

Leading with high expectations

Developing leadership in education

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www.nzcer.org.nz

<https://doi.org/10.18296/rep.0085>

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2025

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He mihi | Acknowledgements

The Leading with High Expectations project is part of NZCER's Te Pae Tawhiti Government Grant programme of research, funded through the Ministry of Education.

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to everyone who contributed to and provided feedback on this literature review. We are thankful for the support and expert guidance from our colleagues and mentors, Mohamed Alansari and Esther Smail, whose insights have been invaluable in shaping this work. A special thanks to Sue McDowall who reviewed our work and provided thoughtful feedback on the draft report.

We also acknowledge the educators and researchers whose work forms the foundation of this review. This review reflects collective wisdom, and we deeply appreciate everyone's contributions.

Pōkanga rongō | Key messages

In this literature review, we examine the concept of high-expectations leadership within educational settings. We analysed 15 studies to explore:

1. the notion of having high expectations
2. the relationship between school culture and teacher expectations
3. key practices related to high-expectations leadership
4. enabling and constraining factors.

The review highlights the importance of a broad concept of high expectations for students that spans across all areas of student development, including academic achievement and behaviour and social-emotional growth. To be truly effective, these expectations must be culturally sensitive and responsive, particularly for ākonga Māori and Pacific students.

The review also demonstrates the crucial role of school leadership in creating a culture of high expectations by setting the tone, modelling standards, and providing the necessary resources and support. A collaborative approach among school leaders, teachers, and communities, underpinned by trust, is essential to ensure every ākonga has the opportunity to succeed. When school leadership, teaching practices, and community engagement are aligned, an inclusive education system can be fostered to enable all students to reach their potential.

While the potential for high-expectations leadership to positively impact student outcomes is significant, several constraining factors must be addressed. Mismatched beliefs between teachers and parents, systemic challenges within education, and societal biases can undermine the effectiveness of high-expectations leadership. Overcoming these challenges requires a proactive approach from school leaders, teachers, and communities, ensuring that all students, regardless of their background, are given the opportunity to thrive.

1. He kupu whakataki | Introduction

Background

In Aotearoa New Zealand, the concept of holding high expectations for all students is central to the educational framework, featured prominently in both the 2007 *New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007) and the updated *New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, n.d.).

The concept of holding high expectations has been widely explored at the teacher level, with a focus on teacher practices in classrooms. Teacher expectations are commonly defined as judgements made by teachers about their students' academic competence and subsequent performance (Good & Lavigne, 2017). Teacher expectations shape student outcomes not only directly but also by influencing how students see themselves as learners and their belief in their own success (for a review, see Wang et al., 2018). For example, Rubie-Davies (2007) found that teachers with high expectations were more likely to provide a more supportive learning environment (e.g., organising students into mixed-ability groups, providing careful explanations of new concepts, and clear feedback). Meanwhile, students are aware of teachers' differing behaviours toward low or high achievers from a very young age (e.g., Babad & Taylor, 1992) which, in turn, reinforces the impact of teacher expectations on a range of student outcomes, including academic achievement and socio-psychological development.

The literature is replete with empirical evidence showing that teachers' expectations can also have profound implications for equity (Rubie-Davies & Flint, 2020). Research has shown that teachers' expectations can vary depending on students' characteristics (e.g., ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic background), even when controlling for achievement (Wang et al., 2018). For example, in Aotearoa New Zealand, teacher expectations were found to be highest for Asian and Pākehā students, and lowest for Pasifika and Māori (Turner et al., 2015). Arguably, differential expectations for students can lead to inequitable learning opportunities and achievement. Therefore, it is crucial for educators to cultivate high expectations for all students, as this approach not only assists individuals in realising their potential but also fosters a more equitable learning environment.

While the concept of high expectations is well studied at the teacher level, there is limited research on how expectations function within the broader school context (Almroth et al., 2021). As suggested by Almroth et al. (2021, p. 887):

One particular dimension of school climate which may be important for academic aspirations is the academic and behavioural expectations conveyed at the overall school level by the teaching body and by the school leadership; an aspect that remains to be elucidated.

Research in New Zealand has highlighted the pervasive presence of low expectations in environments that fail to support Māori students, not just within classrooms but across schools. As explained by Hynds et al. (2017, p. 568):

[A] focus on classrooms is not enough. Disturbingly, results highlighted the presence of low expectations within ineffective environments for Māori students not only across classrooms, but in schools in general. This is particularly important for school leaders to realise, as schools are social and cultural learning systems that contain a range of motivational contexts.

As echoed by Hardré (2015), the values, attitudes, and beliefs present within schools shape classroom environments through both explicit and implicit “valuing” or “devaluing” messages, which further influence students’ potential to succeed academically. Understanding how leadership can foster high expectations across an entire school environment is critical to challenging devaluing narratives and promoting more equitable educational outcomes for all students in New Zealand, and particularly for Māori and Pasifika students.

The lack of research on school cultures of high expectations and the importance of understanding how to develop and implement high expectations at the school level was a key factor in motivating this study. In addition, we argue that high-expectations leadership plays a crucial role in educational decision making, particularly in Aotearoa New Zealand. Bearing in mind the importance of developing the leadership workforce of the future, this study moves beyond focusing solely on individual teacher expectations to investigate expectations as a broader school feature—specifically, school-wide cultures shaped by leadership with high expectations.

This study

The purpose of this scoping review was to help researchers, policy makers, school leaders, and teachers as future leaders in Aotearoa New Zealand to understand and apply educational leadership characterised by high expectations. It is our hope that this literature review will contribute to a deeper and more nuanced understanding of how school-level expectations can be embedded in practice, inform decisions, and improve educational outcomes for all students. It is also hoped that this study will support school leaders and future leaders to understand the high-expectations model and how to apply its principles in their daily work.

The scoping review:

- presents how high-expectations cultures are conceptualised and enacted in schools
- develops a framework that allows schools to embed high-expectations practices.

2. He tukanga | Method

We conducted a scoping review of research focused on high-expectations leadership, following the methodological framework outlined by Arksey and O'Malley (2005). The review was carried out in five stages: (1) defining the review's purpose; (2) identifying relevant studies; (3) selecting studies; (4) charting the data; and (5) summarising and reporting the results. In this section, we provide a detailed description of each stage of the scoping review process.

Stage 1: Defining the review's purpose

Prior to the scoping review process, we identified our overarching purpose of this review: to examine research on the school culture of high expectations. To clarify the specific objectives of the review, our team met and discussed the rationale for conducting the review and the desired outcomes. As a result of these discussions, we formulated one overarching research question: *"What does the literature say about school cultures of high expectations?"* Following this question, the sub-research questions are:

- How has the notion of having high expectations been demonstrated and defined to date?
- What is the correlation between school level expectations and teacher expectations?
- What are the key practices associated with high-expectations leadership?
- What factors enable and constrain adoption of high expectations in schools?

All subsequent decisions in Stages 2–5 were guided by these research questions.

Stage 2: Identifying relevant studies

Keyword searches were conducted in four major online databases: Google Scholar, ERIC, ProQuest, and PsylINFO. The search terms used in those databases were as follows:

- ("teacher* expectation*") AND ("school culture" OR "school environment" OR "school climate" OR "leadership").

Asterisks were included on several key terms as a wildcard symbol to retrieve variations of the term (e.g., expectation* would retrieve expectation and expectations). Keywords related to both "culture", "environment", and "climate" were used as these terms are often used interchangeably in the literature to refer to school-level practices.

Filters were selected to only include English language studies that were published in peer-reviewed academic journals between the years 2013 and 2024. Our primary focus was on research conducted in Aotearoa New Zealand, prioritising local studies to ensure that the insights are relevant and specific to the Aotearoa New Zealand context. We also considered international research to broaden the scope, as international research can offer valuable perspectives that complement and inform our local endeavours. Throughout the analysis and writing process, we applied a Te Tiriti lens to ensure the findings will enhance our understanding of kaupapa Māori for the benefit of ākonga.

Figure 1 depicts the search, selection, and extraction processes that were conducted according to the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) statement. The initial database searches retrieved 32 articles but five were duplications. This meant that 27 articles were included in the initial search.

Stage 3: Selecting studies

During the process of reviewing the abstracts, 11 articles were excluded, either because the focus was not on school-wide teacher expectations ($n = 9$), or the studies were not empirical ($n = 2$).

The first author then scanned the References sections of all 16 remaining articles for titles that could be relevant to the review. This resulted in an additional six articles. All our team members then read all 22 articles in full and recorded their reasons for considering any article's exclusion. This list and the reasons were shared and discussed as a team and then a final decision was made about exclusion. The team agreed that seven articles should not be included in the review. This left a total of 15 articles included in the final review.

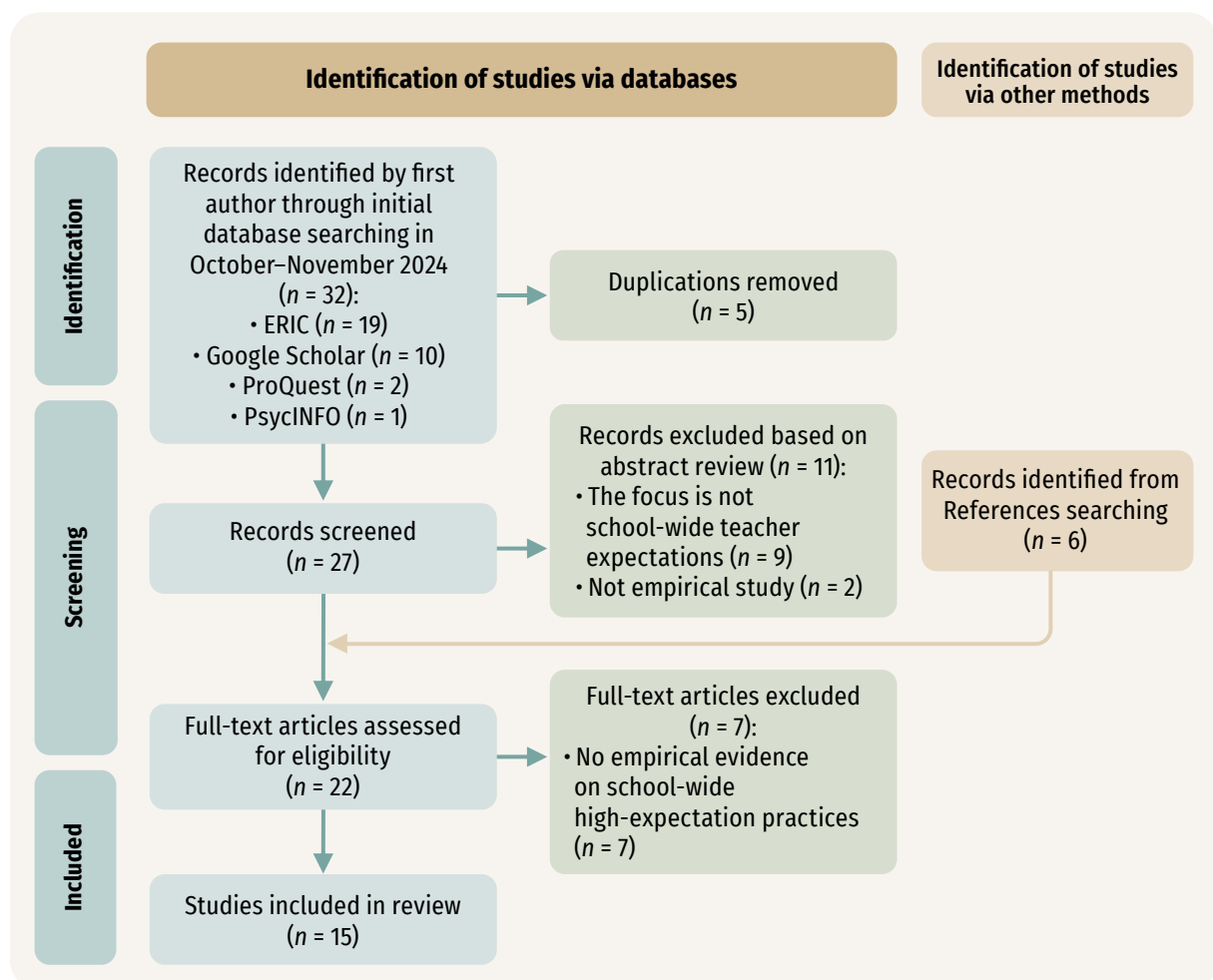


FIGURE 1 Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA)

Stage 4: Charting the data

In this stage, the team collaboratively developed a data-charting form to extract descriptive data relevant to the review's purpose. This was an iterative process, with team members meeting regularly to identify key content categories and refine the form based on emerging insights (Levac et al., 2010). Each team member used the finalised data-charting form to independently extract descriptive data from all 15 articles. We met and discussed the extracted data to reach a consensus on the final descriptive information to include. This collaborative approach was advantageous as it encouraged in-depth conversations and cross-checking, which resulted in the entire team carefully re-examining all studies to identify evidence thoroughly.

As shown in Table 1, the demographic information of each publication (e.g., country) was coded. This process aimed to capture as much contextual information as possible to better understand the practices and evidence pertaining to our research purpose. A systematic approach was used to ensure accurate and thorough coding of demographic data. The first author reviewed the publications and generated initial codes for demographic details, while the second and third authors reviewed the coding to ensure consistency and validity.

It is important to note that only one New Zealand study on school-level expectations was found and included in this review, highlighting a gap in local research. This presents an opportunity for future studies to explore how high-expectations leadership manifests specifically in Aotearoa New Zealand schools and how international findings can be adapted to meet the unique needs of ākonga in the local context.

Stage 5: Summarising and reporting results

After reaching consensus on how to summarise the extracted data, the team reviewed the data to identify patterns across the publications and developed a framework for presenting our findings. In this analysis of content, we identified five overarching key themes for the practices associated with high-expectations leadership: 1) teaching and learning; 2) developing self and others; 3) school management; 4) engaging with communities; and 5) growing educational networks. Through this process, we also identified several sub-themes under each overarching theme (Figure 2). By having multiple authors involved in the process, it was possible to ensure consistency and validity in the coding and to mitigate bias and errors.

TABLE 1 Publication demographics

Article	Country	Setting/type of schools	Methodology	Participants
Almroth et al. (2021)	Sweden	Primary school	Quantitative design	Parents of 3,959 students (7th grade) from 101 Swedish primary schools gave consent for their children's participation during the 2013/2014 or 2014/2015 school years. Both parents and children completed questionnaires at baseline and two subsequent annual follow-ups. The school climate questionnaire was answered by 4,542 teachers and 11,282 students (9th grade) during each school year.
Bryan et al. (2017)	US	High school	Quantitative design	The data combined the responses from 13,983 students who completed a survey in the baseline year as 10th graders (2002), in the first follow-up administration as 12th graders (2004), and in the second follow-up 2 years after expected high school graduation (2006).
Buxton (2017)	Australia	Primary school	Case study	Thirty-two teachers (school leadership teams and teachers) in five Catholic primary schools participated in semi-structured group interviews.
Davis et al. (2024)	US	High school	Case study	This study includes participants who had attended Roosevelt High School during the time period of interest (1930s through 1978), combining three data sources: surveys ($n = 57$), archival information, and research literature related specifically to Roosevelt.
Gómez-González et al. (2024)	Spain	Elementary schools	Mixed methods design	This study combined four data sources collected from eight Spanish elementary schools: semi-structured interviews with 48 family members and 13 teachers; communicative focus groups with 19 family members and five teachers; questionnaires from 84 family members and 27 teachers; and communicative daily life stories of 13 family members.
Hynds et al. (2017)	New Zealand	Secondary schools	Mixed methods design	Eighty-nine secondary schools participated in the national evaluation of the initiative, with nine of these schools selected as case study schools for more intensive data collection. The measures involved analysing action plans from all 89 participating schools, conducting 75 in-class observations and administering over 5,000 student surveys at the nine case study schools.
Jia et al. (2016)	US	High school	Quantitative design	This study had a statewide sample of 315 high schools, with 52,012 students and 56.5% of teachers in these schools participating in the surveys.
Klar & Brewer (2014)	US	Middle school	Case study	Eight semi-structured interviews were conducted with the principal, the assistant principal, six teachers (two 8th grade, two 7th grade, two 6th grade), SIC chair/instructional coach, and two parents. All 27 teachers from the school completed an online survey. Documents related to school activities were also collected. Field notes of activities observed during the two days were taken.

Article	Country	Setting/type of schools	Methodology	Participants
Malone et al. (2023)	US	One suburban public school district	Critical race counter-storytelling	Eight families were recruited to participate, and semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant (seven female students and two male students, eight mothers and two fathers).
Møller (2018)	Norway	Lower secondary school	Case study	Individual interviews were conducted with the principal and superintendent (both were interviewed twice). Focus group interviews were conducted with two deputies, eight teachers (two focus group interviews), and eight students (two focus group interviews). Surveys of 85 students in 10th grade were analysed.
Okilwa & Barnett (2017)	US	Elementary school	Case study	Information was drawn from archival data and interviews. Interviews were conducted with the current school principal, two teachers, and two parent leaders in the Fall of 2014. In the Fall 2015, a follow-up interview was conducted with one of the three teachers who has taught at the school for 25 years.
Okilwa & Barnett (2018)	US	Elementary school	Case study	Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the four principals who served the school from the early 1990s. Three veteran teachers were interviewed (individual session with one of the teachers and then one focus group session with all three teachers) and one focus group interview was conducted with two parent leaders.
Sarra et al. (2020)	Australia	N/A	Qualitative design	The first phase was the development of the concepts over a decade of working with educators (teachers, school leaders, teacher-aides, Aboriginal Education Workers, and Community Elders). The second phase (reported in this study) comprised 28 semi-structured interviews with selected educators. ¹
Van Den Broeck et al. (2020)	Belgium	Secondary schools	Quantitative design	Surveys were collected from 2,354 students and 502 teachers across 30 Flemish secondary schools.
Van Houtte & Demanet (2016)	Belgium	Secondary schools	Quantitative design	Questionnaires were collected from 11,844 students and 2,104 teachers in 84 Flemish secondary schools.

¹ “The Stronger Smarter Institute augments this field research with a quantitative analysis tool, the high-expectations relationships behavioural index, used with Stronger Smarter Leadership Program participants. An analysis of this data will form a third phase of the research” (Sarra et al., 2020, p. 39).

3. He kitenga | Findings

How has the notion of having high expectations been demonstrated and defined to date?

Having high expectations for all students is a foundational principle in contemporary educational frameworks, particularly in Aotearoa New Zealand. The literature consistently highlights that this principle is multifaceted. High expectations are not about imposing uniform standards but rather ensuring that every student is challenged to reach their fullest potential, with the appropriate support and resources in place. Achieving this requires collaboration among educators, schools, and communities to create an environment where every ākonga believes in their potential to succeed and is provided with the necessary opportunities to do so.

Trusting, not demanding

When understanding the notion of having high expectations for all students, it is important to note that “These high expectations ... are *high yet reasonable*, and constantly demonstrated and reinforced in the practice of the principals” (Gurr, 2015, p.138, emphasis added). As explained by Sarra et al. (2020), building trust and getting to know students better is key to developing high expectations. In addition, it is crucial to distinguish fostering trust in students’ potential from simply demanding achievement. While high demands might create pressure and reinforce stereotypes, high expectations, when communicated effectively, encourage a belief in students’ potential to succeed and grow (Sarra et al., 2020). For example, in Møller’s (2018) study, this understanding of the difference between high expectations and demands was widely acknowledged by the principal and the teachers in the same school. As suggested by teacher participants:

While they complied with the municipal priority of raising standards and improving test scores, their stories highlighted the need to develop an understanding of democracy among the students, emphasising the ability to critically analyse the dynamics of political processes and practices. (Møller, 2018, p. 95)

This approach reframes the emphasis from demanding compliance or identical achievement from all students to recognising the unique potential of each student, which empowers students to take ownership of their learning and pursue their goals.

Consistent with Sarra et al. (2020), the interviews in Møller’s (2018) study revealed that trust should be nurtured, not only between teachers and students, but also among teachers, the leadership team, and the principal. As one teacher expressed, “It is a culture of trial and failure; we support and help each other to develop as teachers, and our principal is willing to listen to us” (Møller, 2018, p. 95).

Extending beyond academic excellence

High expectations in education are often closely linked to academic achievement, with studies highlighting the impact of such expectations on student performance (e.g., Bryan et al., 2017; Jia et al., 2016). However, it is essential to recognise that high expectations should not be limited to academic

outcomes alone. As stated in the High expectations principle² of the updated *New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, n.d.):

Learners can have abilities in a wide range of domains (for example, creative thinking, the arts, sports, interpersonal skills, and spirituality). It is important that schools avoid defining high expectations in terms of academic outcomes alone ... Schools should consider how they can develop high expectations that reflect New Zealand's bicultural foundations and growing cultural diversity. (para 1)

This perspective is reinforced in our reviewed articles. For instance, Almroth et al. (2021) emphasised that a culture of high expectations should reflect not only academic standards but also beliefs about students' capacity to grow in all areas of their development, including their behaviour and social-emotional skills.

In addition, the notion of high expectations requires particular consideration for students from diverse backgrounds. Research studies such as those by Buxton (2017), Hynds et al. (2017), and Sarra et al. (2020) highlighted the specific challenges faced by Indigenous students (e.g., Māori students, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students). These studies revealed the potential negative impact of stereotypes and biased expectations on the educational experiences of these students. For instance, Māori students might experience educational environments where negative stereotypes dominate, rather than a belief in their potential. Such studies emphasised that high expectations must be culturally sensitive, avoiding the reinforcement of harmful stereotypes. Instead, they should promote a belief in the potential of every student, regardless of background. For example, Hynds et al. (2017) argued that expectations must be carefully framed in ways that prevent the perpetuation of negative stereotypes. In contexts where students perceived that stereotypes about their ethnic groups were being reinforced, it could be detrimental to their sense of agency and self-worth. This can undermine their ability to develop a growth mindset, as students may come to believe that their success is predetermined by factors such as ethnicity or socioeconomic status. One illustrative example came from a Māori student who recounted an assembly where the principal presented data on the achievement rates of Pacific and Māori students. The student perceived the presentation as reinforcing a stereotype that their ethnic group was less capable:

[In assembly] ... our principal was showing us a presentation about Pacific and Māori students about our [achievement] percent rate [which has] gone down and he was trying to explain to us and all I could hear is Māori is being dumb just putting us down and stuff ... [it was in front of the whole school], they showed us this huge slide show about Pasifika and Māori students not succeeding (Māori student). (Hynds et al., 2017, p. 567)

Another Māori student shared their frustration about how their ethnic group was singled out in discussions about achievement, highlighting a double standard between recognition of success and failure:

I just don't feel like they [teachers] single out Māoris in any way, shape or form until it comes to who's not achieving? ... and we all achieve together but if you're not achieving, your ethnic group comes out. If you get an excellence for PE, they don't go Māori excellence for PE, but if you fail, you fail like a Māori" (Māori student). (Hynds et al., 2017, p. 567)

These reflections underscored the importance of framing high expectations in a way that empowered students, rather than reinforcing limiting beliefs about their potential.

In summary, the notion of having high expectations for all students should go beyond academic achievement. The framing of expectations is particularly important for students from diverse

2 <https://newzealandcurriculum.tahurangi.education.govt.nz/5637210590.p>

backgrounds, including Indigenous students, who may face unique challenges due to harmful stereotypes and biased expectations. Educators must ensure that their expectations are culturally responsive and promote a growth mindset. Failure to do so can contribute to the perpetuation of negative stereotypes and undermine students' belief in their ability to succeed. Ultimately, fostering an environment of high expectations that is both academically rigorous and culturally inclusive is essential to supporting the holistic development of all students.

What is the association between school-level expectations and teacher expectations?

The manifestation of high expectations in schools operates on both personal and collective levels (Gurr, 2015). On the individual level, teachers' high expectations are evident in their instructional practices, interactions with students, and classroom environment (Wang et al., 2018). At the collective level, school leaders have been found to be key in shaping a school culture of high expectations by setting the tone through clear expectations, modelling high standards in their actions, and reinforcing these standards through ongoing practices (more practices will be detailed in the next section). Such collective expectations shape the overall educational environment, impacting both students' academic aspirations and behavioural outcomes.

Figure 2 illustrates the relationship between school culture and teacher expectations based on the publications reviewed in this study. Generally, school culture, shaped collectively with leadership at its core, tends to be more intangible and difficult to measure compared to teacher practices in the classroom and student outcomes. However, school culture plays a crucial role in shaping individual teachers' beliefs and practices which, in turn, impact student outcomes. This section will unpack more details about how these factors are interlinked.

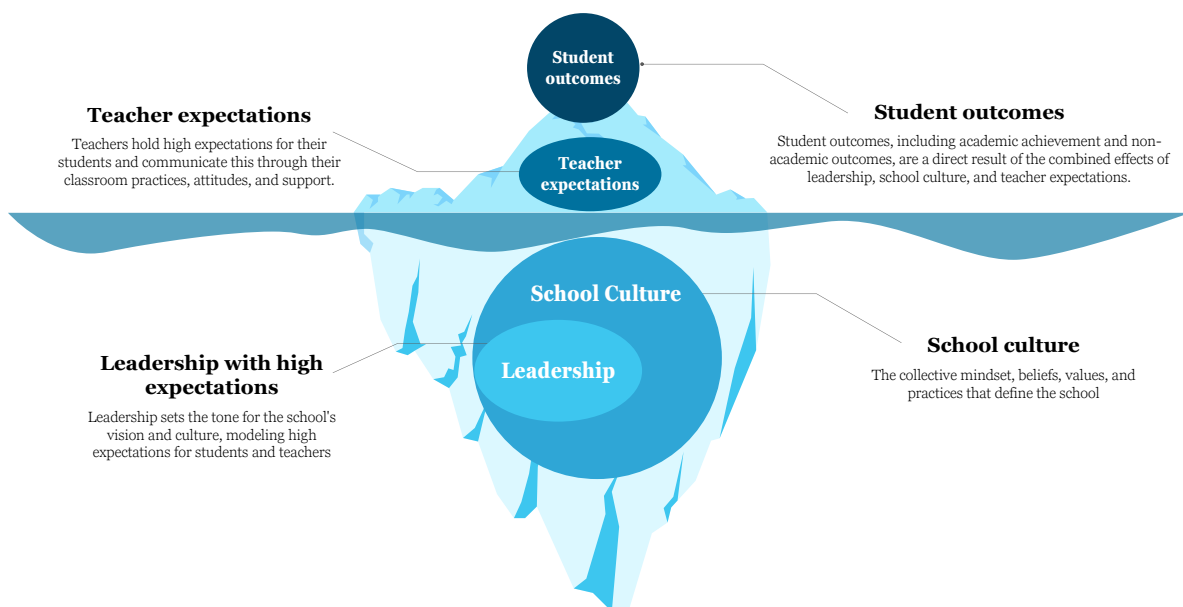


FIGURE 2 Relationships between school culture and teacher expectations

Collective effort in shaping high-expectations culture: Leadership as a core

There is a consensus across the reviewed studies regarding the importance of creating an environment where expectations are not only clearly articulated, but are also consistently implemented across the school. The principle of holding high expectations for all students is not the sole responsibility of individual teachers but is a whole-school commitment (Hynds et al., 2017). For example, Sarra et al. (2020) argued that high expectations are manifested not only at the spheres of the “personal”, but also the “school” and the “community” level. This includes school leaders, teachers, students, and families, all of whom played a crucial role in creating an environment where high expectations were clearly articulated and consistently upheld. Van Den Broeck et al. (2020) highlighted the concept of a “teachability culture” (p. 6), describing a shared belief system among staff regarding the teachability of students, which directly influenced students’ ability to meet educational expectations. The importance of creating a school climate that views all aspects of student development as opportunities for growth was emphasised here. Additionally, research consistently underscores the importance of family and community engagement in reinforcing high expectations for ākonga (e.g., Gómez-González et al., 2024; Sarra et al., 2020). Building trust between educators and parents, and extending these conversations beyond the school gates, is vital for sustaining a culture of high expectations.

Effective school leadership has been recognised as being central to establishing and maintaining high expectations across a school community (e.g., Møller, 2018). Leadership extends beyond setting expectations; it includes providing the necessary resources, professional learning and development (PLD), and support for teachers to uphold these standards. By modelling high expectations and maintaining consistency in their approach, leaders demonstrate their commitment to student achievement, thereby creating an environment where both students and teachers are motivated to excel. For example, Hynds et al. (2017) noted that leadership played a critical role in shaping the school’s culture and ensuring that expectations were communicated and upheld at all levels. As suggested by Hynds et al. (2017, p. 568):

The presence of low expectations and negative stereotypes towards Māori students was particularly disturbing within a professional development and learning context whereby senior and middle school leaders were being challenged to critically evaluate their beliefs and expectations of Māori students and their communities.

Møller (2018) further emphasised that school principals relied on the support of their leadership team and teachers to succeed in upholding high expectations.

School culture underpins teacher expectations

Bearing in mind the significant role of leadership in shaping the school culture of expectations, research indicates that teachers’ beliefs, including their expectations of students, are often shared and reinforced within the broader school culture; for instance, its ethnic composition and the collective teacher culture (Thys & Van Houtte, 2016; Van Den Broeck et al., 2020). Arguably, teachers at the same school tend to develop shared beliefs, which in turn influence how students are treated and the opportunities available to them. This collective set of expectations can significantly impact students’ academic performance and motivation, often being more influential in creating self-fulfilling prophecies than individual teacher expectations alone (Van Den Broeck et al., 2020).

How school culture was perceived by teachers and its relation to student aspirations was further illustrated in research by Almroth et al. (2021). Surprisingly, the study found a positive correlation

between teacher-rated expectations and students' academic aspirations, but no such correlation was observed in student-rated measures of school climate. As suggested by the authors, one possible explanation for this divergence was that teacher reports captured dynamics behind the scenes that might not be visible to students. Compared to students whose perceptions of school culture were often shaped by more individual experiences, teachers' perspectives of the school environment encompassed not just classroom interactions but also broader school-wide dynamics, such as the ethos set by school leadership, the alignment of resources, the emphasis on academic achievement, and the collaborative relationships between staff. This discrepancy highlighted how teachers, with their more holistic view of school operations, might be better positioned to assess and articulate the broader expectations of the school community, which were often internalised as part of the school's culture. Furthermore, the shared beliefs within the school—what teachers expected from students, how students were supported, and how achievements were celebrated—became embedded in the school culture, reinforcing the notion of high expectations across all levels of the school. Teachers, influenced by this culture, were more likely to adopt a mindset that aligned with the collective expectations of the school, which might not be as visible or understood by students.

Teacher expectations as mediators of school culture

As mentioned above, a school culture of high expectations reciprocally interacts with individual teacher expectations, with teachers actively contributing to and benefiting from the shared culture, which in turn influences how teachers communicate these expectations to students. Teachers are key mediators who translate the school's broader culture into tangible actions within their own classrooms. Arguably, teacher expectations serve as a key mediator between school culture and student outcomes.

It can, therefore, be challenging for individual teachers to counteract existing cultural norms, particularly if the broader school environment fosters low expectations. Despite these challenges, research shows that individual teachers can still make a significant impact (Van Den Broeck et al., 2020). Although teacher expectations at the classroom level are beyond the scope of this literature review, it is worth noting that, while teachers are influenced by the broader school culture, they still have the capacity to “turn the tide” by fostering high expectations and creating a supportive learning environment in their classrooms (Van Den Broeck et al., 2020). For example, Sarra et al. (2020) suggested that teachers could positively impact student outcomes through relational practices which included building trust, providing individualised support, maintaining a firm yet nurturing approach to learning, and fostering a classroom environment where students were encouraged to meet high academic challenges. These practices, which were often referred to as high-expectations relationships, directly influenced how students perceived their own potential and engaged with their learning.

However, it is important to acknowledge that, while teachers can “turn the tide” in their classrooms by fostering high expectations, they operate within the broader context shaped by school leadership (Hynds et al., 2017). The culture of expectations in a school is rarely determined by any one teacher's efforts alone. Rather, it is a product of the collective actions, with leadership setting the overall direction and teachers ensuring that those expectations are realised in everyday practices.

While individual teachers are vital in translating high expectations into meaningful classroom practices, the establishment and maintenance of a school culture of high expectations is ultimately driven by school leadership. Teachers, in turn, mediate these expectations at the classroom level, creating a learning environment where students feel empowered to meet academic challenges. Thus, for a culture of high expectations to be effective, alignment between leadership and teachers is essential, with leadership fostering the culture and teachers ensuring its application in daily practice.

What are the key practices associated with high-expectations leadership?

In this literature review, we identified five themes relating to high-expectations leadership in schools. As shown in Figure 3, these themes included practices that spanned teacher, school, and community levels. Practices were related to: 1) teaching and learning; 2) developing self and others; 3) school management; 4) engaging with communities; and 5) growing educational networks. Within each of these themes there were groupings of characteristics, actions, strategies, and approaches that demonstrated aspects of leading with high expectations in educational settings.

Theme	Sub-theme	Examples
Teaching and learning	Aspirational achievement goals	"... We've got this test coming up at the end of this year, and we're going to do something. We're not going to be last on everything." (Klar & Brewer, 2014, p. 432)
	Reaching beyond grades and test scores	"...Rather the daily interactions in schools assist in shaping the lens through which students and families see the school, the community, and the world." (Malone et al., 2023, p. 254)
	A fair and supportive system	"A PBIS model will likely be most effective when students perceive that the disciplinary system is fair and that positive reinforcement efforts reflect respect for students." (Jia et al., 2016, p. 300)
	A positive school environment	"The teachers exercised autonomy in the teaching domain and felt trusted by their principal, whom they described as a supportive person who provided a good social environment for teachers." (Møller, 2018, p. 95)
Developing self and others	Meeting PLD needs	"One key focus of any professional development should be to empower non-Indigenous teachers to feel they have the efficacy to 'say something' and not let the fear of putting a foot wrong get in the way." (Buxton, 2017, p. 205)
	Opportunities for teacher leadership	"engaging in systematic work on teacher leadership and developing leadership capacity in the school." (Møller, 2018, p. 93)
	Individualised, personal teacher reflection	"Teachers need opportunities to reflect on their own standpoint in order to find common ground for building cultural competence and in turn their confidence ..." (Buxton, 2017, p. 208)
School management	A collegial staff environment	"building a culture of feedback, and the principal attempted to serve as a role model in providing feedback immediately after a situation arose." (Møller, 2018, p. 93)
	Teacher collaboration	"having teachers working more collectively inside the school." (Klar & Brewer, 2014, p. 439)
	Shared vision	"...Peterson suggested the need to '[have] a clear focus, a vision that everyone bought into. It was utilizing your resources effectively and it was also celebrating as a whole team.'" (Okilwa & Barnett, 2018, p. 61)
Engaging with communities	Building trust with communities	"...aspiring principals need to learn how to assess a community's values in order to effectively lead change. ...requires being visible and accessible to the community and reaching out to the community to create collaborative bonds." (Klar & Brewer, 2014, p. 440)
	Developing community partnerships	"principals sought the partnerships of community businesses and organizations to support their grand agenda of providing quality educational experiences ..." (Okilwa & Barnett, 2018, p. 57)
Growing educational networks	Principal networks	"She also appreciated the established network among the principals in lower secondary schools...they shared knowledge and helped one another in troublesome situations." (Møller, 2018, p. 93)
	Relationships between local and district education	"build a bridge as a mediator between the municipality's expectations and her local school's needs..." (Møller, 2018, p. 93)

FIGURE 3 Themes and codes of practices associated with high-expectations leadership

1. Teaching and learning

Setting and communicating aspirational achievement goals

Research on high-expectations leadership highlights the central role of school leaders in setting and communicating aspirational goals for student achievement. Some of our reviewed studies illustrate how school leaders who actively set clear and ambitious directions can reshape school culture. For example, Møller (2018) described leadership responses to concerns about student success in upper secondary schooling, where teams deliberately focused on lifting results through stronger academic expectations. Klar and Brewer (2014) documented how the principal transformed a middle school by setting aspirational academic goals, recognising both students and teachers, and publicly celebrating achievement as a way to signal high expectations. This approach combined recognition with consistent communication, reinforcing high standards while supporting staff to meet them. Sarra et al. (2020) extended this argument in the Australian context, showing how high-expectations relationships for Indigenous students reject deficit discourses and ensure equitable access to challenging learning opportunities. Collectively, these studies underscore that high-expectations leadership is not only about setting ambitious academic achievement goals, but also about embedding them in school culture through consistent communication, recognition, and relational practices that support both students and teachers. However, Hynds et al. (2017), in their analysis of 89 school action plans across six regions in New Zealand, found that schools often lacked strategic planning to improve Māori student outcome goals. They noted that schools could set higher targets for academic achievement and more explicit commitments to higher National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) performance expectations.

Education that reaches beyond grades and test scores

A key practice associated with high-expectations leadership is fostering a focus on teaching and learning that encompasses more than just academic success. In New Zealand, this broader perspective on teaching and learning aligns with current government priorities in relation to the promotion of positive behaviour in the classroom, and respectful relationships with learners and their whānau.

While existing literature supported the importance of leadership teams prioritising improving students' academic results, studies also showed that education should reach beyond test scores and grades to strengthen daily interactions with students, shaping the lens through which students and families perceive their school, community, and the world around them (Malone et al., 2023).

Finding a balance between supporting academic and emotional learning goals involves a culturally appropriate approach that integrates discipline with caring support (Su & Lee, 2023), with attention to student development (Almroth et al., 2021). For schools to establish school-wide high expectations, Jia et al. (2016) emphasised the importance of providing teachers with coaching on student interactions and implementing reward systems to encourage positive student behaviours. Additionally, Van Den Broek et al. (2020) found that, alongside high expectations for their students, it was critical that teachers also provided students with information on ways to transform their aspirations into reality, such as providing clear guidance on positive study behaviours.

In addition, Okilwa and Barnett (2017) found that leaders with high expectations clearly articulated their vision, values, and expectations of what makes a successful school in terms of wellbeing, discipline, and safety, as well as academic outcomes. For Aboriginal students in Australia, Buxton (2017) found that high-expectations leadership involved a strengths-based approach, which not only challenged deficit narratives but also focused on ways to exceed expected achievement benchmarks.

High-expectations leadership was not limited to academics but also involved nurturing the whole child, providing students with the tools to succeed in both their academic and personal lives. This comprehensive approach ensures that students are not only challenged to excel but are also supported in developing the skills, behaviours, and mindset necessary to turn their aspirations into achievements.

A fair and supportive system

In addition to expectations that extend beyond academic attainment, evidence also suggested that schools should have systems in place that students perceive as well-developed and fair. Jia et al. (2016) found that, alongside a fair disciplinary system, students also wanted to feel respected and cared for by their teachers. Other systemic factors crucial for effective teaching and learning included fostering a culture of reciprocal trust and equity, setting clear standards for student behaviour, and creating values and norms that supported a positive psychosocial environment (Møller, 2018).

In the New Zealand context, Hynds et al. (2017) found that schools' strategic goal setting and high aspirations for Māori students were key to setting the conditions for success. A vital aspect of this approach was how school leaders communicated their beliefs about Māori student achievement, reinforcing a culture of high expectations and support. Another example of a specific support system in the US was the creation of structured reporting processes for school counsellors to share both formal and informal messages with students over time, fostering ongoing communication and support (Bryan et al., 2017).

A positive school environment

A positive school environment was also found to be important for creating supportive conditions for teaching and learning. Examples of related practices in the literature included teachers feeling that they were supported and trusted by their principal who created a good social and physical environment, and that they were able to exercise autonomy in their teaching domains (Møller, 2018). In Okilwa and Barnett's (2017) study, the physical environment was also found to be an important aspect of creating a school culture where high standards and success were celebrated and sustained in US high schools. In these schools, explicit past, present, and future achievement outcomes were prominently displayed in school hallways using visual graphics to reinforce their positive values and mindset.

2. Developing self and others

Meeting PLD needs

Another key finding emerging from the literature was that teacher development is central to a school culture of high expectations. Professional development is essential for teachers to grow in confidence, and to empower them to reflect on their own teaching practice (Buxton, 2017). In a Norwegian school, Møller (2018) found that the development of a new literacy and numeracy programme began with collaboration between school leaders and teachers during the planning phase. Teachers were encouraged to identify their own practice needs, and, through this process, they quickly became enthusiastic about the project, recognising how it would address areas of teaching they were eager to improve. Similarly, in diverse Flemish schools, Van den Broek et al. (2020) found that teachers held a critical responsibility for transforming their students' aspirations into reality, with the authors arguing that teacher education programmes should reinforce this while preparing teachers for challenges in their role.

Other studies highlighted how teacher education programmes can contribute to a school culture of high expectations in various ways. For instance, in Australia, Buxton (2017) stressed the need for teacher education programmes to increase awareness of Aboriginal culture and worldviews. Van Houtte and Demanet (2016) similarly highlighted the importance of promoting an understanding of school cultures in relation to student demographics as part of teacher training. These findings underscore that teacher development not only strengthens individual practices but also aligns with high-expectations principles by ensuring teachers are well prepared to meet the diverse needs of their students.

Opportunities for teacher leadership

Opportunities for teacher leadership in schools was also an essential practice of schools with high-expectations leadership. In a study of a Norwegian school, Møller (2018) described strategic, distributed leadership as being a key intervention employed by a principal in order to establish and develop a school structure of shared leadership across multiple levels. Teacher leadership was supported, and team leaders took responsibility for instructional leadership. These were characteristics of a collective culture where both teachers and leaders expressed a desire to make a difference, alongside high expectations about student achievement.

Individualised, personal teacher reflection

Several articles highlighted that high-expectations relationships offer opportunities for educators to personally reflect on themselves and their practices. Sarra et al. (2020) argued that leading with high expectations began in the personal sphere, with two key elements to critical self-reflection: professional accountability and adopting a strengths-based approach. Opportunities for self-reflection are especially critical when confronting biases in Indigenous or culturally diverse school settings (Buxton, 2017; Malone et al., 2023). In Australian primary schools, teachers needed opportunities to reflect on their own standpoints in order to challenge and build their own cultural competence and confidence. Through these opportunities, as well as professional and self-reflection, teachers came to value Aboriginal lived realities, enabling them to become effective educators of Indigenous children and young people (Buxton, 2017). Similarly, Malone et al. (2023) found that raising educators' awareness of their own behaviour based on racial biases, intentions, and institutionalised discrimination towards Black students in US suburban schools was essential for teachers to counter racism in their classrooms and across the school. In this study, the uniform perception of low teacher expectations for Black students was found to be destructive.

3. School management

A collegial staff environment

Cultivating a collegial staff environment was found to be a key aspect of high-expectations leadership (Møller, 2018). Building a culture of feedback is one of the central strategies, with principals' role-modelling this by providing immediate and constructive feedback for staff to support their professional growth (Møller, 2018). Staff meetings were identified as forums for setting both individual and collective goals and expectations (Okilwa & Barnett, 2018). These meetings provided an opportunity to communicate expectations effectively, and for there to be accountability between teachers (Okilwa & Barnett, 2018). The key to the effectiveness of these meetings, however, was in how high expectations were communicated to staff, students, and community and in seeking to find some agreement amongst those involved. Similarly, Møller (2018) emphasised the importance of organising

meetings into teams for each grade or year level. Weekly team meetings were a forum to co-ordinate activities, share experiences, and discuss problems. Intra-group relationships within teaching teams were also critical. It was found to be important that a group environment was conducive to psychological support and risk-free zones for taking on personal challenges while remaining strongly orientated towards students' school results.

Teacher collaboration

Teacher collaboration is another crucial high-expectations leadership practice. Collaboration encourages collective approaches to professional practice and prioritises the importance of teachers working collectively to create a shared sense of responsibility to support student outcomes (Klar & Brewer, 2014). One strategy the literature explored was deliberately hiring staff whose philosophies aligned with the school's high expectations (Okilwa & Barnett, 2018). Schools that explicitly focused on teacher collaboration included current teachers in the hiring process of new staff. Another strategy was having experienced teachers mentor those less experienced around expectations of excellence for themselves and their students (Okilwa & Barnett, 2017). By intentionally embedding teacher collaboration into recruitment, PLD, and employing *tuakana/teina* practices, leaders fostered a collegial environment that supported quality teaching and learning.

Shared vision

In the school sphere, a shared vision between leaders, parents, teachers, and students is essential for creating and sustaining consistently high expectations and a culture of success. For teaching teams, a shared vision of high expectations might include having a clear focus that everyone buys into, whole-team celebrations, and using resources effectively and wisely (Okilwa & Barnett, 2018).

According to Sarra et al. (2020), a shared vision also included a collegial staff environment and the building of teacher–student relationships. These relationships involved specific efforts to get to know students and to have strengths-based conversations that enabled high expectations and positive student identities. Van Houtte and Demanet (2016) found that a teacher's socialisation into the shared vision of a school most likely took place in informal situations where teachers shared their experiences of their students and classroom (e.g., in staff rooms). Klar and Brewer (2014) described the actions taken by a school principal in a low-income rural US school to build a shared vision. Key steps taken by the principal included engendering a family atmosphere at the school, recognising students and teachers for their achievements, and promoting family and community pride. As leader, the principal communicated this vision to staff and parents vocally and visibly. Teachers were aware of the principal's high expectations for them but also knew that he was highly supportive of their efforts to meet those expectations.

However, misalignment can sometimes occur within schools. The school that participated in Møller's (2018) study demonstrated a collective culture, yet the collaboration within the school appeared to be largely focused on planning and co-ordination rather than on implementation. There seemed to be a gap between the intended collaborative approach and actual practice: "leadership team emphasised expectations about common reflections, but according to the teachers, this occurred to a lesser extent in practice" (p. 95). This finding underscores the importance that a shared vision be not only communicated, but also consistently enacted and supported in practice to drive meaningful change.

4. Engaging with communities

Building trust with communities

The literature highlights the importance of building trust between schools and their communities, acknowledging that engagement beyond the school gate is crucial to develop and sustain meaningful relationships (Sarra et al., 2020). High-expectations leaders recognise that they must be aware of local communities' perspectives and sensitivities (Buxton, 2017) to ensure their engagement reflects the needs of the communities they serve. Further, to effectively lead change, aspiring leaders need to learn how to assess a community's values. This requires being visible, accessible, and initiating interactions with the community (Klar & Brewer, 2014). Buxton (2017) also suggested that consultation with marginalised communities should involve teachers having direct interactions with the local community and foster awareness of school happenings and initiatives.

Another central aspect of effective community engagement is changing parental perceptions of schools (Møller, 2018). For example, by sharing student data, seeking direct input and maintaining consistent expectations, schools could contribute to shifting long-held scepticism and disenfranchisement some parents had of the education system (Okilwa & Barnett, 2018). Directly involving families in their children's education helped reinforce high aspirations and create new collective educational narratives that redefine how families perceived and discussed their children's future (Gómez-González et al., 2024). As will be elaborated below, some families struggled to believe their children could meet high academic and behavioural expectations (Okilwa & Barnett, 2017). This underscores the need for educators' unwavering commitment not only to maintaining high expectations that are both ambitious and achievable (Okilwa & Barnett, 2018) but also effectively communicating those expectations to families.

Developing community partnerships

High-expectations leaders also look beyond individual family engagement and seek community partnerships to create and enhance educational opportunities for their students. For example, Okilwa and Barnett (2018) found that school leaders actively sought partnerships from local businesses and organisations to provide quality learning experiences outside the classroom for both students and their families.

Gómez-González et al. (2024) provided examples of Family Education programmes that taught specific strategies and skills, when offering courses in areas such as mathematics, literacy, and language that enabled parents to better support their children's education. As a result, parents developed a stronger sense of their educational capacity and effectiveness, alongside higher expectations for their children's academic success. This reflects the power of school-community partnerships in fostering a collaborative environment that supports student achievement.

5. Growing educational networks

Principal networks

Principal networking is recognised as crucial practice that fosters collaboration and sharing knowledge (Møller, 2018). These networks provided principals with the opportunity to discuss challenges, navigate the complexities of their roles, and reduce the isolation often experienced by leaders. Despite its recognised significance, principal networks were relatively underrepresented in the high-expectations leadership literature we reviewed. However, this theme became more

prominent when we moved beyond the literature and considered the local perspective. For example, NZCER national surveys have identified Kāhui Ako as a key platform for interaction among schools and principals, with reports suggesting that participants continually benefited from their involvement in these networks (Alansari et al., 2023). Further research is needed to explore how principal networks function specifically in New Zealand and how high-expectations leadership practices can be integrated into, and informed by, these collaborative interactions.

Relationships between local and district education

Another practice associated with high-expectations leadership is the ability to effectively build bridges between the school and local municipalities (Møller, 2018). Bearing in mind that high-expectations leadership goes beyond simply imposing external demands, it is important for school leaders to act as mediators to negotiate competing demands between school and municipality. This role involves balancing the responsibilities of justifying leadership decisions while advocating for the needs of the school. For example, in Møller's (2018) study:

She [the principal] believed in a bottom-up strategy but also attempted to build a bridge as a mediator between the municipality's expectations and her local school's needs. She sometimes acted as a buffer against the municipality's demands, requiring her to justify her decisions in her dialogue with the superintendent. (p. 93)

This strategy is particularly crucial in contexts where principals and teachers are constantly asked to reconcile government policies and external changes with the core values of the school.

What factors enable and constrain adoption of high expectations in schools

Enabling factors in adopting high expectations

As mentioned above, one of the core enabling conditions identified in the literature is the development of a **culture of reciprocal trust** among school leaders, teachers, and students. According to Møller (2018), when trust was nurtured within a school, it fostered an environment where high expectations were more likely to be embraced. Teachers who felt trusted and supported by their leaders were more confident in maintaining these expectations, even in the face of challenges. This trust enables a collaborative approach to teaching and learning, where teachers can also challenge students to meet high academic and behavioural standards.

Another enabling factor is a **commitment to equity**. Schools that actively work to provide equitable opportunities for all students are better positioned to implement high-expectations practices. This commitment ensures that all students, regardless of their background or previous academic performance, are given the tools and resources to meet elevated expectations.

In some cases, **teacher autonomy in decision making** at the classroom level was found to be an enabling factor (e.g., Møller, 2018). Teachers who are given the flexibility to adapt the curriculum to their students' needs while maintaining high standards are often more successful in fostering an environment of high expectations. While national standards and assessments may exert external pressure, a degree of autonomy allows teachers to be creative and responsive to student needs without sacrificing rigor (Møller, 2018).

Constraining factors in adopting high expectations

One significant constraining factor in adopting high expectations is **misaligned expectations** between teachers and parents. In one case, parents perceived the expectations set by the teacher for their child—who was performing below grade level—as unrealistic (Okilwa & Barnett, 2017). This mismatch often led to resistance from parents, who felt that their children were being unfairly challenged. Despite assurances from teachers that their expectations were realistic, such resistance might result in withdrawal from the school (Okilwa & Barnett, 2017). This tension highlights the importance of effective communication between teachers and parents to ensure alignment regarding expectations and to gain parental buy-in.

Another constraining factor is **systemic challenges and financial constraints**. In some contexts, certain educational pathways, like technical and vocational courses, require concerted efforts from leaders to reverse perceived negative biases and highlight their value (Van Houtte & Demanet, 2016). Furthermore, the financial difficulties faced by many schools can exacerbate these constraints, creating ethical dilemmas for educators who struggle to balance the need for high expectations with a lack of resources (Møller, 2018). A challenge for rural school leaders to address is the pervasive belief that their communities are inferior to urban communities. In these settings, high-expectations leadership practices involved developing and communicating a positive and compelling vision to families that countered the pervading narratives and re-envisioning what was possible for their children (Klar & Brewer, 2014).

The cultural and societal context in which a school operates can also act as a significant constraint. Malone et al. (2023) found that deeply ingrained **societal and institutional biases and deficit-based thinking** held by some educators regarding certain groups of students negatively affected families' engagement. This finding has been echoed by Sarra et al. (2020) who found that deficit discourses often shaped educators' expectations of certain student groups, particularly Indigenous students. In the Australian context, Sarra et al. (2020) found that, when the educational system was Anglo-Australian dominated, students from diverse cultural backgrounds might face systemic bias. This deficit thinking, although often unconscious, could prevent teachers from fully embracing high expectations for all students. Sarra et al. (2020) further explained that societal conditioning to have low expectations of Indigenous students could be difficult to overcome, even among those who genuinely believed in high expectations. This entrenched mindset reinforces stereotypes and limits the educational opportunities for marginalised groups, making it a significant barrier to adopting a high-expectations approach.

4. Ngā kōrero whakakapi | Summing up

This literature review highlights the importance of high-expectations leadership in shaping school culture, which in turn influences teachers' beliefs and student outcomes. For the future workforce in Aotearoa New Zealand, leadership development should equip leaders and teachers as future leaders with the skills to communicate high expectations and cultivate a school culture of high expectations. To achieve this, realising and understanding the importance of high-expectations leadership could be the first step. Offering professional support with high-expectations leadership strategies could be another step forward.

The literature reiterates the need for leaders to create environments where high expectations extend beyond academic performance. Additionally, teachers as future leaders should be empowered to assume leadership roles and collaborate effectively with their communities, ensuring that the educational system remains responsive to diverse needs and challenges. By aligning leadership development with these practices, New Zealand can cultivate a new generation of leaders capable of meeting the evolving needs of students and educators, fostering a more equitable and inclusive education system.

This literature also sheds lights on opportunities for further strengthening existing leadership strategies, programmes, and frameworks in New Zealand, such as the Rautaki Kaihautū | Leadership Strategy,³ the Strategic Leadership for Principals Programme,⁴ Huia Kaimanawa,⁵ and Tū Rangatira Māori Medium Leadership.⁶ These programmes already align with some of the high-expectations leadership practices discussed in this review. For example, Huia Kaimanawa prioritises the visions and aspirations of iwi and hapū, integrates Māori cultural values, and sets ambitious goals for ākonga Māori success, which aligns with several high-expectations leadership practices outlined in this review. However, there is potential to make these high-expectations leadership practices more specific and explicit by incorporating the framework provided here. By building on the principles and practices from this review, these leadership programmes can better support the development of leaders who are committed to maintaining high expectations and ensuring the success of all ākonga, which will contribute to a more inclusive and equitable educational landscape in New Zealand.

3 <https://teachingcouncil.nz/professional-practice/rauhuia-leadership-space-home/rauhuia-leadership-space/leadership-strategy/>

4 <https://www.springboardtrust.org.nz/what-we-do/strategic-leadership-for-principals-programme-slpp/>

5 <https://www.teakatea.co.nz/huia-kaimanawa/about-huia-kaimanawa>

6 <https://www.educationalleaders.govt.nz/Leadership-development/Key-leadership-documents/Tu-rangatira-English>

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