were interviewed to gain their perceptions on middle-level leadership. For example, White asked the following main questions:

- For the principals, deputy principals, curriculum coordinators and teachers – with particular regard to leadership, how do you see the role of curriculum area middle managers (CAMMs) in this school?
- For the CAMMs – with particular regard to leadership, how do you see your role as a CAMM in this school?

White also used several further questions to ensure the completeness of the responses:

- During discussion of the CAMM leadership role, were there concrete examples used?
- Was there discussion relating to the perceived effects of CAMMs on student learning outcomes?
- Has the interview participant been given an opportunity to relate material they feel is relevant to the CAMM leadership role?

Keane (2010) used a similar set of questions, whilst Cotter (2011) used a more extensive list of 14 questions to cover a similar range of issues. Interviews were supplemented with school document analysis as appropriate. White (2000) researched heads of English and Mathematics in six government secondary schools and interviewed in total 18 principals and senior leaders, 11 heads of English or Mathematics and 17 teachers. Keane (2010) researched learning area leaders (LAL) (English, mathematics, technology, science, technology) in three Catholic secondary schools and interviewed in total eight principals and senior leaders, ten LAL and five teachers. Cotter (2011) researched curriculum coordinators in three Catholic secondary schools and interviewed in total 17 principals and senior leaders, 3 curriculum coordinators, 15 middle-level leaders and 7 teachers. Across the three studies involving 12 schools, 111 people have been interviewed comprising 43 principals and senior leaders, 39 middle-level leaders, and 31 teachers.

Findings

In White's (2000-2002) study on middle-level leadership there was a consistent view within the schools studied about the role of the English and mathematics coordinators, a position that White labelled as CAMM. Senior leaders, CAMMs and teachers all believed that CAMMs can affect student learning outcomes, yet the nature and impact of the role was highly context dependent with, for example, some CAMMs working with teachers to improve teaching and learning and other CAMMs operating managerially, concerned with supplies, textbooks and timetabling matters only. Taking into account the extant literature on middle-level leadership, White constructed four leadership components (instructional leader, curriculum strategist, learning area architect, and administrative leader), and then distributed the 15 themes (shown in the boxes in Figure 1) that arose from analysing the participant interviews. This model acknowledges important management considerations (administrative leadership), but highlights leadership that leads to improved teaching and learning (instructional, curriculum and learning area leadership), leading White to call this an enhanced model of CAMM leadership.

At the time we (Drysdale, Gurr and White) had been discussing the idea of portfolio leadership – that is, leadership in which an individual amasses a range of leadership knowledge and skills from which they can draw upon and use depending on the context or situation (Gurr, 2001). It acknowledges the earlier research on contingency and situational leadership and it influenced White’s middle-level leadership model shown in Figure 1. White (2001, pp. 220-2) described each role as follows:

- (1) CAMM as instructional leader: this reflects aspects of the CAMM leadership role that are directly involved in improving the teaching and learning process in the learning area.
- (2) CAMM as curriculum strategist: this reflects aspects of the CAMM leadership role that are involved in direction-setting for the learning area and the school in curriculum matters. Includes aspects to do with the CAMM role in raising learning area and school profiles when appropriate opportunities arise.
- (3) CAMM as learning area architect: this reflects aspects of the CAMM leadership role that are involved in changing learning area culture and building human capital in the learning area.
- (4) CAMM as administrative leader: this reflects aspects of the CAMM leadership role that involves what is traditionally considered learning area “management”.

Keane (2010) found that the leadership role of LAL (these roles include the English and Mathematics coordinators of White’s research, as well as those leading any learning area) was considered essential to the development of good student learning outcomes, yet in only one of the schools, where the LAL role was enhanced so that they could lead, was there evidence of significant improvement in student learning outcomes. Leadership capacity of most of these teachers was constrained by inadequate preparation and support, lack of time to effectively carry out the role, difficulties with staff management, and role ambiguity. Conversely, leadership capacity was enhanced when the senior leadership of the school: enlisted LAL as partners in developing strategic approaches

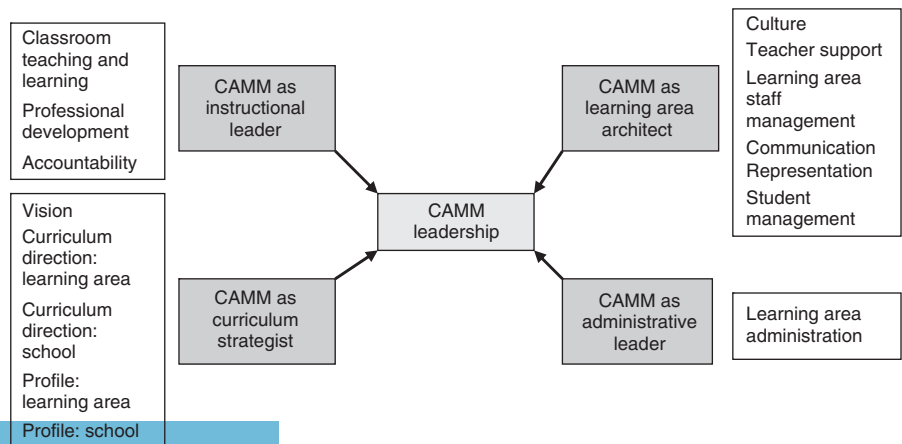


Figure 1.
White’s curriculum area middle manager leadership model

to teaching and learning; created structures that enabled time to work with staff; and, proactively removed barriers which might inhibit LAL leadership. Unlike White's research, Keane's participants reported considerable differences in perception about the leadership role. Whilst there was agreement that the administrative aspect was important, principals and curriculum coordinators expected LALs to exert more leadership than they believed they could, especially in regard to staff management: "many of the LALs expressed frustration about difficult staff members or problems getting staff together. A key dilemma for the LALs was that they wanted to be consultative leaders yet they were expected to be supervisors as well [...]" (Keane, 2010, p. 152). Keane did not develop a leadership model as his research essentially confirmed the model proposed by White ten years earlier. Apart from the differences found in perceptions about the role, Keane's research provides evidence that these middle-level leaders can positively influence student learning outcomes:

[...] LAL leadership is complex and multi-dimensional and is seen to be central to improvement in student learning outcomes. Their complex role includes the kinds of leadership that is exercised by principals and the SMT and yet the LALs often receive inadequate preparation and little time to carry out their role. Moreover they are often removed from discussions about whole school policy and development (Keane, 2010, p. 153).

Cotter (2011) found the role of curriculum coordinators to also be complex. Positioned at a senior leadership level, their primary role was to promote and support learning and teaching suited to the local context; that is to make sure that the teaching and learning programme matched the needs and aspirations of the school's students and parents. This was a narrow role, however, more about minimising the impact of the external world than being innovative: "[...] a desire for the curriculum coordinator to demonstrate territorial pride [...] to filter ideas and act as 'gate keeper'" (Cotter, 2011, p. 217). Much of this work was managerial and how this was done varied considerably across the schools as the design of the role at each school seemed to be influenced by the school context and specifically tailored to the person holding the position. Consistent across the schools, however, was a lack of focus on "active instructional leadership of a clear vision for strategic improvement in learning and teaching" (Cotter, 2011, p. 218). There were several tensions that help explain these observations. Curriculum coordinators were expected to:

- ensure the school was compliant with externally imposed curriculum changes, but in a way that was aligned with local needs, and which reflected an awareness and responsiveness to local priorities;
- provide operational guidance to the school, subject departments and teachers on curriculum matters, yet respect the autonomy of teachers and middle leaders in doing so;
- be knowledgeable about the latest curriculum innovations, but to be able to filter these so teachers were not overwhelmed by change;
- manage people and curriculum processes and in so doing hold people to account, whilst maintaining personable relationships; and
- have a vision for learning and teaching at their school, but with little support or direction at the school level as to what this might be.

There was little evidence that curriculum coordinators impacted on student learning, and this seemed to stem from a lack of clarity at the school level about how to improve

student learning, and, at the curriculum coordinator level, little sense of how they might influence school improvement, and a poor understanding of leading change, especially in relation to engaging people in change efforts:

Rather than being innovators for change and improvement themselves the curriculum coordinators were seen to react to what educational researchers commonly view as the inevitability of change [...] Seeing change as mainly doing the same things somewhat differently was perhaps prevalent because the 'buy in' to change had not occurred at a strategic improvement level (Cotter, 2011, pp. 218-9).

Cotter cast a critical eye at the role in recommendations that suggested the importance of the role for contemporary schools needed to be reviewed; maybe it could be done better by dispersing the functions across other senior leadership roles, or if it is to be retained then the emphasis needs to be on leadership or learning rather than "compliance and administration of externally imposed change at the school level" (Cotter, 2011, p. 222).

Discussion

Leadership role

This research on middle-level leadership suggests that the work of these leaders is heavily dependent on how their roles are constructed. Some are expected to be leaders that influence teaching and learning, and they may be developed and supported to do so. Unfortunately, a decade after this original research we are still finding examples where teachers in these key roles have few expectations or opportunities to exercise leadership. Dinham's (2007) study and the research reported here indicate that heads of departments and programmes can make a difference, but key to this is the support and high expectations from the leadership of the school (particularly the principal), and the capacity and aptitude to be leaders. Too often some or all of these elements are missing. If we are serious about improving schools there is a need for school leadership structures to be reconsidered and then appropriate support given to ensure we have leaders capable of transforming schools.

The consistent findings over a decade from these three studies are somewhat concerning. Too many people in leadership roles are not leaders, do not have an expectation of being a leader, and do not have the organisational support to be leaders. We have argued elsewhere (Gurr, 2010) that leadership needs to be seen as a special quality and that the current vogue for everyone as a leader is unhelpful. Rather we believe current arrangements are helpful with two provisos: that the middle-level leaders are truly expected to be leaders and that they are given the support to be leaders; that teachers work collaboratively in professional learning communities that have great teaching and great teachers as their focus. In the school sector there is a long history of using professional learning communities as a way to think about the organisation of schools, and contemporary conceptions such as that of Bolam *et al.* (2005) may better describe the collaborative work needed of most teachers. The current focus on distributed leadership seems unhelpful and may indeed be exacerbating the problems as people who do not want to be leaders, nor who have the skills, attitudes or aptitudes to be leaders, are being forced into roles that have leadership as an expectation. As we have argued previously (Gurr, 2010) a leadership structure that will serve most schools both now and in the future to improve learning will have:

- a principal as the main leader supported by, depending on school size, a small leadership group;

- several middle-level leaders responsible for leading improvement in teaching and learning;
- a professional learning community that unifies all in trying to improve the school; and
- teachers who have great teaching and learning as their professional goal.

What is proposed here should be familiar to many in schools. It reinforces the importance of principals exercising leadership – setting direction, developing staff, developing the school organisation and focusing on improving teaching and learning – and suggests the need for more, but not all, teachers to be leaders. In particular, it calls for those responsible for helping to improve teaching and learning (curriculum coordinators, LAL, literacy leaders and so forth) to be supported as leaders. Developing professional learning communities will be important to create the responsive and creative environment needed for contemporary successful schools. It moves explicitly away from the idea that everyone is a leader, and instead proposes that leadership is a somewhat special quality.

If leadership is a special quality, a parallel research stream of ours provides some guidance as to what this might look like. At the same time as we have been interested in middle-level leaders we have, since 2003, as part of our research in the ISSPS, been progressively developing a conception of successful school leadership culminating in the model shown in Figure 2 (Drysdale and Gurr, 2011a).

The model is essentially a social systems framework that depicts behaviour as a function of the leader who acts within an institutional role. In Figure 2, the leader (principal) interacts within the particular school context and engages in developing a series of strategic interventions aimed at improving student outcomes. The areas that can influence student outcomes are labelled, from most to least impact, as teaching and learning (Level 1), school capacity building (Level 2) and other influences (Level 3).

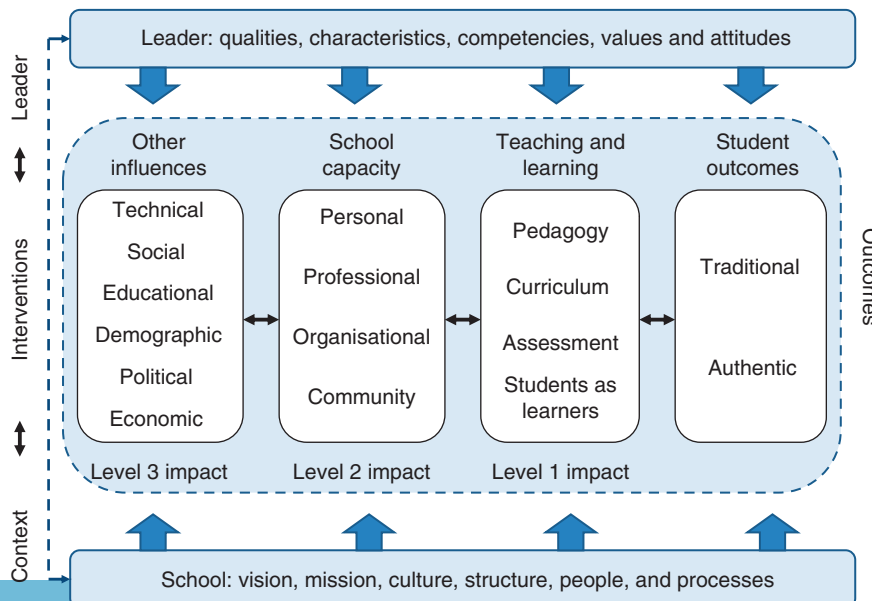


Figure 2.
Drysdale and Gurr
successful school
leadership model

The leader can make interventions at any level in the model, including student outcomes (through, e.g. identifying important outcomes other than literacy and numeracy).

We found (Drysdale and Gurr, 2011a; Gurr and Drysdale, 2007; Gurr *et al.*, 2006) principal leadership to have mostly an indirect effect on student outcomes through activity at Level 2 whereby principals seek to enhance capacity across the four areas of personal (encouraging personal professional growth), professional (enhancing teacher collaboration and practice), organisational (facilitating a supportive organisational learning environment) and community (enhancing relationships with parents and the wider community). Enhancing these capacities leads to improvement in teaching and learning (Level 1) and hence student outcomes.

The location of principal leadership contrasts with the research on middle-level leadership we have reported, which places much of their work at Level 1. Within the teaching and learning area, the quality of instruction, the design of the curriculum, the various forms of assessment and the ability to motivate and equip students to manage their own learning, directly impact on student outcomes. White (2000) described effective middle-level leaders as being involved in instructional leadership, learning area architect and curriculum strategist roles whereby they were influencing the four areas identified in Level 1 of Figure 2; the less effective middle-level leaders focused on administration and routine management tasks almost exclusively. Keane (2010) supported this, identifying a positive impact on student learning in those middle-level leaders who were able to work with teachers at Level 1.

There was some evidence that middle-level leaders were involved in the Level 2 element of professional capacity building, such as leading professional learning communities and supporting professional learning: however, there was little or no evidence of building capacity in the other elements of Level 2 (community and organisational capacity building), at Level 3 (influence at district or system level), or in influencing the types of student outcomes that were valued (authentic and traditional outcomes).

To enhance schools we need more middle-level leaders to be involved in Level 1, and to be more involved in the four school capacities of Level 2. This call is aligned with new Australian professional teaching standards which describe leading teachers in ways that would have them operating equally at level 1 and 2 of our model and occasionally at Level 3 (details can be found at: www.teacherstandards.aitsl.edu.au). This is best achieved by focusing on providing greater support organisationally and personally to these leaders, helping them to clarify their role and enhance their capability to provide leadership interventions at all levels to help improve student outcomes. This requires a re-thinking of the middle-level leadership preparation and development programmes.

Leadership development

In Australia there are no credentialing (other than a teacher qualification) or mandatory preparation programmes for school leaders (Anderson *et al.*, 2008). Preparing to be a school leader has largely been the responsibility of the individual (Gurr *et al.*, 2011a, b), relying on an apprenticeship model where aspiring school leaders progress based on the skills and experience learned on-the-job (Su *et al.*, 2003). Post-graduate qualifications were an option for individuals willing to gain specific knowledge and skills in educational administration, but they were not a requirement, and the extent to which even successful principals accessed this varied (Gurr *et al.*,

2011a,b). The middle-level leadership reported in this paper confirmed that the apprenticeship model was the dominant, with a successful record as a teacher being the starting point for leadership. More troubling, however, was that in the three studies there was not only paucity in training and leadership development for middle-level leadership, but a number of middle-level leaders also failed to see the necessity of prior development.

In recent times in Australia there has been a reaction to the apprenticeship model with federal and state governments, educational systems, teacher unions and service organisations developing leadership standards (Anderson *et al.*, 2008). For example, the Federal Government has developed the National Professional Standards for Principals (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL), 2011). As leadership standards have been developed so to have leadership development programmes targeted at different levels of leadership (aspiring leaders, emerging leaders, beginning principals, experienced principals). In Victoria, for example, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) has set up the Bastow Institute for Educational Leadership (www.bastow.vic.edu.au) to provide a suite of leadership programmes to build leadership capacity within the system. In 2013, the Victorian Catholic system will have its own leadership institute to provide leadership development programmes for school leaders and other leaders in Catholic services. In recent years both systems have begun to sponsor teachers to gain masters' level qualifications.

We know that leadership is important to student learning and school success (Leithwood *et al.*, 2004), and there is emerging evidence about what constitutes effective leadership preparation, and consensus that effective leadership preparation makes a difference to schools (Bush, 2008, 2009; Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2010). When comparisons are made across countries there is variation in the requirement for pre-service leadership preparation and on-going development support (Ylimaki and Jacobson, 2011b). In comparing principals from Australia (no pre-service leadership programmes) and those from the USA and Denmark (which do have pre-service programmes) Gurr *et al.* (2011a) found that all principals spoke of the importance of having had experience with a strong and supportive mentor, a high level of personal motivation, and a love of learning. Across seven countries, Ylimaki and Jacobson (2011b, pp. 186-7) found that principals emphasised the importance of "hands-on experience for the acquisition and development of successful leadership", all had good social and professional supports, and there was extensive experience in working with others, with successful leadership "developed through teamwork and strong relations cultivated through professional learning and experience". In the USA context, which has widespread certification requirements, exemplary pre-service programmes had coherent curriculum linked to standards, an emphasis on leadership of instruction and school improvement, active and student-centred instruction, knowledgeable faculty with school experience, a cohort structure, targeted recruitment and internships (Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2010). At the in-service level, Darling-Hammond *et al.* (2010) found that exemplary US district support for leadership development included having a leadership learning continuum approach, providing learning grounded in practice, and fostering collegial learning networks. While there remain variations in what are considered best practices in preparation and leadership, Bush (2008, 2009) argues that there is a moral imperative to support the preparation and development of school leaders and that because every individual is different, with different needs, a range of leadership development opportunities need to be provided.

The successful school leadership model (Drysdale and Gurr, 2011a) outlined above provides a clear strategy for leadership development. First it shows the organisational and personal domains where leadership support and development should be focused, and second it provides guidance for the type and range of interventions necessary to impact on student achievement.

The organisational dimension, reflected by model in Figure 2, is critical for the support of middle-level leaders. A school, like other social organisations, is a place where people work and live. Owens and Valesky (2011) state that a person's behaviour is influenced by not only their personality and what they bring to the organisation, but also by the social norms and expectations of the culture. This organisational dimension is an important element of the effectiveness of the work of middle-level leaders. White (2000) referred to these as "situational factors", while Keane (2010, p. 157) noted, "the role of the LALs was found to be heavily dependent on the situation or context". The contextual or situation variables that influenced success of middle-level leaders include: the role and expectations of senior leadership; the organisational structure, systems and culture of the school; and the specific contextual variables of the role, such as the learning area, subject discipline or section within the school. The senior leadership of a school greatly influences the role, structure and culture of the school, and in many cases they also select or promote individuals to the middle-level roles. Clearly the attitudes, expectations and capabilities of senior leadership are crucial to how these roles are constructed and supported. Overly bureaucratic and hierarchical structures, referred to as mindless and inhibiting structures (Hoy, 2003), are barriers to effective leadership. To be more effective senior leadership needs to be proactive and clear about their role in promoting and supporting middle-level leadership through such activities as providing quality professional learning, building a productive and collaborative school culture, and enhancing organisational policies, structures and processes. A package of leadership support programmes would typically include induction, coaching, mentoring, teaming, learning communities, formal and informal training, short and long-term professional learning opportunities, and a supportive performance management programme. It is clear that senior leadership also needs leadership development in how to support the development of middle-level leaders.

In considering the individual dimension, people bring a range of personal aspects to the workplace such as personality, personal qualities, experience, learning and capabilities. This would suggest that middle-level leaders have a responsibility to develop their own leadership capacity through training, development and experience. Interestingly, as previously stated, many middle-level leaders had no training prior to taking up their appointment, or even thought it necessary to have pre-training (White, 2000). Lack of professional development and experience meant they had to learn on the job. Expectations need to be clear at a system and school level about professional responsibility for individual capacity building in leadership and professional practice. Individuals need to develop their own customised individual development and career plans, rather than rely on the system or school; much as the successful principals we have studied took charge of their own professional development (Gurr *et al.*, 2011a, b).

The second aspect derived from the model (Drysdale and Gurr, 2011a) that has implications for leadership development is knowledge of teaching and learning. Kouzes and Posner (2007) note that credibility is the foundation of leadership. To be credible as a leader in teaching and learning requires a high level of professional competence and knowledge (Robinson, 2006). Munro (2005, p. 6) argues that leaders need to be "experts of learning" as well as "experts in learning". He notes that effective

school leaders differentiate professional learning for teachers and provide opportunities to enhance teaching practice. Hill (2002) identifies what school leaders need to know about teaching and learning as interventions. School leaders are required to have an intimate knowledge of the range of interventions that will impact on student outcomes. The national professional standards for advanced teaching and for principals (Teaching Australia, 2008) lists contemporary and authoritative “profession knowledge” as the first of three essential standards (professional knowledge, professional practice and professional leadership) that are critical factors for realising teacher and leadership capabilities. This requires a knowledge and understanding of the factors that influence learning and development, knowledge of effective pedagogies, areas of expertise, and a wide range of resources for teaching and learning.

White’s (2000) study highlighted curriculum, learning and instruction as the key domain areas of middle-level leaders. Level 1 of the model (Drysdale and Gurr, 2011a) shows four domains: teaching, curriculum, assessment and learning as areas of expertise that contribute significantly to student learning. To become credible and effective leaders, middle-level leaders should be required to engage in quality professional learning in each of the areas that encompass their roles and demonstrate competence and influence in these. While Level 1 (teaching and learning) of the model identifies the key domains of knowledge and influence, there is also potential for them to work and influence at Level 2 (school capacity building). Leadership development programmes should provide strategies and processes for building capacity in the individual, professional, organisational and community domains. They should also be encouraged, supported and provided with opportunities to work in Level 3 where they can impact at a network, district or system level; an example would be encouraging middle-level leaders to be actively engaged with professional associations and with system initiatives.

Conclusion

Our overview of the research on middle-level leadership in Australia, focused on the research of White (2000), Keane (2010) and Cotter (2011), shows their potential to make a significant impact on school and student improvement. Unfortunately far too often this potential is unrealised. In this paper we conclude that lack of understanding and organisational support by senior leaders, the lack of professional preparation and leadership development by individual middle-level leaders, and underdeveloped professional knowledge and capability contribute to a missed opportunity to make a difference in schools. By referring to our successful school leadership model (Drysdale and Gurr, 2011a) as a guide and conceptual framework we recommend that middle-level leadership can be enhanced by focusing on opportunities for quality professional learning and leadership development in building professional knowledge and practice in teaching, curriculum, assessment and student learning (Level 1), and also in helping with developing strategies for building school capacity (Level 2). We have argued elsewhere (Gurr *et al.*, 2011a,b) that whilst formal leadership development programmes will remain important, increasingly there will be more thought given to structured experience-based programmes, and the personal qualities of leaders. For our middle-level leaders this will mean developing personal qualities and skills that enhance working with colleagues to improve practice (such as coaching and leadership skills like active listening, providing feedback and so forth), actively structuring experiences that progressively develop leadership capacity (with the use of internships, mentoring and coaching important), and having access to high-quality

formal professional learning programmes that will link these experiences and develop awareness of the wider knowledge about improving schools. Finally, there also needs to be high expectations and processes in place that encourage middle-level leaders to accept responsibility for their own learning and development. This could partly be achieved by the development of individual customised learning plans that are linked to school and system goals and which form part of a performance review process (Drysdale and Gurr, 2011b; Gurr and Drysdale, 2011).

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