



Teacher and Middle Leader Perceptions of Culturally Responsive Middle Leadership Practices and Their Ability to Meet the Needs of Māori Students in New Zealand Secondary Schools

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Abstract

This paper examines the self-reported culturally responsive practices of curriculum leaders ($n=53$) and teachers ($n=105$) from six state funded secondary schools in New Zealand. Participants were surveyed to examine the relationship between middle leader self-reporting of culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) for improving Māori student engagement and teacher perceptions of those practices. School contextual factors and student academic achievement were also compared with the response ratings to understand any association between culturally responsive middle leadership and student academic outcomes. The study found that middle leaders with more experience generally reported greater confidence in their leadership of CRP. Furthermore, there was some indication that teacher perceptions of middle leader's use of CRP practices may be higher in schools with more experienced middle leaders. However, despite the crucial role middle leaders have in supporting the use of CRP in their departments, no relation was found between the confidence of middle leaders regarding CRP and student academic achievement (155).

Keywords Secondary schools · Curriculum middle leaders · Culturally responsive · Indigenous

Introduction

Middle leaders in secondary schools operate at the interface between different sources of influence and change within schools (Lipscombe et al., 2023) with curriculum middle leaders having significant responsibility for the instructional leadership of

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teachers in the curriculum departments they lead (Tang et al., 2022). Although middle leaders do not have ultimate organisational authority of school functions (Murphy, 2013) their leadership positioning close to the classroom environment affords them opportunities to lead teaching and learning, including modelling culturally responsive approaches in curriculum design and delivery (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995). This study examines how middle leaders report and theorise culturally responsive pedagogy as a lever for increased student equity in secondary schools and how middle leader perceptions of their leadership practice aligns with teachers in terms of promoting improved outcomes for Māori students. In this study we infer participants self-reporting of their middle leadership practices as a measure of their confidence to lead a proactive and resilient teaching workforce that can meet the needs of diverse students. Curriculum middle leaders are significant facilitators of the professional learning and development of teachers in their department (Bryant et al., 2020; Edwards-Groves et al., 2016) and therefore their focus in promoting a social justice and equity agenda within their direct sphere of leadership is important if they are to influence the teachers they lead (Wills Brown & Williams, 2015).

In the Aotearoa New Zealand context, the persistent need to better meet the needs of Māori students means attention to culturally responsive practice has been an ongoing priority for leaders in secondary schools. Critical research reminds us of the powerful connection between politics, economics and culture, in which social, historical and ideological forces produce and constrain our social structures (Bourdieu, 2005; MacDonald, 2023). These forces are particularly evident in schools and have historically impacted the New Zealand education system resulting in negative social and academic outcomes for Māori (Berryman & Eley, 2024). New Zealand educators have focused on implementing interventions designed to close the achievement gap for Māori students, with targeted CRP professional development initiatives shown to have a significant benefit for Māori students in participating schools (Alton-Lee, 2015).

There has been a history of deficit theorising by teachers in relation to Māori student achievement, driven by stereotyping and low teacher expectations (Bishop & Berryman, 2006). The perpetuation of deficit beliefs about the capabilities and prospects of Māori students has influenced students' own self-belief and academic persistence (Rubie-Davies & Peterson, 2016). In a recent study in New Zealand secondary schools the authors found that middle leader participants revealed high levels of overall self-efficacy regarding culturally responsive practice which appeared unrelated to the socio-economic status of students in the school or their academic achievement (Highfield, Webber & Woods, 2024). The study found that middle leaders in secondary schools have the influence and capacity to ensure Māori students are empowered to learn about their own histories and are taught in inclusive classrooms that focus on Māori potential (Highfield, Webber & Woods, 2024).

To further investigate the effectiveness of secondary school middle leaders culturally responsive practices, this study investigated the responses to Likert scale questionnaires completed in 2023 by 53 middle leaders and 105 teachers employed in six state funded schools with variable contributing contexts. The two guiding research questions were:

1. Does school context have any relationship to the reported CRP practices of middle leaders and their ability to meet the needs of Māori students in secondary schools?
2. What is the relationship between middle leader's experience, self-reported CRP and Māori student academic achievement in secondary schools?

The questionnaire responses were then compared with the academic achievement results for Māori students at the school in the same year that the research was carried out.

Literature Review

There is limited international research that investigates the extent to which middle leaders specifically encourage culturally responsive approaches for indigenous students in secondary schools. However, over the last 25 years there has been increasing scholarship describing leadership for equity in schools and improving academic achievement for minority students (Banwo et al., 2021; Khalifa et al., 2016; Shields, 2010). School leaders are increasingly aware of the social vulnerabilities that originate for young people outside the school (Banwo et al., 2021). Leadership for inclusive and socially just education environments is crucial in supporting better life outcomes for students (Shields, 2010). Friere's (1997) contention "that education is not the ultimate lever for social transformation but without it transformation cannot occur" (p.37) is central to a culturally responsive and transformative approach to leadership within the compulsory schooling context (Shields, 2010). Curriculum middle leaders are essential to transformation because these individuals have the unequalled opportunity of direct and regular contact with both teachers and students. It is our contention that the critical leadership required to advance genuine educational reform will come largely from those whose daily work is primarily focussed on *both* leading and teaching (Grootenboer, 2018). Khalifa et al. (2016) endorse four specific middle leadership practices including, leaders interrogating their practice with critical self-awareness; curricular and teacher development that is inclusive of community contexts; an inclusive school climate or spaces that affirm student's identity, and engaging adults outside the school as bearers of culturally appropriate knowledge. While these practices align with New Zealand education policy settings (Ministry of Education, 2022), a recent study with 170 middle leader participants in New Zealand revealed that middle leaders espoused theories and actual enactment of policies that support Māori students are inconsistent (Highfield, Webber & Woods, 2024).

Cultural constructions of difference and school success and failure are often represented in educators' personal beliefs, attitudes and values, shaping how educators interpret and enact CRP (Highfield, Webber & Woods, 2024). The term cultural responsiveness expresses how teachers can respond to the myriad of academic needs of students from culturally diverse backgrounds (Wills Brown & Williams, 2015). However, CRP needs to be focussed on academic success at the same time as students developing their own cultural competencies and understanding the ways in which social structures and practices help reproduce inequities (Ladson-Billings, 1995). In

a recent study, the authors found that middle leaders culturally responsive practices were more likely to focus on creating positive relationships with Māori students, at the expense of monitoring their academic progress (Highfield, Webber & Woods, 2024). The authors contend that while middle leaders have internalised government messaging around the importance of positive relationships for student equity, the messaging is yet to translate into increasing numbers of Māori students attaining university entrance (UE) (Highfield, Webber & Woods, 2024).

The New Zealand Context

Since the early 2000's successive governments have been focussed on improving educational outcomes for Māori and to that end culturally responsive pedagogy in the New Zealand education context has been underpinned by *Te Tiriti o Waitangi* as a foundation document (Hetaraka, 2022). New Zealand schools are required to have strategic plans in place which outline how they will fulfil their commitment to *Te Tiriti o Waitangi* and ensure effective engagement with Māori (Ministry of Education, 2021). Schools have a duty to actively promote and develop education settings in a way that prioritises success for Māori students through ensuring learning settings are free from racism, responsive to learners' identities and include the use of te reo and tikanga Māori into everyday activities (Ministry of Education, 2021). These important priorities now dominate educational rhetoric and shape governance, leadership and teaching decision-making in schools (Burns et al., 2024).

The New Zealand education system predominantly consists of publicly funded schools (Ministry of Education, 2023). However there is considerable variance between schools due to factors such as students' sociocultural diversity, socioeconomic and geographic location, and the ability to resource the school through donations by parents (Alcorn & Thrupp, 2012). To provide additional government funding to schools within lower socioeconomic communities, state schools in New Zealand are assigned an Equity Index Identifier (EQI). The EQI is a statistical tool which estimates the extent to which students within a school may face socio-economic barriers to educational attainment with additional funding allocated based on the needs of the school (Ministry of Education, 2024; New Zealand Qualifications Authority [NZQA], 2024a). Funding from central government is designed to create equitable opportunities for students, regardless of the socioeconomic circumstances of their family, community or the school they attend. To aid reporting, schools have been placed into socioeconomic bands based on their EQI, with bands ranging from schools with students who have the fewest socio-economic barriers that are described as few, below average, average, above average, many or most socio-economic barriers to achievement (NZQA, 2024a). However, despite additional government funding provided to schools who educate students with higher socio-economic barriers, examination pass rates for students in schools that serve low socio-economic areas, remain lower than that of students attending schools in higher socio-economic areas (NZQA, 2024b).

Student academic outcomes in New Zealand secondary schools are measured through their results in the national assessment system. The National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) is designed for students in the senior secondary

school aged 15–18 years. The NCEA is a standards-based qualification system which enables students to receive an exit qualification from year 11 onward. NCEA offers three levels of attainment with students generally working toward level 1 from year 11, level 2 from year 12 and level 3 in year 13. If students wish to attend university, they need to complete additional requirements to attain University Entrance (UE) (NZQA, 2024c). NCEA provides students with multiple pathways to success, enabling students to gain qualifications through vocational pathways (such as construction, manufacturing, farming, the creative or service industries), and academic pathways, which lead students toward university (NZQA, 2024d). NCEA has been criticised for leading to inequitable outcomes for some students as the attainment of standards in vocational pathways are not accepted for entrance to university (Madjar et al., 2009; Daniell, 2018). Daniell (2018) found that students from high-performing schools generally gained more of their level 3 credits from subjects that lead to university, when compared with low-performing schools where students were more likely to gain their level 3 credits from vocational unit standards. Furthermore, there is concern that some schools provide inadequate guidance for students regarding subject choices and schools need to have effective systems in place to monitor student achievement to ensure students achieve their aspirations for further study (Madjar et al., 2009; Webber et al., 2018).

Methodology

Questionnaires for this study collected both quantitative and qualitative data from curriculum middle leaders and teachers in New Zealand secondary schools. The aim of the study was to identify the middle leadership practices enacted by middle leaders and to understand how those practices were perceived by teachers in their school. The items that form the basis of the data for discussion for this paper related to the culturally responsive leadership practices performed by middle leaders in New Zealand secondary schools, including a question regarding *Te Tiriti o Waitangi*. Middle leaders were asked to reflect and rate their leadership practice and teachers were asked to reflect on the culturally responsive practice of the middle leader in their main area of learning. Middle leaders were asked to rate the extent to which they encouraged culturally responsive practice, ensured Māori students were provided with opportunities to succeed and ensured the principles of *Te Tiriti o Waitangi* were at the forefront of department decision-making and practice. Quantitative data was gathered from questions using a Likert response scale of either strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree and strongly disagree. For the purposes of analysis and reporting, positive and negative results were aggregated, with only the aggregated positive results reported. The results reported in this paper focus primarily on the quantitative data gathered from the questions relating to CRP.

The initial study design was approved by the University of Melbourne (protocol number 20433 on 21/02/23) and ratified by the University of Auckland Ethics committee on 01/03/2023 for use in New Zealand. Once ethical approval was received a recruitment email was sent to principals in all New Zealand secondary schools. Eighteen school leaders agreed for the survey to be sent to their staff. Teachers and

Table 1 Participants and participating schools

School Code	School type (all schools are state funded)	EQI band (showing barriers to achievement)	Roll size and % of Māori students	ML participant numbers	Teacher participant numbers
School A	Regional town, co-ed school	Below average	1500–2000 13%	9	15
School B	Regional town, co-ed school	Average	500–1000 26%	4	10
School C	Regional city, Girls school	Below average	500–1000 15%	5	8
School D	City, Co-ed school	Below average	1000–1500 13%	13	25
School E	City, Co-ed school	Above average	1000–1500 18%	12	12
School F	City, Girls school	Few	Over 2000 10%	10	35
Total				53	105

Table 2 Middle leaders' responses to Likert questions – by years of experience

% of ML's who strongly agreed / agreed to the statement:	Under 5 years exp (n=19)	5–10 years exp (n=15)	10–15 years exp (n=10)	Over 15 years exp (n=9)
I encourage culturally responsive practice	100%	87%	100%	100%
I ensure that Māori students are provided with opportunities to succeed through culturally responsive curriculum and pedagogy	74%	80%	70%	100%
I ensure the principles of Te Tiriti o Waitangi are in the forefront of our department decision making and practice	84%	80%	80%	89%

middle leaders in those schools were emailed an anonymous link by a school administrator and provided full details of the study. Informed consent was obtained by all participants via the online questionnaire. The results from six schools are reported on in this paper, reflecting the six schools who had the highest number of middle leader and teacher participants.

The quantitative data reported in this paper predominately focus on the self-reported results from 53 middle leaders. The survey responses from 105 teachers in the same schools have been included as a comparison to the middle leader responses to ascertain the level of agreement between middle leader and teacher responses. Details of participants and participating schools are available in Table 1 below.

Results

Data gained from the Likert scale questions revealed middle leader self-reporting of CRP leadership practice was very positive, with nearly all middle leaders, regardless of their level of experience, indicating they encourage CRP (see Table 2). However, the data also showed highly experienced middle leaders (over 15 years) generally

felt more confident that Māori students were provided with opportunities to succeed due to the CRP they led in their department. Furthermore, the data revealed highly experienced middle leaders were also more confident ensuring Te Tiriti o Waitangi is at the forefront of their department decision-making.

The data set included a larger proportion of middle leaders with under 10 years' experience (64%), and 36% who had under five years' experience in their middle leadership role. Therefore, to ensure student academic data is viewed in context, Table 3 includes participant responses to the Likert questions along with school level details to enable the experience level of middle leader participants and the educational context of each school to be included in the analysis. Furthermore, middle leader responses were compared with teacher responses from the same schools to investigate teachers' perceptions of the middle leadership practices occurring in their school. The level of agreement between middle leaders and teachers is important because it lends legitimacy to middle leader self-perceptions of their ability (Highfield, Thompson & Woods, 2024). If teacher and middle leader responses are different this indicates a difference in perception of their leadership practice (Daniels et al., 2020).

Discussion

Middle Leaders' Self-Reported Culturally Responsive Practice

The summarised survey results are promising as they reveal that a very high proportion of middle leaders who participated in this study believed that they encouraged culturally responsive practice and the teachers in their schools supported their claims. However, there is considerable variance in middle leaders claims that Māori students are provided with opportunities to succeed. Two schools (B and C) had a low percentage (25% and 20%) of middle leaders who agreed that Māori students succeed through CRP, but the teachers in those schools had a much more positive response to that item (80% and 85%). The middle leaders in the four remaining schools scored this factor very positively and the teachers in those schools also agreed with their positive ratings. It is the role of educational leaders to set organisational school goals that promote cultural competencies and create a climate that is respectful, tolerant and sensitive to the needs of culturally diverse students (Minkos et al., 2017). These results suggest that in four of the six schools these goals are consistently espoused and enacted. In two schools, there is more diversity of opinion regarding the practices being promoted to ensure Māori students are provided with opportunities to succeed.

The Impact of Middle Leadership Experience

Half of the middle leaders who participated from School B have less than five years' experience as a middle leader so their low score may indicate that less experienced middle leaders had lower confidence regarding the effectiveness of CRP to improve opportunities for Māori students. This finding is supported by the research of Irvine and Bundrett (2019) who investigated the role experience plays in middle leaders'

Table 3 Middle leader (ML) and teacher (T) responses to Likert questions compared by school context and student academic achievement

School context	Year 13 – Māori student academic achievement –2023*		Year 13 – All student academic achievement –2023		I / my ML encourage/s culturally responsive practice		I / my ML ensure/s that Māori students are provided with opportunities to succeed through CRP		I / my ML ensure the principles of Te Tiriti o Waitangi are in the forefront of our department decision making and practice			
	% ML with <5 years' experience	EQI band (showing barriers to achievement)	NCEA Level 3	UE	NCEA Level 3	UE	% MLs who SA/A ^ (n=53)	% Teachers who SA/A ^ (n=105)	% MLs who SA/A ^ (n=53)	% Teachers who SA/A ^ (n=105)		
School A (ML, n=9) (T n=15)	44%	Below average	78%	30%	71%	49%	100%	73%	89%	80%	89%	67%
School B (ML, n=4) (T n=10)	50%	Average	57%	35%	60%	49%	100%	80%	25%	80%	50%	70%
School C (ML, n=5) (T n=8)	20%	Below average	77%	69%	78%	64%	100%	100%	20%	88%	60%	88%
School D (ML, n=13) (T n=25)	54%	Below average	65%	50%	74%	61%	92%	84%	92%	84%	92%	60%
School E (ML, n=12) (T n=12)	33%	Above average	61%	14%	68%	33%	100%	100%	83%	83%	92%	67%
School F (ML, n=10) (T n=35)	10%	Few	81%	59%	86%	78%	90%	90%	100%	80%	80%	74%

* all % are based on a small cohort of students which means figures are likely to vary over time (NZQA, 2024) ^ SA – strongly agree, A – agree

development. They argue that experience, acquired over time, is a key component of leadership and newly appointed middle leaders often have little experience to draw upon, particularly in leading peers (Irvine & Bundrett, 2019). Carraccio et al. (2008) explained that experienced middle leaders behave more intuitively because their mental models are well formed (West-Burnham & Koren, 2014). Mental models are defined as “representations of the outside world in individuals’ minds” (Keskinkiliç Kara & Ertürk, 2015, p.2145). Newly appointed middle leaders, who have little prior experience of the capabilities they need to develop or draw upon, are more likely to have weaker mental models, and are therefore more likely to act analytically rather than intuitively (Irvine & Bundrett, 2019). In school C only 20% of the middle leaders had more than five years’ experience, although all the teachers and middle leader respondents in the school encouraged culturally responsive practice only 20% of middle leaders believed that Māori students were provided with opportunities to succeed through CRP.

In the participating schools in this research project the school that serves a high proportion of students from high socioeconomic backgrounds (School F) also had the most experienced team of middle leaders. This may be because schools serving students from high socioeconomic backgrounds generally have higher staff retention or fewer problems attracting experienced staff due to the perception of a less-challenging teaching environment (Gore et al., 2022; Milanowski, 2017). However, Graham et al. (2020) argue that more years of experience do not by themselves translate into higher quality practice and state that to specifically address culturally responsive competencies, professional growth opportunities must be intentional and consistently embedded in everyday practices for *all* staff (Minkos et al., 2017).

Relationship between School Context and the CRP Practices of Middle Leaders

It is widely recognised by educational researchers that there is a strong relationship between students’ socio-economic status and educational achievement (Biddulph et al., 2003). It is also accepted that teachers can make a substantial difference to the achievement of students (Alton-Lee, 2003). What is seriously debated, however, is the relative importance of each of these major variables. When children attend schools with varying socioeconomic compositions, the differences in overall achievement levels between schools closely reflect the socioeconomic backgrounds of their student populations (Snook & O’Neill, 2010). The socio-economic context of schools may help to provide some insight into the results of this study, which showed mixed results when taking account of student achievement and the self-reported CRP practices of middle leaders to provide Māori students with opportunities to succeed. Snook and O’Neill, (2010) argue that the overall evidence within the New Zealand research is that family socio-economic status at birth substantially predicts and shapes the child’s educational attainment - but does not determine it. Therefore, understanding CRP in schools and the extent to which it might have any mitigating effects is important. In the study reported in this paper, Schools A, D and F have the highest percentage of middle leaders who believe that Māori students are provided opportunities to succeed through CRP. School F has students with few economic barriers to education, and schools A and D have students with below average economic

barriers to education. It may be that middle leaders from these schools have access to extra resourcing to support the use of CRP in their departments and therefore feel more confident that the CRP they enact provides opportunities for Māori students to succeed. However, the school with the highest number of middle leaders with under 5 years' experience (school D) also has the greatest level of disagreement between teachers and middle leaders regarding *Te Tiriti o Waitangi* being in the forefront of department decision-making with a 32% difference in views expressed.

Relationship Between Middle Leader Self-Reported Culturally Responsive Practice and Māori Student Academic Achievement

Academic achievement data relating to year 13 Māori students compared to the whole year 13 cohort in each participating school were used to determine if Māori student academic achievement is at a similar level to their peers. Academic achievement data was then compared to the middle leader and teacher questionnaire results to understand the extent to which there was any relationship between middle leaders self-reported CRP and student academic achievement. This analysis found no relationship between middle leader CRP practices and Māori academic achievement at whole school level. Almost all the middle leaders who participated in this research project ($n=53$) agreed or strongly agreed that they encouraged CRP, but the UE achievement rates for Māori students seem to bear little relationship to their CRP self-perceptions.

A major influence on a young person's self-efficacy for academic achievement is the quality of their school's social climate or environment (Rubie-Davies, 2014). Rubie-Davies (2014) argues that school climate is a powerful influencer on student motivation and personal beliefs about their academic capabilities. The expectations that leaders and teachers communicate to Māori students as well as the types of instructional strategies teachers use in classrooms can be an important motivating factor (Hynds et al., 2017). Walkey et al. (2013) found that students were sensitive to both overt and covert messages from teachers and leaders regarding high versus low expectations for success. Students who reported lower aspirations in their study did not perceive that their teachers had high expectations for their academic performance. This study would instead suggest that socio-economic factors influencing school contexts such as experienced staff, resources and facilities are more positively associated with Māori student achievement, but only when middle leaders and teachers are also committed to a culturally responsive approach and where the principles of *Te Tiriti o Waitangi* are at the forefront of decision making.

The results reveal that the percentage of Māori students staying at school to gain the NCEA level 3 certificate is diverse across the participant schools. Schools A, C and F had the highest percentage of Māori students attaining NCEA level 3 compared to other schools in the study. School C and F also have the highest percentage of Māori students attaining University Entrance (UE), while school A had the second lowest percentage of Māori students attaining UE when compared to all schools in the study. When comparing Māori student academic achievement at NCEA Level 3 with the whole school cohort, there was less disparity between the two groups with less than 10% difference. However, the difference in the two cohorts for UE was more concerning as it ranged from 11 to 19% for 5 of the 6 participating schools.

These results are reflected in the 2019 national achievement data revealing that Māori and Pacific students were awarded UE at much lower rates than non-Māori students (NZQA, 2022). A key reason for the lower rates of UE attainment lay in subject requirements not being met and students missing the opportunity to gain UE because of completing NCEA level 3 through the achievement of unit standards, which are not counted toward university entrance (NZQA, 2022). A recently published report focusing on schools where Māori academic achievement is high, outlines the measures taken by school leaders and teachers to ensure positive student achievement (Smaill et al., 2024). The authors found that students were supported toward attaining UE when leadership systems and roles were structured around building relationships with students, for the purpose of learning (Smaill et al., 2024). Furthermore, students benefited from teachers ensuring they select a pathway to UE early in their secondary schooling, and accordingly, when teachers and leaders frequently use achievement data to set learning goals, they ensure students remain on track to achieve UE (Smaill et al., 2024).

In a previous paper investigating the relationship of CRP and Māori student outcomes, the authors found middle leaders espoused strong theories about supporting Māori student success, particularly in terms of attending to the pastoral needs of students and nurturing positive teacher–student relationships (Highfield, Webber & Woods, 2024). However, this research revealed an enactment gap between official policy and practice in schools, or espoused theories of action and the actual theories-in-use when it came to ensuring Māori students were supported to gain academic qualifications at the same level as non-Māori (Argyris & Schön, 1974). In the present study, four schools had 50% or less Māori students achieving UE and in just one school (School C) Māori students UE rate was 5% higher than non-Māori. Importantly, in school C the teachers were very positive about the enactment of the principles of *Te Tiriti o Waitangi* by the middle leaders (88%) and most middle leaders had more than five years' experience in their role. We argue that culturally responsive and relational pedagogy alongside relevant curriculum learning contexts are baseline instructional practices (Herrera et al., 2012). In order to meet the aspirations of *Te Tiriti o Waitangi*, leaders and teachers in secondary schools need to embed and affirm the critical thinking and meta cognition strategies required by Māori students (Davies et al., 2023) that will not only ensure they enjoy success in high stakes assessments but will provide them with a range of opportunities to develop and realise their potential throughout their lives.

Teacher and Middle Leader Perceptions of the Enactment of Culturally Responsive Pedagogies

A comparison of middle leader reporting of their CRP and teachers' perceptions of their enactment of these practices provides some support for the finding that experience in middle leadership matters. Teachers' perceptions of the culturally responsive middle leadership practices in their school were generally high regarding the question of whether their middle leader encourages CRP, although there was at least a 20% difference between teacher and middle leader perceptions at schools A and B where a high percentage of middle leaders participating in the study had under five

years middle leadership experience. Teachers were also positive about middle leaders ensuring Māori students were provided opportunities to succeed through CRP. Interestingly, teachers at schools B and C perceived this occurred at their school at a level on par with other schools in the study, regardless of the low responses from middle leaders at their schools. Responses from teachers regarding the use of *Te Tiriti o Waitangi* to guide decision making showed some disparity within School D, the school with the highest number of middle leaders with under 5 years' experience. Teacher perceptions of CRP occurring at school C and school F were either in agreement with middle leaders, or indicated the practice was occurring despite some middle leaders reporting it wasn't. Table 3 shows that in four out of the six schools in the study (A, D, E and F) teachers were less likely to agree that their middle leaders have the principles of *Te Tiriti o Waitangi* at the forefront of their decision-making but in all schools well over half (60-80%) of the teachers agreed this was the case.

Limitation

This study presents the beliefs and self-reported practices of middle leaders regarding their enactment of CRP and teachers' perceptions of those practices, at whole school level. Whole-school academic achievement at NCEA Level 3 and UE results of Māori and non-Māori students are also presented. The researchers did not compare practices at the department level where specific Māori student academic scores could be directly correlated with the CRP beliefs of a specific middle leader and teachers. In addition, the response rates at School B and C were low, although they are commensurate with the size of the school roll. Assessment results in specified domains of knowledge at particular points in time are not the same thing as longer-term educational achievement, self-efficacy, and independence. To determine whether social class-related educational inequalities are being reduced, one must look beyond snapshot assessments to understand the longer-term gains of disadvantaged students (Snook & O' Neill, 2010).

Conclusion

This study builds on the existing literature to demonstrate that middle leaders are critical change agents in leading and modelling culturally responsive pedagogy at department levels in their schools. This requires them to build their experience to become expert at building sustaining collective vision and agency amongst staff and their departments (Minkos et al., 2017). There is a powerful body of opinion which rejects the relationship between poverty and educational achievement among diverse students (Snook & O Neill, 2010). We support the argument that optimal learning environments can be created for culturally diverse students with the commitment of leaders and teachers regardless of socioeconomic constraints. This study provides some evidence of the features that could be identified and then generalised to support the prioritisation of CRP in other schools. This research supports the notion that effective curriculum middle leaders in secondary schools require ongoing professional learning in culturally responsive practice (Dunn, 2020) that promotes higher

order thinking skills and critical cognitive approaches (Davies et al., 2023) in order to put theory into action in ways that specifically support the academic success of Māori students.

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Data availability Anonymised data is available on request from the corresponding author.

Declarations

Competing Interests The authors have no competing interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

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