

Realising the Value of Performance Appraisal for Middle Leaders in New Zealand Secondary Schools

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Abstract

This paper reports on a study that investigated the appraisal of middle leaders in three New Zealand secondary schools in order to determine what constituted effective performance appraisal and how this practice could be improved from the perspective of this middle tier of leadership. Overall, appraisal was variably practised and seen as a compliance mechanism rather than an opportunity for conversations about achievement and development, when it occurred at all. It is concluded that what middle level leaders experience as performance appraisal may be devalued by senior leaders paying insufficient attention to the appraisal of middle leaders especially in relation to their management responsibilities. Development linked to the appraisal of both senior and middle leaders could strengthen appraisal practice, increase its value for all parties, and tap the unrealised potential that performance appraisal has for supporting middle leaders to improve student learning outcomes.

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Introduction

In the New Zealand secondary school context middle leaders are teachers who take on extra responsibilities such as leading a subject department or year level within the school. As such, they are allocated management units (salary allowances) to recognise these duties and are expected to meet professional standards for Unit Holders in addition to the core professional standards for Teachers (Ministry of Education, 1999). They hold designations such as Head of Department, Teacher in Charge of a subject or Dean: a title normally indicating pastoral rather than academic duties. These teachers find themselves at the interface between teaching and managing because in almost all cases middle leaders have both teaching and management responsibilities (Bennett, Woods, Wise & Newton, 2007; Cardno, 1995; Fitzgerald, 2009; Kemp & Nathan, 1995). In this position they find themselves in a vertical chain of command with direct responsibility for the performance of teachers, with and through whom they must achieve the goals and objectives of their particular area of responsibility. This notion of line management drawn from the Human Resources Management theory base (Oldroyd, 2005; Rudman, 2010) can aptly be applied to secondary schools because middle leaders expect to report on their achievements to senior leaders further up the line and are expected to appraise the performance of the staff in their teams. This resonates with the definition provided by Rudman (2010, p. 469) who describes the line manager as “managers who report to the next-in-line manager and are responsible for an organisation’s main operations and activities”. This definition captures accurately the key role that middle level leaders, especially those with responsibility for a subject department, play in a secondary school as they are closest to the teaching and learning activities and it is their leadership and management that determines the success of these educational operations. Consequently, middle level leaders perform a significant role in secondary schools and it behoves those to whom they report to recognise and accord value to their performance. Middle level



leaders according to the New Zealand Ministry of Education have “a pivotal part to play in helping their schools pursue their goals and achieve their objectives” (Ministry of Education, 2012, p. 11). One avenue for providing middle leaders with the conditions they need to perform their role effectively is a system of performance appraisal that “can lead to affirmation that performance expectations are being met, and to the identification of areas for improvement” (Cardno, 2012, p. 90). These middle level leaders need to experience effective appraisal themselves in order to capably appraise people in their department teams. Whilst a vast array of literature exists in relation to the appraisal of teachers and the appraisal of principals, there is a paucity of literature available on the appraisal of middle leaders in educational settings (Robson, 2012). The purpose of this article is to report the findings of one New Zealand study into the views held by practitioners about their experiences of appraisal practice as middle leaders.

Complex Purposes of Performance Appraisal

Professional work in organisations is subject to scrutiny by others and the teaching profession is no different in that it demands a high degree of critical appraisal of one’s work in order to judge its effectiveness and seek ways of improving it. In New Zealand’s period of radical educational administration reform being implemented in the 1990s, old ways of judging performance through the Inspection of Schools system were replaced by practices driven by the values of New Public Management ideology that meshed the notion of quality with accountability (Brundrett & Rhodes, 2011). As a consequence, teacher appraisal was introduced as a way of mandating professional accountability.

Cardno and Piggot-Irvine (1997) described the performance appraisal of teachers as an evaluative activity which is intended to benefit both the individual and the organisation by leading to affirmation that performance expectations are being met, and to the

identification of areas for improvement. Its dual purposes of accountability and development serve multiple values: providing a means of demonstrating accountability and a means for targeting development needs simultaneously. This is a view of appraisal that presents it as mutually beneficial to employer and employee (Rudman, 2010) by being professionally enhancing and at the same time serving the need of the organisation to operate a system for overseeing the work of teachers that contributes to effective institutional performance. Several years on, a review of the practice of staff appraisal in New Zealand schools undertaken by the Organisation for Economic and Cultural Development (OECD) reports on its purposes from a more pragmatic perspective. This report by Nusche, Laveault, MacBeath & Santiago (2012) states that teacher appraisal occurs in relation to individual teachers gaining or renewing teacher registration and it is also part of the employer's performance management processes. As part of these processes it has two major purposes which are attestation of satisfactory performance for salary progression and improvement which is linked to professional learning and development to improve teaching and learning.

Appraisal is intended to cover both the teaching aspect and the management aspect of the role of middle leaders in New Zealand secondary schools because the mandatory requirements for performance management prescribed by the Secretary for Education in the *Guidelines for Performance Management Systems* (Ministry of Education, 1997) include reference to teachers who hold management responsibilities (such as planning, decision-making, reporting, professional leadership, and resource management). Boards of Trustees as the employers in New Zealand's self-governed school system (Middlewood & Cardno, 2001) must ensure that performance expectations are clearly communicated and that appraisal is implemented as specified by the national guidelines. This responsibility is usually delegated to the principal who in turn delegates appraisal to appropriate managers along the line. For those



in middle leader roles, performance expectations are also linked to the Professional Standards (Ministry of Education, 1999) which contain a specific standard that applies to Unit Holders. It is notable that the two most significant reviews of appraisal practice undertaken in recent years (Education Review Office, 2014; Nusche et al., 2012) do not make any specific reference to appraisal practice in relation to middle leaders. However, what they do report about the practice of appraisal in schools may generally be applicable.

Nusche et al. (2012) found that “regular teacher appraisal as part of performance management is variable across schools” (p. 77) in terms of both the quality of processes and frequency. Because the Board of Trustees had discretion in design of systems these varied greatly across the country. Of further concern to these evaluators is that, “there is little evidence about the quality and impact of teacher appraisal in New Zealand” (p. 77). While this OECD report makes clear connections between the practices of teacher appraisal and the management of professional learning and development (PLD) it concludes that “there is room to improve these links” (p. 67). It also highlights a concern about the variable nature of the provision of PLD highlighted in earlier ERO reviews. In 2009 the Education Review Office (ERO) conducted a national evaluation of the management of professional learning and development in schools and discovered that this was extremely variable – meaning that it was not consistent in quality or spread to all teachers. It is noteworthy that the ERO (2009) review glaringly avoids specifically naming the issue of teacher appraisal in the evaluation approach. Not a single research question is formulated to establish or confirm a link between appraisal and development in this study. The connections between professional development and appraisal are not isolated or highlighted to demonstrate links although mention of how teacher appraisal contributes to development planning is buried under headings such as school-wide planning. For example, one school “uses a variety of data sources in its planning, including ... information from the teacher appraisal process” (ERO, 2009, p. 12).

Once again, the study makes no mention of any special development needs for middle leaders. Furthermore, the study is premised on the assumption that even in secondary schools it is the principal who manages teacher development. The role of the middle leader being directly involved with teachers in appraisal and development practices is not considered in this report and is the case in relation to the OECD study on appraisal as well. The literature that deals with the roles and development needs of middle leaders (Bush, 2010; Fitzgerald, 2009; Gurr & Drysdale, 2013) suggests they are often the forgotten people between the principals and the teachers in secondary schools where in fact, they are possibly the most influential in terms of exerting direct influence over the quality of teaching and learning.

Achieving the dual purposes of accountability and development, for improvement (Cardno & Piggot-Irvine, 1997) is what is deemed to be necessary to practice appraisal effectively. New Zealand secondary schools are not achieving this regularly for all teachers as confirmed by the research that has evaluated these practices (ERO, 2009, 2014; Nusche et al., 2012). In particular, the over emphasis on using appraisal for compliance to complete procedures related to salary progression attestation, to the detriment of its use as a channel for improvement has created a challenge with regard to how appraisal is viewed by teachers and leaders. The most recent study of appraisal in secondary schools in New Zealand (ERO, 2014) recommends a way forward in which appraisal becomes a central pillar of professional practice with links to and from school-wide planning and review, teacher self-assessment and development and the assessment of how the professional standards are met. According to this report,

High quality appraisal maintains a fine balance between the accountability requirements and the improvement focus. The actual practice depends on the school culture and on leadership knowledge and expertise to drive for professional accountability rather than technical compliance. (p. 29)

The culture in which performance appraisal operates is a determinant of its successful implementation. Reporting on



successful elements of appraisal in New Zealand schools, Nusche et al. (2012) comment that appraisal is part of a 'high trust' culture. They comment on high levels of professional autonomy, collegiality and support. In this sort of culture they say that "as trusted professionals ... teachers in New Zealand are, apparently, eager to receive feedback" (p. 76). It is within such cultures of high performance trust that professionals can engage in productive conversations (Cardno, 2012) about practice and how it can be improved. It is these sorts of conversations that middle leaders in particular have indicated as being important in their development as leaders (Robson, 2012).

The Critical Function of Appraisal in Instructional Leadership

Middle leaders now feature centrally in thinking and research around the notion of instructional leadership. In this construct of leadership, the leader can influence instruction (that is, teaching in the classroom) in two ways. Firstly this can occur in a direct, hands on way that requires face-to-face interactions and is called *instructional actions*. Secondly, it can be enacted in an indirect, more distant manner related to establishing the conditions for effective instruction and is about creating *instructional climate* (Seashore Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom & Anderson, 2010). Seashore Louis et al. (2010) point to the important role of middle leaders (specifically the department heads in secondary schools) who are the recognised *direct* instructional leaders through distribution of this role beyond the principal.

Bendickson, Robinson and Hattie (2012) state that, "in secondary schools, principals are more likely to focus on indirect instructional leadership than they are in primary schools, because middle leaders such as heads of department take on much of the direct instructional leadership" (p. 2). This implies that the middle leaders' work is "focused on the quality of teacher practice, including the quality of the curriculum, teaching and assessment, and the quality of teacher inquiry and teacher learning" (p. 4). Neither the Seashore Louis et al.

(2010) study nor Bendickson et al. (2012) raise the issue of the specific leadership and management knowledge and skills that middle leaders require to carry out direct instructional leadership. Nor do these authors say how these capabilities are to be appraised or developed. They do, however, make connections to broad categories of leadership and management practice which include the management of people in their teaching teams.

The Methodology

This small-scale qualitative study was guided by the following research questions:

What are middle leader experiences of appraisal practice?

What needs to be improved to realise the potential value of appraisal for middle leaders and for schools?

It was important to collect data about the perceptions of middle leaders regarding their appraisal experiences that would provide both width and depth within a manageable framework. The research was conducted in three large co-educational secondary schools where the Principals were willing to make school documentation available, allow the researcher access to administer an electronic questionnaire to all middle leaders and extend an invitation to them to participate in individual interviews. Each of these schools had at least fifteen teachers who held designated middle leader positions.

In all, three data collection methods were employed to capture as much reality as possible (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Firstly, documents were analysed (Wellington, 2000) to establish institutional expectations related to performance appraisal of and by middle leaders. These documents comprised school policy statements, procedures and guidelines for performance appraisal and middle leader job descriptions. The main focus of document content analysis was to isolate specific references to the middle leaders' role in each school and/or draw inferences about how the appraisal systems



might be implemented for and by middle leaders. Secondly, a qualitative questionnaire containing both closed and open-ended questions (Bryman, 2012) was circulated electronically to all middle leaders in each school through email contacts provided by the principal. Altogether 46 questionnaires were sent out and 26 responses were received (there were twice as many responses from school A as there were from schools B and C). In spite of two reminder emails being sent, the low response rate from two schools remains disappointing. Thirdly, to deepen the quality of data the researcher interviewed five middle leaders who had volunteered to participate via the questionnaire (two from schools A and B and one from school C). Using a semi-structured interview format the researcher was able to elicit rich information that reflected in-depth experiences (Fontana & Frey, 2005) in the one-to-one interviews that was not included in the questionnaires because of its sensitivity. In turn, during the more relaxed and reflective interview setting, participants openly revealed more of the difficulties they experienced in relation to appraisal. Furthermore, the researcher was able to interpret the physical actions of participants, and not just their words (Bryman, 2012). In reporting the findings below, data from all three methods are integrated.

Data were analysed by simple calculation of frequency of response to Likert scale questions. The open-ended questions and interview data were coded thematically within broad categories already established from the literature base on appraisal and middle leadership to identify recurring issues. All interviews were digitally recorded in face-to-face meetings and the transcripts were verified as accurate by the participants in order to increase the trustworthiness of the study. By employing multiple methods to gather the data, a form of data triangulation was achieved which strengthened the accuracy of the reality being studied. As Meriam (2009) states, triangulation is probably “the most well-known strategy to shore up the internal validity of a study (p. 215).

Findings

What it feels like to be a middle leader?

Overall, the 26 participants in this study have a wide range of teaching and leadership experience. The responsibilities of the role include teaching and leading programmes and staff. In addition, all participants, without exception, commented on a heavy workload and feelings of being overwhelmed. Over two thirds of respondents to the questionnaire commented that they found the role rewarding, multifaceted and interesting. Less than half of the questionnaire respondents felt that they were adequately supported by senior leaders in their schools. Likewise, the participants noted that their job description was either vague or not current, nor specifically highlighting the leadership aspects of their role. One participant (C2) referred to their job description as being put together hastily, “essentially created because of an ERO visit this year”.

Expectations Related to Performance Appraisal

All three schools in this study provided documentation about the purposes and processes of performance appraisal that were consistent with the national guidelines for performance management in schools and indicated that the activity had two clear functions: to promote and improve high performance. Policy documents in School A referred to a commitment to:

Implement appropriate personnel management procedures to promote high levels of staff performance and to be a good employer as defined in the State Sector Act, 1988.

In this school, annual appraisal is conducted to:

Create an environment of continuous improvement for staff and students through a robust appraisal process owned by all staff. Outcomes of the appraisal will be tied to professional development.



School C's personnel policy requires all staff to be reviewed annually in order to:

Ensure ongoing improvement in performance in order to provide the best possible opportunities for student success.

In all three schools the procedures for performance appraisal clarify that this will be conducted for teachers by middle leaders (Department and unit heads) and for middle leaders by senior leaders (Deputy Principals in most cases). Because all of these schools comply with the national guidelines they refer in policy and procedure documents to the following basic, common elements that comprise an annual cycle of performance appraisal for teachers in schools.

- At the start of the appraisal process the job description (for Unit Holders) is confirmed – in an initial meeting.
- Development goals are set for the year.
- There are regular observations of teaching and links are made to the Registered Teacher Criteria or Professional Standards for Teachers (and Unit Holders).
- Records are maintained by filling in procedural forms (eg. Completing the HoD Performance Review Booklet)
- Some form of self-assessment and student evaluations may be employed and discussed – in a closing meeting.
- There is an appraisal report produced and this is linked to attestation that standards have been met to enable salary progression.

Nowhere in the documentation is there specific reference to the need for regular conversations between appraiser and appraisee. On the face of it, appraisal is presented as a disembodied, perfunctory event with no reference to the possible mutual benefits to the organisation and the individual that could be gained through engagement in dialogue about performance.

Whilst a completely different policy and set of procedural documents in each school applied to the appraisal of principals

(Education Review Office, 2014b), the schools' documentation made no mention of the appraisal of the leadership and management facet of the middle leaders' role. Because all of the documentation was related to the mandated requirements for the appraisal of teachers, its focus was the classroom teacher and not the leaders of these teachers.

What appraisal feels like for a middle leader?

Results from the questionnaire indicate that the majority of the respondents were familiar with the purposes of teacher appraisal documented in their schools' policies and identified these as improvement (21 respondents); informing professional development (19 respondents); compliance with attestation requirements (16 respondents) and an accountability and tick-box exercise (13 respondents). The interviews yielded a much stronger focus on the accountability purposes of appraisal in relation to how it was experienced by middle leaders, who said, for example:

It's to check that I am doing the job ... a tick box exercise, with little obvious appraisal of me as a leader; the signing off of teacher registration every three visits. (A1)

Here's where I have issues. It is supposed to be that you evaluate the quality and standard of teaching to check they are performing at an acceptable standard. Instead it is really a data collection exercise, a tick box activity, a fill in the gaps here for someone to ensure it is all done. (C1)

To be honest, a tick box basically ... I am pretty much left to it really. (B1)

For almost all the middle leaders who were interviewed, there was evidence that for them appraisal was about compliance, if it happened at all. Asked about her experiences of being appraised, one participant commented that:

To tell you the truth, I have got no idea. It's not done thoroughly. At our level it's ticking boxes... That means little. (A1)

In the views of all of these participants, appraisal did not appear to be given much attention or status as the following comments indicate.

It is seen as a chore rather than a process to raise student performance in the classroom. (A2)



I was never appraised for the last two years as HoD. As a result I don't feel particularly thrilled about the appraisals I am expected to do. (B2)

Pretty much two observations and then we are done and dusted ... not much going on ... can't recall if it happened last year. (A1)

This perception is borne out by questionnaire responses related to the value placed on appraisal practices in general and for middle leaders in particular. Many participants (14) personally felt that appraisal was not a key focus of the school and several of them (17) perceived that the school was not performing well in this area. Comments from questionnaire respondents expand this view of appraisal as:

- *Seen as another requirement to tick off rather than a professional learning tool.*
- *As rigorous as the manager wants to make it.*
- *Not important. The importance seems to be from middle management down, not middle management up.*

Overall, the perceptions of appraisal being relayed include the view that sometimes the teaching work of the middle leader is being appraised (for example, the reference to observations of teaching) and sometimes not even the teaching is appraised. None of the participants in this study make reference to having experienced appraisal that is focused on the leadership and management role that Unit Holders are expected to perform.

Improving the Appraisal of Middle Leaders

There is little doubt that the middle leaders in this study perceive their roles as important and demanding and believe that the lack of attention paid to their performance as middle leaders diminishes the value placed on the contribution they make in leading learning from the middle of the organisation. Several comments in the questionnaires focused on how appraisal could be accorded a higher value and made more meaningful for middle leaders. The most frequent mention was accorded to time allocation for appraisal,

senior leaders demonstrating that it is valued and important, and the school supporting the development of leadership practice.

Improving What Happens

Just over half of the questionnaire respondents were not satisfied with the appraisal practices that they had experienced. They made comments that indicated their appraisal was:

- *Not productive ... Has not improved my leading.*
- *Not setting deep, meaningful objectives for me.*
- *Not mutually enhancing. I want to develop personally.*
- *Not about meeting with the appraiser – just paperwork.*

The interview responses revealed a common thread related to the participants' views that they experienced appraisal in a very superficial way: that was not meaningful. One middle leader commented that her appraisal had been rushed and minimal. She says:

In term four my senior manager says, "I need to visit your classroom to do an observation". It happens twice, usually late in the year and there is a very quick follow-up conversation and that is pretty much it. There is little obvious appraisal of me as a leader and that is where I need it. (C1)

Another middle leader (A2) said he wanted his appraisal to be much more than just checking up on him. "I want an opportunity to reflect on success and critique what's not working – higher level discussions, mentoring, coaching". And yet another (A1) commented that, "The whole process is too often treated as a 'necessary evil' – no follow-ups or real meaningful dialogue". One of the middle leaders interviewed (B1) felt it was such a waste of resources to engage in appraisal that was not satisfying and suggested that the whole staff might benefit from training that could:

Show how to make it more meaningful, not just more paperwork. Tighter systems and a higher priority and value placed on it as a whole school system, where everyone gets the same message. (B2)



In both the questionnaire comments and the interviews participants made practical suggestions about the way in which interactions between senior leaders (who were normally the appraisers) and the middle leaders being appraised could be improved. The responses stressed the need to make time for formal professional conversations (beyond those related to form-filling) so that middle leaders felt attention was being paid to their work and their development needs. Interviewees suggested that the senior and middle leader should have a more open, visible appraisal relationship and even meet on a monthly basis to talk about performance and development. As one participant stated:

If you are in the mindset of having a regular meeting time – it works. We could identify areas of stress that need extra resources both in time and financial and ways to complete the jobs required. (C1)

It is not only the middle leaders who should be concerned about their capability and development as leaders. A critical role is played in this practice by the senior leaders assigned as the appraisers of middle leaders and they may not be performing this function effectively. Not all middle leaders interviewed were happy with the quality of their appraisal and their views can be summarised as wanting to be appraised by someone who can provide ongoing mentoring, development and inspiration. They say:

The senior managers of the school are not confident about the process. This is evident in the lack of discussion concerning the appraisal process.(B1)

Senior leaders need to be capable of overseeing middle leaders, to push middle leaders to do better because teaching and learning does suffer when appraisal systems are poor. (A2)

I am so frustrated because I am not being appraised. This is a bad example from the top level, yet we are meant to deliver appraisal, carry out appraisal in our departments. (B2)

You need people who are conducting these appraisals to be someone who can inspire and know what it takes to develop these middle leaders. (A1)

One overall finding of this study that is repeated in a variety of ways is that the appraisal of middle leaders appears to be undervalued, unattended to and underdeveloped in relation to the time and attention it is accorded, the absence of meaningful

professional conversations, and the lack of leadership training to improve effective appraisal practice.

Developing Leaders

What these findings show is that the middle leaders are not only feeling short-changed by the way they are being appraised but are also concerned that the appraisal process is not delivering on what it promises in relation to being linked to relevant developmental goals. The majority of questionnaire respondents indicated that their professional development was related to curriculum and teaching. One third of respondents commented on a need for specific development related to their middle leader role. All of the five middle leaders who were interviewed indicated an interest in professional development that could support their leadership role. Four of the five also commented that when they had sought support for relevant leadership development they had been unable to secure this. Two of these participants referred to a lack of resources. As an interviewee says:

I want to have a conversation about postgraduate study with my appraiser but people are now actually reluctant to ask for Professional Development (PD). We get told early on in the year that there is no more money. (A2)

Associated with effective appraisal practice is the need for both appraisers and appraisees to participate in leadership development around this topic. This study confirms that a large majority of middle leaders who completed the questionnaire (17 respondents) believed that their school was not performing effectively in relation to implementing appraisal. Many of the comments in the questionnaire related to a lack of training provided for the middle leaders themselves (and others) as appraisers of staff. For example:

- *We presumably work it out for ourselves based on our own experience of appraisal in the past.*
- *It is rarely discussed. Appraisal is left to the individual departments to work out.*



The perception of a lack of leadership training or professional development conveyed by the participants could be related to the emphasis placed on appraising teaching and a total absence of appraisal that focused on the leadership and management expectations held of these middle leaders, specifically the expectation that they appraise the staff for whose performance they are responsible.

Discussion

The findings of this study confirm that middle leaders in New Zealand secondary schools do indeed play an important and pivotal part in directly contributing to the quality of teaching and learning. They fundamentally did this by being responsible for the performance of staff in their subject areas (an average of four staff) and this included conducting the performance appraisal activities required. It is also clear from this study that all of the middle leaders who participated understood that as part of the performance appraisal system they would be appraised by a senior staff member – normally a member of the Senior Leadership Team (SLT).

The reality presented in the views of these middle leaders showed that the school's communication about teacher appraisal was clear, they understood its purpose with regard to attestation and the professional standards for teaching (Ministry of Education, 1999) as well as its purpose related to professional learning and development for teachers. Consequently, there were procedures in place and forms to complete and as leaders they understood what would be required of them in relation to their own appraisal and the appraisal of others. This is consistent with the findings of Nusche et al. (2012) in relation to the strength of appraisal practice reported in their country review. They found that teaching standards were a key element in any appraisal system, that appraisal as an employer practice in line with the mandated guidelines was generally well consolidated across schools. They commented that “the focus on developmental teacher

appraisal is a strength” and that appraisal “typically involves helping teachers learn about, reflect on, and improve practice in the specific school context in which they teach” (p. 75). While there is strong evidence of appraisal practice in the three research schools, what is notably absent is evidence of appraisal practice that is specifically directed towards learning about, reflecting on and improving practice as a Management Unit Holder or middle leader in a secondary school. Neither the documentation nor the experiences of these middle leaders include any reference as to how the specific duties related to being a middle leader are evaluated as the basis for planning leadership development. The literature that draws links between performance appraisal and professional development is vast and consistent in pointing to a need to base targeted development on prior assessment of need through appraisal (see for example, Adey, 2000; Cardno, 2012; Cardno & Piggot-Irvine, 1997; Education Review Office, 2009, 2014; Middlewood & Cardno, 2001). Nusche et al. (2012) assert that in the broad New Zealand school context “there is room to improve the links between teacher appraisal, professional development and school development (p. 78).

The finding that middle leaders are experiencing some form of appraisal, some of the time, resonates with the research (Nusche et al., 2012) that indicates its provision is extremely variable across schools. Evidence from this study confirms that it also appears to vary within schools, with middle leaders often receiving little or no guidance about how to perform this important function. The participants identify the need for development that is targeted to their needs. This is an issue for senior leadership in a school and particularly the principal who is attributed by much of the recent research to be the most influential person in achieving effective appraisal system implementation (Education Research Office, 2014; Nusche et al., 2012). When school leaders are aware of the scope of development such as that depicted by Cardno, 2005; 2012) as a model of holistic professional development (see Figure 1) they are able to see beyond the limits of teacher professional learning and development

as the only form that is available and include the notion of management development in their thinking. A holistic model comprises four key aspects of development focus: curriculum development, personal development, management development and school-wide development that are linked to appraisal, overarched by strategic management and review and underpinned by educational leadership that anchors all development activity to the service of improving teaching and learning.



Figure 1: A holistic model of professional development

Source: Cardno (2005, 2012)

Such conceptualisations of professional learning and development that enable a wider leadership view that encompasses management development for both senior and middle leaders could begin to provide conditions that could meet the expectations held of appraisal by many of the middle leaders in this study. As Cardno (2012) states, “Around the world there is evidence that education systems have recognised and responded to the need for leadership and management development of aspiring, newly appointed and experienced principals. ... For other managers at senior and middle management levels a picture of inconsistency emerges” (p. 107). These leaders in the middle are now recognised as crucial players in the business of maintaining effective organisations. They are also the

most likely recipients of the distribution of instructional leadership beyond the principal, yet they appear to be forgotten in plans to develop the specific knowledge and skills that enable the effective management of those with and through whom they achieve the organisation's goals.

The theory-base on performance appraisal in schools is consistent in offering the proposition that when appraisal is underpinned by clear values of professional accountability and development it has many benefits that can impact positively on the organisation and on individuals (Cardno & Piggot-Irvine, 1997; Forrester, 2011). In this study some examples of effective appraisal for middle leaders have been identified but are far outweighed by aspects of appraisal practice that are disappointing and fall short of expectations. There is, however, information generated from this study that points the way towards practice changes that could make a critical difference to the work and achievements of middle leaders if the potential advantages of appraisal to improve the quality of management and the quality of teaching and learning are recognised and acted upon at the top level of the school. The participants in this study want appraisal that is meaningful, recognises their need to engage in conversation about their performance and development with the appraiser and gives them confidence in the capability of the senior leaders to conduct their appraisal.

The inherent dual purposes of appraisal: accountability and development, can often be uncomfortable bedfellows unless these values are understood and enacted in practice through making them transparent and discussable (Cardno, 2012). What makes performance appraisal effective is that it is utilised to have conversations about performance problems; that it is not avoided or postponed because of either inertia or inability; that it is utilised to agree solutions to performance problems and plan changes. The most effective aspect of appraisal practice in the views of the majority of middle leaders in this study was the value of conversations with their leaders. They described these as professional conversations that were



ongoing but firstly, did not happen often enough, if at all and secondly, were informal rather than embedded in the appraisal process. This finding mirrors messages in the literature about the importance of on-going dialogue about practice. Middlewood and Cardno (2001) state, “the giving and receiving of feedback is fundamental and the purpose is to focus on performance with the aim of achieving stretch or challenge” (p. 11). This implies that, in this study at least, middle leaders recognise that there are particular capabilities they need to develop to manage people in their teams. They would like to see their own appraisers model these capabilities but find in most cases there is no opportunity for such learning.

Conclusions

The experiences of appraisal by middle leaders in this study are very varied and range from no appraisal at all to appraisal that is a mere technicality to appraisal that is considered worthwhile and useful to the middle leader. From what has been evidenced earlier, it is possible to conclude that while there is appraisal happening, it is not focused on appraising leadership performance. Are these middle leaders forgotten in the middle of the organisation or is it merely the leadership role that they perform that appears to be forgotten, or at the very least under-valued? If there is no appraisal of their leadership and management responsibilities it follows that there will be no related developmental activity linked to the expectations held of middle leaders beyond their teaching responsibilities. We conclude that there are implications for leadership practice at both the senior and middle levels of secondary school leadership that flow from the findings of this research. In order to realise the value of appraisal for middle level leaders, the knowledge and skills of senior leaders who are their appraisers must also be considered.

Implications for Senior Leadership Practice

Senior leaders in secondary schools (Deputy Principals normally) are appointed as the appraisers of the middle level leaders. In the view of the middle leaders who experience appraisal conducted by these senior leaders, there are shortfalls in the delivery of a practice that should have mutual benefits for both the organisation and the individual. The potential for strengthening the leadership and management practices of individual middle leaders which in turn would impact on the capability of the organisation to achieve its goals appears to be unrealised. This draws attention to the possibility that the senior leaders charged with the task of appraising middle leaders may not themselves have the necessary knowledge and skills to undertake this work. It behoves the principal of a secondary school to consider the quality of the appraisal experiences of middle leaders as important and to ensure that the appraisal and development of senior leaders is attended to so that they can carry out effective and meaningful middle leader appraisals that are linked to relevant development.

Implications for Middle Leaders

Middle leaders in secondary schools hold “influential positions within schools to drive curriculum, change and innovation” (Ministry of Education, 2012). They have direct responsibility for leading quality teaching and learning, the core work of the organisation. Until significance is given to ensuring the appraisal of middle leaders is effective and balanced, both accountability and development for improvement may only be realised at a superficial level. In the absence of a national policy, the onus is on school leaders to ensure that school-level policy, process and practice of appraisal that specifically targets middle leaders is enacted. Overcoming the identified challenges of unclear job descriptions, unsatisfactory appraisal experiences, a lack of appraisal training, and few opportunities for robust professional conversations demands a form



of indirect instructional leadership from the principal to ensure that conditions exist to allow middle leaders to be effective direct instructional leaders.

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