

Authentic school leadership change in New Zealand: rhetoric or reality?

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to suggest that without an educational environmental shift in New Zealand it will be difficult to achieve authentic school leadership change. The paper is based largely on the results of a study of the leadership perceptions of 94 secondary school principals in New Zealand (Slowley, 2012) and therefore is mostly about how difficult it is for secondary school principals in New Zealand to make changes in their leadership. However, it also points to a dichotomy that exists for principals at all levels and school types, between the leadership assumptions that permeate the schools' self-management system in New Zealand and the new leadership forms being called for by the government and its advisors and by some educationalists. This paper argues that dichotomy exists because the current schools' self-management system compels principals to be focused on the demands generated by an education market and by the government's expectations that principals should be effective administrators. To illustrate this dichotomy, the paper outlines the impact on the leadership of the individual principal of the accountabilities and leadership assumptions they are subject to on a daily basis. In so doing, the paper raises important questions about the value of providing principals with models of good leadership practice when those leadership models contrast with the inherent leadership assumptions within the current education environment.

Keywords: *Authentic school leadership change; good leadership practices; inherent school leadership assumptions; school leadership accountabilities*

Introduction

The education leadership literature provides a wide range of studies that all point to the importance of effective school leadership in enhancing student learning. Many of those studies have been accompanied by models of 'good' school leadership which principals are urged to imitate. From the New Zealand perspective, a key document in this regard has been *School Leadership and Student Outcomes: Identifying What Works and Why: Best Evidence Synthesis* (Robinson, Hohepa, & Lloyd, 2009), although this document makes it clear that there needs to be additional research into the more complex issue of secondary school leadership. Calls for leadership change however, do not all come from the research on school leadership. In recent times there have been increasing comments by politicians and their advisors about the effectiveness of school leaders and the need for leadership change. As Louis and Robinson (2012) pointed out, "Educators around the world are living in a period of almost unprecedented policy activism" (p. 629). In New Zealand this activism has taken the form of a growing political focus on education and some politicians focusing on the perceived failures of schools and school leaders.

This is not to say that research into effective models of school leadership that will enhance student learning outcomes in New Zealand is without merit. The recent Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA, 2013) results suggests that there does need to be on-going discussion about methods to improve student learning. Those results also highlight the need for New Zealand to address the inequality of outcome that exists between some sections of the community; in particular the low achievement of Māori and Pasifika students. However, calls for leadership change or the provision of leadership models of best practice could well be accused of ignoring the daily reality of a New Zealand secondary school principal's role and the degree to which the

current system of school's self-management in New Zealand ensures that it largely consists of administration, and various aspects of management (Slowley, 2012, 2013; Wylie, 2007). Such calls for change also run the risk of ignoring the capacity of the individual principal to achieve a level of coherence between their own, the school-based leadership agendas and the government's policy agendas when the education market requires principals to conform to essentially, non-educational, forms of leadership effectiveness, such as administrative efficiency.

Such calls for principals to imitate leadership models may also be accused of ignoring the fact that school leadership in New Zealand is a highly personalised concept. This is because schools and principals in New Zealand have been isolated through the level of devolution within the original schools' self-management system concept and since then, the heightened inter-school competitiveness which has been reinforced by the level of parental choice in the system. As a consequence, as the study by Slowley (2012) demonstrated, the leadership of the individual principal is shaped, not by the needs of the students in the school but by the methods the principal uses to make sense of the complex interactions that exist between their own leadership perceptions, the accountability and policy demands of the government and its advisors, the community's assumptions of the school's and the principal's effectiveness and the reactions of the school staff to the person and the leadership actions of the principal. This tendency for principals to personalise the role is not confined to New Zealand. It exists wherever principals or schools are isolated or subject to personalised accountabilities. O'Day (2002), for instance, pointed out that the nature of the leadership of a principal in the United States is dependent on the constructs, schema, values and emotional reactions they bring to the role. However it is arguable that it is more intense in New Zealand because of the isolation of schools and the principals created by schools' self-managing system.

This paper, therefore, explores the concept that it is the lack of professional trust and leadership independence within the educational environment in New Zealand that inhibits the capacity for secondary school principals to make authentic and sustained leadership change. In particular, it argues that, because in New Zealand principals are compelled to conform to a particular set of leadership expectations and assumptions that are being constantly reinforced by a range of personalised and professional accountabilities, the role of the principal has been reduced to that of a complicit manager of a system they have little say in and only very limited control over.

The nature of principalship in New Zealand

A key feature of the schools' self-management system in New Zealand was the level of devolution. This meant schools and their leaders became individualised administrative and educational units within an education market. As a result, from the inception of schools' self-management in New Zealand in 1989, schools and their leaders have been subject to a wide range of administrative demands. More importantly, these have not lessened in the last three decades (Wylie, 2007), rather there has been growing control over principals and increasing centralisation of leadership. This isolation of the school and the principal has also meant that principals have been able to be singled out by the government and its advisors, as well as some sections of the community and by the media, for blame when a school appears not to be performing (Robinson, 2011). As a consequence, many principals in New Zealand have, for very real reasons of personal security, become risk adverse and conformist in their leadership (Slowley, 2012, 2013).

The impact of the personal and professional accountabilities on the leadership of the individual secondary school principal was identified by Slowley (2012, 2013). He determined that the nature of the leadership of a secondary school principal was largely a limiting form of contingency leadership and was not instructional leadership. The study by Slowley (2012) also identified that the majority of daily leadership activity of the participants was not focused on the teaching and learning in the school but was dominated by a

perceived need, held by the principal, that it was important to meet the government's compliance demands and to deal with issues within the context of the school that impacted on its place within the education market. For instance, the principals in the study spent up to 80% of their time on administrative activities, contextualised problem-solving or on activities that ensured the school met community expectations of a 'good' school'. Little or no time was spent on supervising or being actively involved in the teaching and learning. A link between external expectations and a narrow leadership focus was also identified by O'Day (2002). He pointed out, powerful external accountability measures tended to make schools lose their capacity for independent action and instead, in the eyes of the government and its advisors, they became units of analysis and intervention. This view of the principal's role was also supported by Cardno and Collett (2004) who described the role of the secondary school principal in New Zealand as being more akin to that of a Chief Executive Officer of a mid-sized company than an instructional leader.

More importantly, the study by Slowley (2012) identified that this contingency leadership was created by what Honig and Hatch (2004) described as an outside-in policy approach. They identified this type of low trust policy approach as being a key factor in inhibiting leadership independence because it was often accompanied by unreal expectations or a failure by the policy makers to fully understand the reality of schools.

A similar message was delivered by Louis and Robinson, (2012). They argued that the dichotomy which exists between the calls for leadership changes and the capacity for principals to effect those changes lay in the gap between what the policy makers and some educationalists understand about schools, and what actually went on in schools. They argued that for a principal to become an instructional leader they must spend more time on education and less on management or at "least integrate instructional concerns into all aspects of their managerial decision-making" (Louis & Robinson, 2012, p.635). To do that, principals needed to have a deep knowledge of teaching and learning and to have the ability to build relational trust. As Robinson (2011) also pointed out, it is the integration of contextual problem-solving and trust building that characterises the work of instructional leaders.

However, the current system of schools' self-management in New Zealand does not allow for this approach. As the studies by Cardno and Collett (2004), Slowley (2012) and Wylie (2007) demonstrated, it requires secondary school principals to spend the majority of their time on administration or organisational management as well as be competent in a whole range of management roles, such as financial management, property management and personnel management. The consequence has been that the principals in the study by Slowley (2012) were remote from their staff and were, without exception, over-focused on either finance, property or school image or a combination of these management areas. The degree to which they focused on each area was according to their perception of their personal skills or their perceptions of the external assumptions about the school. For instance, a principal in a school which had received a negative report from the auditors was more likely to place a higher priority on the school's finances, and equate a financial turn-around with leadership effectiveness than on student learning outcome. As a consequence, many of the principals in the study by Slowley (2012) were struggling to gain an alignment between the accountabilities they were being subject to and their personal educational and leadership values.

The impact of the philosophical basis of self-management on New Zealand school leadership

Much has been written about the schools' self-management system in New Zealand and about the degree to which it could be seen as an extreme example of that system (Robinson et al, 2011; Wylie, 1997, 2007). Many of those commentators have also pointed to the fact that the self-management concept in New Zealand did not have its origins in any deep concerns about the learning of students. Rather, its introduction arose from the fiscal needs of the Labour government and the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) insistence that the New Zealand government reduce its commitment to public education and therefore reduce its debt.

Consequently, the reality of the reform has had little or no impact on the classroom and on the core teaching method of the isolated teacher in a classroom (Elmore, 2000; Wylie, 2007). The on-going administrative effectiveness and efficiency focus of the system has also made it an unlikely base for the establishment of an instructional leadership because it has created a belief that good school leadership can be equated with “expert knowledge, role and status, and with what people represent rather than what they are or do” (MacBeath, 2007, p. 2).

This paper argues that for secondary school principals in New Zealand to become instructional leaders, there would need to be a philosophical change in the current self-managing system. Principals would need to be granted authentic leadership independence and the focus on the administrative aspects of the role would need to be removed, or at least reduced. That independence would also need to arise from the willingness of the government and its advisors to accept the fact that teachers and principals in New Zealand have the cognitive and professional capacity to develop internalized professional norms (Robinson, MacNaughton and Timperley, 2012).

Therefore, the real question is not what effective school leadership in New Zealand is but whether it is possible for any new model of school leadership to be made to fit into the current system of school self-management in New Zealand without some changes being made to that system. This was a question raised by the studies of Slowley (2012) and Wylie (2007) which identified that the current system of school self-management in New Zealand focused the principal on managerialism, administrative efficiency and market responsiveness.

The impact of personalised accountabilities on the leadership

Robinson et al. (2011) justified the use of the powerful external accountabilities in New Zealand by suggesting that the New Zealand teaching profession needs to be more selective and more highly qualified. That is a view about New Zealand teachers and principals that opens up a whole new set of arguments about teacher and principal training, the need for a set of leadership qualifications for principals, as well as the remuneration of teachers and the level of professional trust in the system. However, there can be no argument that teacher quality is an important factor in student learning enhancement. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (2012) indicated that the more successful school systems concerned themselves with teacher quality.

There is no argument either, that where the accountabilities are not focused on compliance, but rather on embedding teaching and learning excellence, as for instance in Finland, then there can be improved student performance. Where also, there is a shift from bureaucratic, top-down forms of accountability which encourage conformity to the development of sets of professional norms by the profession itself, there are improved student outcomes (Robinson et al., 2012). As Kruse, Louis and Bryk (1994) pointed out, improved teaching cannot be created by rules. The need for less bureaucratic-type accountability and more leadership and teacher freedom of action was also supported by the OECD (2010) which stated that where clear links exist between professional accountability and the growth of teacher capacity, teachers and school leaders get better results because they have more discretion and leadership freedom.

This is why the results of the study by Slowley (2012) presented a worrying picture. The results of that study showed that the personalised and professional, accountabilities that the principals were subject to were a significant factor in limiting their leadership focus and activity. In particular, the study identified that the very powerful, and very personalised, effectiveness accountabilities that came from the inter-school competitiveness and the strength of parental choice in the educational environment were key factors in inhibiting the capacity of the secondary school principals to make changes in their leadership style of focus. This was evidenced by the responses of the participants in the study to the question about their most important leadership concerns.

They indicated they were mostly concerned with the interface between the school and the community and were therefore highly responsive to community assumptions of effectiveness.

The study identified that principals also tended to identify measures such as school popularity or roll growth as signs of leadership effectiveness, rather than enhanced student learning across a broad range of cognitive and non-cognitive skills. Most of the principals in the study were also focused on the comparative achievement data of school success in the external qualifications that was published by the media in the so-called 'league tables'. They felt that data was an important factor in determining the school's place in the education market. They also felt that the results were seen by the Ministry of Education, the Education Review Office and the community as a mark of their personal leadership effectiveness. What was also significant was that this leadership focus continued to exist, even when such effectiveness criteria were at odds with the social disadvantage of the community and the learning needs of the students in the school. As one principal in the study who led a school serving a socially disadvantaged community stated in his interview, "I am collecting figures for the data police because the community doesn't think we are doing well enough."

This understanding about the impact of the accountabilities and leadership expectations on the individual principal also exposed another issue: the degree to which the principals were influenced by the leadership assumptions of the Ministry of Education and of the Education Review Office. It must be acknowledged there have been support measures put in place by the Ministry of Education for principals in New Zealand, such as *Leadspace* or *Kiwi Leadership for Principals*. There are also training programmes offered for new principals through the First Time Principals Programme (FTPP) and other leadership training programmes which prospective principals can opt into. However, the overall tone of the support offered by the Ministry of Education is administrative. On its official website (www.minedu.govt.nz), for instance, the role of the principal is described as to "manage the school's day-to-day activities within the policies that the board has set". That website also makes it clear that a key function of the principal is to ensure the school is compliant with government policy. A module in its leadership section, labelled, *No More Nagging Doubts (2010)* describes itself as providing "outlines for principals, other school leaders and trustees, the key policies, procedures and systems required for compliance in all areas of school operations as defined by the National Administration Guidelines (NAGs)". This administrative view of the role is also partially reinforced by the Professional Standards for Secondary School Principals (2013), which form the basis of compulsory appraisal for principals and which are linked to the remuneration of principals. In those standards there is a *Systems* area of practice that contains seven management components that principals are expected to be appraised against.

Admittedly, this section represents only a quarter of those standards. However, the results of the study indicated this systems management section is the one the principals were mostly likely to be focused on. This was partially because it was the one being reinforced by the Education Review Office's generalised reports and in its Framework for School Reviews (2013). For instance, in that Framework, Dimension 3 describes the role of the principal as, "overall responsibility for day-to-day management of a broad range of matters, including personnel, finance, property, health and safety, and design and delivery of the curriculum".

It could therefore be argued that a key consequence of the external, official and unofficial accountabilities, as well as the broadly-held societal assumptions about what the role of a principal entails, have meant that secondary school principalship in New Zealand has become a form of outcomes leadership with an orientation to quantifiable results, rather than a form of process leadership with an orientation to developing co-operative processes and trust within the school. More importantly, it could be argued that the strength of those accountabilities, as well as the potentially punitive enforcement of them by the Ministry of Education through school interventions, have resulted in schools conforming to a broadly held and generic view of school purpose and organisational structure rather than designing themselves and their programmes to suit the specific learning needs of the students in the school. This runs counter to the research into successful principalship, both in New

Zealand (Notman, 2012; Robinson, 2011) and in Australia (Mulford & Silins, 2003) which determined that the most effective form of school leadership is more likely to be a form of process leadership in which principals and their staff have the professional freedom to establish processes within the school that are suited to the needs of that school and the skills of the teachers within the school.

The study

The study that formed the basis of this article had as its main aim to gain an insight into the leadership perceptions of secondary school principals in New Zealand and, more importantly, to identify those factors that impacted on those perceptions. It did this by questioning the leadership understanding and then reviewing, the leadership practices of 94 (44%) secondary principals from throughout New Zealand. The study also had a secondary aim, in that it sought to identify if there were any differences between the cognitive understanding of leadership the principals had and their actual leadership practices.

From that study several key conclusions were drawn that clearly indicated the day-to-day leadership of principals was contextualised by the needs of the school and by the specific expectations placed upon them rather than by leadership models or by leadership theory. The first was that there was the expectation that the leadership of secondary school principals in New Zealand should be highly administratively focused. This supported the findings of Billot (2003), who also identified a high administrative workload in secondary school principals in New Zealand. The second was that the leadership of an individual principal was personalised, not by a set of core educational values, but by external perceptions of that principal's effectiveness and the principal's perception of the school in relation to other schools. The third, and perhaps the most significant, was that the principals were not inclined to change their leadership style or focus once they were aware their leadership style was seen by the community and the staff to be acceptable.

It is acknowledged that it would be reasonable for principals of large school organisations such as secondary schools to be more organisational leaders than leading teachers (Cardno & Collett, 2004; Service, 2011). The complexity of the school would also explain, to some extent, the administrative focus the participants in the study had. It is also acknowledged that the non-instructional leadership focus of secondary principals is exacerbated by the subject specialisation of the teaching in secondary schools. However, neither of those influences can fully explain why none of participants indicated they wished to become instructional leaders beyond providing a place in which learning could take place. Instead, the results of the study pointed to the refusal to change being more likely the result of the leadership expectations placed on the principal.

The need for systemic change

A key finding of the study by Slowley (2012) was that there was an evident disconnection between the leadership demands created by the current system schools' self-management in New Zealand and the philosophical basis of some of the leadership forms principals are being asked to imitate. This finding supported results of the studies of Cardno and Collett (2004) and Wylie (2007) that showed the self-managing system in New Zealand has ensured that principals are administrators first and educators second. The results of those three studies also pointed to principals lacking the necessary leadership independence to make significant leadership changes because they were leaders in a high stakes environment in which they could be held personally accountable. As MacBeath (2007) pointed out, a high stakes environment destroys trust. In comparison, research on effective school leadership has shown that principals need to have leadership independence, a level of professional trust and to be more focused on learning enhancement than administration (Robinson, 2011).

Mulford and Silins (2003) in their research into effective schools in Tasmania, for instance, suggested that for learning enhancement to occur there would need to be a change from bureaucratic effectiveness measures to ones that accounted for a broader concept of education. A similar message was delivered by Galton and

MacBeath (2002) who argued that determining success by test scores in a political and social context was a source of stress to principals because there were few things in school that stood still long enough for them to be authentically measured. They also argued for broader effectiveness measures to be implemented. MacBeath (2007) also pointed to the need for accountability in schools to be derived from a strong values position rather than mandated targets. He argued that currently schools and communities were being caught up in a statistical deceit that was political and social in its origins (p. 5). Elmore (2005) also argued that accountability should be based on an organisational and professional trust, which he described as the “connective tissue” (p. 20) within a school. Hargreaves (2004) also suggested that some of the problems of educational inequity could be traced to some of the accountability measures being used. He argued that schools which were in socio-economically advantaged areas, and were therefore seen as being high capacity, had professional discretions and autonomy. In comparison, schools in poorer areas and which were not seen as performing so well, tended to be subject to prescriptive improvement strategies, which perpetuated dependency by the staff on measurable outcomes.

It is additionally acknowledged that to achieve a change to a system in which there was more independent school leadership would be difficult in the current political climate in New Zealand. It is also acknowledged that such a change would only happen if the government and its advisors accepted that school leaders were capable of making independent decisions based on the learning needs of the students in the school. There would also need to be a reduction of the marketization of schools and also of the capacity of sectors of the community to so strongly influence the structure and shape of schools. The administrative burden on principals would also need to be removed or, at least, mitigated. Then new leadership accountability measures could be negotiated that were more based on shared professional norms and professional trust and which were therefore, largely intrinsic because they were based on a set of moral values or internalized professional norms (Robinson et al., 2011). Such models can be found in Japan, Finland and China-Shanghai.

Therefore, calls for leadership change by the government and its advisors without supporting systemic changes are problematic. This is also possibly true of the new Investing in Educational Success (IES) (2014) initiative by the government. While it is laudable in its aims, in that it seeks to have schools work in communities, and while it is supported by research on the positive impact on student learning of schools cooperating (Robinson, McNaughton & Timperley, 2011; Stoll, Bolan, McMahon, Wallace & Thomas, 2006), it does not address the issues around the marketization of schools and the inter-school competitiveness that exists in New Zealand. In this sense it represents another example of the dissonance that exists between policy and reality identified by Louis and Robinson (2012). As Berliner and Biddle (1995) described them; such initiatives could well be dismissed as arising from a ‘manufactured political crisis’. MacBeath (2007) also pointed out, change because politicians identify a crisis, is merely to subject the community, schools and school leaders to a political sleight of hand that equates school success in measurable skills with the vitality of the economy and personal political capital. Wolf (2002) attributed such behaviours to the current narrowing vision of education.

However, there is a possible starting point for to leadership change in New Zealand. To be instructional leaders, principals need to be given back some level of professional control and be trusted to make the right decisions. The first step therefore, would be to move away from effectiveness being equated with a set of administrative skills and more emphasis being placed on principals acquiring a set of leadership dispositions or competencies based on intrapersonal skills. Leithwood (2005), for instance, offered just such a list of key dispositions that successful principals could have. He based that list on the early findings of the International Successful School Principals (ISSP) project. Those included: passion, persistence, optimism and emotional sensitivity. Similar dispositions were identified by Duignan and Gurr (2007) who also included the need for principals to have a clear and well-articulated philosophy as well as a sense of moral purpose. Notman (2012) also pointed to the need for physical well-being, intellectual stimulation, personal and professional

development, critical reflection and resiliency. A similar list was identified by the participants in the study by Slowley (2012) as key leadership dispositions and skills.

The second step would then be to devise an educational environment in which those dispositions were accepted as the basis of effective leadership. Such an environment could be based on that identified by the Leadership for Learning Project (known as *Carpe Vitam*) (2002 -2005) funded by the Wallenberg Foundation in Sweden. That project, directed from the University of Cambridge, looked at leadership in schools in eight cities: Athens, Brisbane, Copenhagen, Innsbruck, London, Oslo, Seattle and Trenton (New Jersey). It identified five environmental conditions for student learning enhancement. It found that learning enhancement would take place when there was a focus on learning within the school environment and that environment assumed everyone was a learner. It also found that there needed to be an effective interplay of emotional and cognitive processes and that the learning process needed to be sensitive to context and the different ways people learn. It also suggested that the function of the school leader was not compliance or administration but to create and sustain conditions that were favourable for learning. It also suggested that to achieve those favourable conditions there would need to be opportunities for shared dialogue between leaders and within the school. The project did, however, suggest principals also needed to be realistic and be politically aware.

The problem is that in New Zealand, educational well-being and political success are inextricably linked, in what Alterman (2004) described as a “post-truth political environment” (p. 10). This is an environment which Osborne (2005) also described as one in which Ministers “make statements on what they would have liked to be the truth” (p. 10) to suit political ends. As Osborne also pointed out, where such a linking between education and political well-being exists it has led to a tacit acceptance of the status quo amongst politicians and some educators because any change in the environment would be too big a risk. It should also be said that such changes would also require politicians to go counter to the current political climate in New Zealand, which is largely based on using what people have not done, or on their failure to reach required standards, as a political tool to further policy aims rather than seeking broad solutions.

Conclusion

This paper is not about rejecting calls for school leadership change in New Zealand but aimed to highlight the fact that such calls, without significant changes being made in the current educational environment in New Zealand, are problematic. There is no doubt that the impact on student learning outcomes of a school leader who is able to focus on the teaching and learning is significant. Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris and Hopkins (2006) pointed to the importance principals have in establishing a learning culture in a school. Mulford and Silins (2003) argued that effective leadership by the principal was essential for creating organisational learning. They also pointed to the profound effect principals can have on the learning within a school. The OECD (2010) also stated that effective school leadership is an essential element in improving student learning outcomes.

The idea that principals should not work in isolation is also well supported by research on effective school leadership. Mulford and Hogan (1999) in their study of principals in Tasmania pointed to the importance of co-operation between schools and school leaders. Wylie (2007) in her study of schools in Edmonton also indicated that the strength of that system was that the schools worked in co-operative clusters towards common educational goals. The value of schools working co-operatively was also identified by Robinson et al. (2011) in their paper on building capacity in the self-managing schools’ system. It was also clearly identified in the results of the learning communities research conducted in the United Kingdom by Stoll, et al. (2006) as well as in the results of the Leadership for Organisational Learning and Student Outcomes (LOLSO) conducted by Silins, Mulford and Zarins (1999).

By the same token there is a significant amount of research by educationalists that call for a system rethink in New Zealand. Leithwood (2005) argued that the current system of the administrative principal is

having little effect on learning. This is the same message found in studies by Bell, Bolam, and Cubillo (2003), Billot (2003), Cardno and Collett (2004), Leithwood, Louis, Anderson and Wahlstron (2004), and Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris and Hopkins (2006).

This paper therefore urges educationalist and practitioners to look beyond leadership change to an ecological change. It suggests that if such a change were to take place then it is more likely that new school leadership forms may emerge naturally because principals will be enabled to more readily focus on student learning and educational enhancement.

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