SUSTAINABILITY AND RESILIENCE IN NEW ZEALAND PRINCIPALS

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Introduction

This sabbatical was undertaken in Term 3, 2012. The purpose of the sabbatical was:

1. To research models of sustainable leadership and principal resilience in NZ primary schools

2. To interview twelve principals with questions around sustainability and resilience

3. To compare the theory with the results of the interviews, which describe the practice of sustainable leadership

4. To develop an integrated visual model of sustainable, resilient leadership to be used for future planning at Our Lady of Victories School, based on the findings of the project.

A Theoretical Approach to Resilience and Sustainability

Research Methodology

The literature review summary which forms the theoretical basis of this paper was conducted using a thematic approach where books and articles were categorized according to various major themes. These themes had been identified in the early stages of initial reading as pertinent to the study. Research was also categorized as national or international, as the primary focus for this paper is New Zealand schools. However, the literature extends beyond New Zealand as there was simply not enough material to give depth to the findings, and the international literature provides a broader perspective on resilience and sustainability.

Primary sources included books, journals and newspaper articles as well as various addresses, principals' conferences and regional principal meetings. Secondary information was obtained via database searches and from various websites on educational leadership, for example Leadspace, New Zealand Educational Association Leadership and National College for School Leadership in the United Kingdom.

Coupled with this literature review summary, an action research inquiry occurred using a mixed method approach of data collection. Principal resilience and sustainability was examined through face to face interviews (n =12) with Principals in primary schools of various sizes (U2-5). Initially, interviews were to be conducted throughout New Zealand, however, as this research inquiry progressed, after interviewing the first two Principals in Christchurch (where the author is based), it became evident that for Canterbury Principals their view of sustainability and resilience was coloured by the recent traumatic experiences (major earthquakes) they had been through. The author believed this provided a unique opportunity for data collection, and an examination of Principals and how they cope under extreme

pressure and as a result, decided to select Canterbury principals only, in the spirit of inquiry learning.

Information around resilience was gathered from a positive psychology (job satisfaction and enjoyment) and a negative psychology (struggles). Sustainability was examined through a discussion of coping mechanisms under pressure and factors which assist with Principal well being and the ability to remain in the job despite the pressures one faces. Principals were then asked whether they see themselves in the profession long term (in five plus years time) and they were asked for any other comments.

It became clear that this research presented a prime opportunity (rarely given) to investigate how these Principals have remained in the profession through this traumatic time, and the factors that have enabled them to be resilient and sustainable, through the last two years.

Definitions:

In order to examine what resilience and sustainability are, it is important to begin by defining them. Zolli and Healy (2012) define resilience as "the capacity of a system, enterprise, or a person to maintain its core purpose and integrity in the face of dramatically changed circumstances," and argue that the resilient mindset allows some to adapt to technological, cultural, and environment change much better and faster than others.

They see resilience as "preserving adaptive capacity (p. 8)—the ability to adapt to changed circumstances while fulfilling one's core purpose, which is an essential skill in an age of unforeseeable disruption and volatility" (p.9). They also believe it is just as applicable to individuals as it is to institutions.

They believe that many systems and cultures have learned to thrive "by encouraging adaptation, agility, cooperation, connectivity, and diversity." This also makes it clear that what resiliency does *not* represent is surrender

Resiliency of School Leaders

How then is resiliency developed in individuals and in organisations such as schools?   Resiliency in schools and school leaders has become an area which has gained increasing attention among educational researchers in recent years. Werner & Smith (1992), in their thirty year study of the qualities of resilient individuals, identified a number of factors which impact on an individual's ability to be resilient. These include an ability for individuals to give of self in service to others and /or to a cause, to use life skills, to be sociable with a sense of humour and believe in one's own ability to influence the environment. Resilient individuals are also autonomous and independent, have a positive view of their personal future, are flexible, have spirituality, and can connect to learning and are self-motivated.

This view is reiterated by Milstein & Henry (2000) who also noted resilient individuals have feelings of self-worth and confidence, and that resilience is an important factor in motivating people. They describe resiliency as "the capacity to meet challenges and become more capable as a result of these experiences" (p. 11). They went on to outline a series of key factors present in families, schools and community which promote resiliency:

- Prosocial bonding – healthy relationships and connections
- Use high warmth, low criticism style of interaction
- Set and enforce clear boundaries
- Encourage supportive relationships with many caring adults
- Promote service to others
- Provide access to resources for meeting basic needs
- Express high and realistic expectations for success

- Encourages goal setting and mastery
- Provides leadership, decision making, and other opportunities for meaningful participation
- Appreciates the unique talents of each individual (p.14)

Another study (Benard, 1991, p. 44 - 48), based on research in child development, family research and school effectiveness, has identified factors that foster natural resiliency known as environmental protective factors. These include caring relationships, high expectations and opportunities for meaning participation and contribution. Within the school setting, and particularly in relation to principalship, this means that a principal's professional knowledge is valued by those within the school community, they are part of a caring network of relationships both within (Board of Trustees, staff and parents) and outside (family and friends) of the school. They promote high expectations for those in their school but also have high expectations of themselves.

Resilient leaders:

Every school or organization will experience challenges from time to time and each leader should have the resilience necessary to take the team through the storm. Jerry L. Patterson and Paul Kelleher writing in their book *Resilient School Leaders* define resilience as "using one's energy productively to emerge from adversity stronger than before" (p. 21). Patterson and Kelleher relate resilience to the 'realistic optimist', one who is not surprised easily, as he/she has already come to terms with the reality that disruptions will happen. Effective leaders in schools prepare the staff and students for possible surprises or challenges.

Patterson has identified six strengths of a leader who is a resilient, realistic optimist:

1) Resilient leaders work to understand what is happening because of the adversity, including how they may have contributed to the adversity.

2) They are positive, believing good things can happen, within the constraints posed by the reality, and that they can play a role in making them happen.

3) They are anchored in their core personal and organizational values, staying focused on what's important rather than allowing adversity to knock them off course.

4) They are persistent in tough times. They recover quickly from setbacks and celebrate small victories along the way.

5) They invest their physical, mental emotional and spiritual energy wisely, knowing when and how to build in recovery time so their energy isn't drained.

6) They act on the courage of their convictions. They take decisive action when adversity strikes and the stakes are high. Their courage largely comes from being clear about what matters most.

The need for resiliency among school leadership is becoming increasingly pertinent in light of a potential leadership crisis in New Zealand and the pressures principals are facing. Resiliency enables individuals to overcome adversity and operates at a deep structural, systemic and human level at the level of relationships, beliefs and opportunities for participation and power (Benard, 1991, p. 46). It is a quality that must be present for school principals to remain in their positions, who often unwittingly find themselves caught up in adversity or at a juncture of power plays. It is an essential quality for sustainable leadership in schools today.

Sustainability:

Sustainability is defined as "holding up, bearing the weight of, or being able to bear the strain of suffering without collapse" (1998, Oxford Dictionary, p. 822). In the context of education, this definition would imply that the ideas or principles of

learning created by one school leader will remain under pressure, especially during periods of change; thus "holding up and being able to bear the strain of suffering without collapse". In times of turmoil or periods of staff turnover, change of students or external governmental changes, and even unforeseen natural disaster, the principles of learning would remain steadfast because they are embedded firmly in the culture and ethos of the school.

Hargreaves & Fink (2006, p. 20) believe that "sustainable leadership is a just and moral form of leadership that benefits us all, now and in the future". While sustainability is well known as the principle behind environmental management and best business practices, it is time to put it to work in education, they believe. This begins with a strong and unswerving sense of moral purpose, an inner conviction, a hopeful sense of shared purpose, where timeless values are a key. This sense of morality and justice from Hargreaves and Fink tends to overlap with Fullan's definition in this area of the need to address the external social and moral climate.

Key findings from a study of the literature indicate that sustainable leadership puts learning first, addressing it over time, even in the medium term, believing that results will take care of themselves. All other principles of sustainability are secondary to this one. As such, the school principal must be committed to leadership for learning in the first instance and see leadership moving beyond the tenure of any one person, so that an agenda for change will exist long term.

Principals need to have a work-life balance, as well as the ability to reflect on what is learnt in a crisis in order to remain in the profession. The importance of supervision or a listening ear/critical friend outside of the school assists in combating the isolation felt by New Zealand principals, particularly those in rural or small schools. Collaborative networks and reflective journaling have also been highlighted by recent research as valuable tools for professional growth. Another tool which assists

in the formation of sustainable leadership is that of distributed leadership where responsibility is shared in schools and teacher and pupil ownership is evident for long term change to transpire.

A focus on relationships both within the school and its community, the development of a positive school culture, with the principal believing in themselves and having a strong sense of moral purpose are all vital components for sustainable leadership in New Zealand. These coupled with the ability to read the social and political contexts and their affect on schools while at the same time planning for succession and developing capacity in existing staff are the other components essential for sustainable leadership to occur.

The New Zealand Situation

At present principalship in New Zealand combines the dual demands of leadership for learning and organisational management, which can prove too much for many, evident from the number leaving the profession. Within New Zealand over the last five years, one third of principals have left primary and secondary principalship and the average age of those currently serving in the profession is fifty five, while the average retirement age at fifty-seven, indicates that a further one third will have retired by 2010 (Carter, 2008, p.3). This creates an urgent need for sustainable leadership in New Zealand schools, as many of the more experienced principals are departing from the profession to retirement. Those serving under the current principal, in school leadership teams, need to step up and move into the vacant principals' positions, of the future. (2008, ibid, p.3).

Within New Zealand, with the advent of Tomorrow's Schools in 1989, "…school leaders had to learn how to develop and manage budgets, they had to become employers, property managers and chief executives to governing bodies. Along with these responsibilities came an increasing range of accountabilities – to the

Ministry of Education, the newly established Education Review Office and the local community, - a diversity of compliance requirements". (2006, OECD, p. 22). These increased demands changed the role of principal from school leader to leader of learning and manager of the day to day running of the school, with increased accountability on a local level given to the newly established Boards of Trustees.

Many principals found this increase in accountability, along with ruthless funding cuts in the early 1990s, a huge change. After this (1994 onward), there was a major review of all curriculum areas, with the emergence of a far more prescribed curriculum, again requiring greater accountability from schools and auditing against this from the Education Review Office.

In a survey of New Zealand principals, where 61% responded, Hogden & Wylie (2005) noted "the current stress levels of principals were high or very high (45%)". Primary principals were over represented in the statistics and stress levels were higher for women or Maori or non NZ European (p. v).

> The main stressors for principals stemmed from balancing the teaching and managing aspects of their role, paperwork and workload. Most principals thought they spent more time on management rather than leadership. These role-related pressures were felt more keenly by principals in small or rural schools. The lack of time to focus on teaching and learning and Ministry of Education initiatives, paperwork and other system demands were identified as having a high impact for over half of the principals.
> The next set of stressors included resourcing needs and ERO reviews which had high impact for around 40 per cent of the principals. Principals of small schools, and rural schools, and also those whose rolls were fluctuating or declining, and to a lesser extent those of low socioeconomic decile schools, were more likely to find aspects of their role stressful (p. vi).

It is evident from this research that New Zealand principals need support in managing their stress and remaining in the job. Current stress factors for New Zealand principals include: management versus leadership of learning, lack of time to focus on learning, Ministry of Education compliance and lack of resourcing as

well as accountability to the Education Review Office coupled with fluctuating rolls (NZPF, 2008).

Canterbury Primary Principals' Association survey findings (2012):

In term 1 of 2012, a survey was conducted by the Canterbury Primary Principals Association around wellbeing in Canterbury schools. The highest number of respondents ever, (n =140), replied.

This survey found that 70% of Principals said they were more tired and stressed than usual. 86% of staff reported they were more stressed and fatigued than usual. 80% of schools experienced property damage from the earthquakes, with 8% significant and 17% moderate damage, causing issues.

Incidents of student stand down and suspensions had more than doubled in Term 1 of 2012, in Canterbury schools, (compared to 2011), and there was a far greater take up of external support services for schools in Term 1, than in previous years at this time (eg RTLB, GSE support, social service agencies). All of these factors place great pressure on Canterbury Principals in being able to fulfil their duties.

What the Principals in the research interviews had to say – Resilience and Sustainability in practice:

Twelve primary school principals in the urban area of Christchurch were interviewed during the course of this research. They were asked five questions and whilst the focus was not on the earthquakes and their impact, per se, it soon became evident that for many of those interviewed, the earthquakes and their impact on these individuals and their schools, were still very much foremost in their minds. The summary of interview findings is as follows, which have been reported using a thematic approach:

Overall results:	N = 12
School size	U2 – 2 U3 - 3 U4 – 4 U5 – 3
How long have you been a Principal for?	0 – 5 years: 8% 6 – 10 years: 42% 11 – 15 years: 25% 16 – 20 years: 17% 21 – 25 years: 8%
Gender:	42% male 58% female
School type:	A mixture of state primary and integrated primary schools in the Christchurch area.
Could you describe some of the joys/things that keep you in the job?	Children (seeing them grow/caring for them) 92% Being able to make a difference to children and their families 61% Collegiality among Principals 50% Enjoy working with the community 42% Enjoy working with staff and seeing them grow as leaders 33%; ability to improve teaching and learning in the school 33%; seeing staff become more reflective practitioners 33%; Variety and challenge of the job 33% Being able to create and initiate change 33% Enjoy the flexibility of being my own boss 33% Like being part of a team 25% Freedom to develop own learning/set goals 17% Enjoy being in the classroom 17% Multicultural aspect 17% Being able to see big picture 17% Working with Board of Trustees 17%
What are some of the struggles you have experienced during your time as a Principal?	Significant lack of external support from key educational agencies we are accountable to 62% Isolation of job (fine line between friendship and being a Principal with staff, hard position) 50% Uncertainty around the future of the school 42% Other Principals: collegial on surface but we have now moved to a competitive situation since the earthquakes around roll and staffing 25% Community challenges:

	- Lack of support for the school 42% Parents who are too involved in the school without full understanding/see part of the picture only 33% - Very demanding parents 25% - Deaths within the community 16% - Very multi cultural school, families all working, difficult getting volunteers 16% **Issues with staff:** - Competency/standard of practice 62% - Resistance to change 33% - Inability to reflect 25% - Lack of systems in the school 25% - Hide behind NZEI/legal help rather than solving the issue 25% - Strong allegiance to previous leadership 25% - Dysfunctional management team initially 25% - Lack of loyalty 16% - Budget deficit initially 16% Earthquake pressures: - No additional support/time off given for Principals unlike teachers/expectations of Principals are far greater in times of trauma in terms of availability and workload 66% - Extremely stressful time 42% - Huge land/property issues 42% - Not trained for this 42% - Impact of quakes on families - relationships/ finances/staff 33% - Roll change/turnover, Principals have been blamed for this 33% - Shock 25% - Lack of information/transparency from above 25% - Seeing children's terror and being helpless to do anything about it 16% - Pressure to open 16% - ESOL families worried about visas and long term prospects in ChCh 8% Instability in chaplaincy of school (unsettling) 16%
What keeps you going in the hard times?	Supportive family (keeps you grounded/partner who listens endlessly) 62% EQs require a different kind of leadership, community stability and relationships have become very important 62% Seeking the support of Principal colleagues/CPPA leadership has been outstanding since the quakes 62% My faith/prayer 62%

	Self belief (inner strength, knowing I am working for the good of others, working for the educational benefit of children) 50% Walk/keeping fit 50% Personal interests/hobbies 50% Distancing myself from the school on weekends 42% Remembering it is only a job/being able to leave it behind mentally /big world out there 42% Time with friends who are not part of the school community 42% School is the one thing that is stable for many of the families in ChCh, they need us more than ever now as they have lost many local facilities 25% Spending time with my own children 25% Mentoring from another Principal 25% Support and confidence of the staff team behind you, 25% Supportive Board of Trustees 25% Walking round the playground/spending time with children in the school 25% Alcohol(stress release) 25% Taking time to consider decisions rather than rushing 25% I have a strong sense of loyalty to the school and its community 16% Supportive community 16% Having had a life threatening illness, puts things in perspective 16% Overeating 16% Supervision 16% Balance in working hours 16% Enjoy the wider educational involvement, national networks 16% Great Chaplain 8% Great support from MOE 8% Support of skilled advisers 8% Sport 8% Don't live too near the school 8% Getting enough sleep 8% Weekends away with spouse 8% Sense of humour 8% Honest and open with staff – greater transparency 8% Being well organised 8% Great PA 8% Changed my leadership style from leading at front to modelling leadership practices and

	letting others lead professional development 8%
Do you see yourself in the job long term?	Yes 33% No 42% Unsure 25% "I am in for the long haul, I still think my job is the best in the world. I am past feeling I need to move schools but want to continue to provide the most amazing opportunities in this current school". (Principal, 18 years) "I have to focus on the positive, I have learnt from the heartache and Principalship taking over my life. You need to be able to step back and live a balanced life". (Principal, 9 years) "I feel disappointed after all the effort I have put into my school, that in a year or two, there may not be a school anymore. This decision is out of my hands, we are in a holding pattern until the Ministry of Education decides what it is going to do with us. The roll has dropped by a third, the buildings are damaged, I am too tired to start again and our community needs a message of hope." (Principal, 10 years)
Any other comments….	"There is a long term impact on your mental well being as a Principal, this job affects your sleep and the ability to turn off. Now we have to get out of Christchurch to get a break. Every year I think it will get better in terms of social and community issues but they continue to increase, every year. This is an extremely stressful job, and currently with the earthquakes, this has got a lot worse." (Principal, 17 years) "The earthquakes have intensified issues for Principals. Parents are on a shorter fuse now, they are quick to anger , face concerns about employment and money and their long term futures. A different kind of leadership is required now." (Principal, 11 years) "What was under the surface in peoples' lives has been exacerbated by the earthquakes, it is all starting to come out, and we seem to cop it at school, from parents. It is like living in a hothouse!"

	(Principal, 7 years)

Summary of findings:

The joys for principals in Christchurch which keep them going, come first and foremost from the children they work with. Seeing staff grow and develop in leadership capacity and pedagogy, provided satisfaction for many Principals, as well as being able to make a difference in peoples' lives. Many enjoyed a strong sense of collegiality with other principals and they liked the flexibility, variety and challenge of the job and working with their local communities.

Struggles in the position, have come in the form of a lack of support from key educational agencies that schools are accountable too, isolation in the job, an expectation that the Principal will be "on call" and always there, (despite the fact that they have their own needs and families) and no additional time off was given to Principals after the earthquakes. Many have experienced uncertainty around the future of their job and schools, a high level of stress, a lack of support from their communities and a feeling that they are not trained for principalship in times of trauma on top of dealing with land and property issues.

The responses of the interviewees do demonstrate in part, the significant pressure that has been placed on Canterbury Primary Principals over the last two years, and provide a snapshot into their world and what has sustained them through this terrible time, and the supports they have drawn upon to survive. It highlights some of the supports that Principals have needed in order to continue in their job: their family, changing their leadership style due to the needs of the community, drawing on the support of other colleagues, their faith and self belief. They have had to use personal interests and hobbies to retain some work life balance and remember that it

is only a job. Keeping fit and spending time outside the school with friends who are not part of the school community has also helped them remain resilient. Principalship in times of trauma causes the individual to draw deeply on these supports and as one of the respondents said, "the earthquakes have exacerbated what was under the surface in peoples' lives".
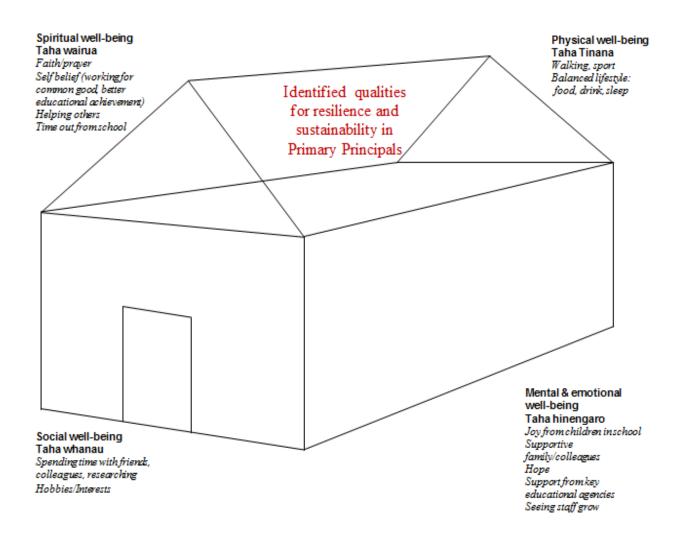
Many of those interviewed do not see a sustainable future for themselves in principalship as a profession, with almost half of the principals, saying they would not be in the job long term. This is a concern, as when they leave, they take a wealth of experience with them.

Limitations of the research:

The limitations of this type of research come from the small sample size (n=12) and possible methods of selection. Colleagues known to the interviewer through the Canterbury Primary Principals Association were selected, and as such, the group was not randomly selected. The limited time frame, for studying current research in this area, also impacts on the quality of the theoretical findings.

Conclusion – A diagrammatic representation of the findings:

A diagrammatic representation of key findings from this research for principal resilience and sustainability has been developed by adapting the Hauora model of well being developed by Mason Durie (1994) and coupling it with the participants' responses. This identifies the prevalent conditions needed for those interviewed to demonstrate resilience and sustainability:

**Spiritual well-being
Taha wairua**
Faith/prayer
*Self belief (working for
common good, better
educational achievement)*
Helping others
Time out from school

**Physical well-being
Taha Tinana**
Walking, sport
*Balanced lifestyle:
food, drink, sleep*

Identified qualities
for resilience and
sustainability in
Primary Principals

**Mental & emotional
well-being
Taha hinengaro**
Joy from children in school
*Supportive
family/colleagues*
Hope
*Support from key
educational agencies*
Seeing staff grow

**Social well-being
Taha whanau**
*Spending time with friends,
colleagues, researching*
Hobbies/Interests

The most commonly identified qualities used by the interviewed Principals which enabled them to be resilient and remain strong during the recent earthquakes and over the course of their careers are very similar to those identified by Hargreaves and Fink (2006) when describing qualities of sustainable educational leaders, who are "able to bear the strain of suffering without collapse, even in times of natural disaster" (p. 20).

They identify a strong sense of moral purpose which was evident from these Principals comments about their self belief (that they were doing the right thing and working for the common good of the school and its community), alignment with their own inner convictions (their faith) and a hopeful sense of shared purpose (working with the team and other colleagues on the same goals).

Hargreaves and Fink highlighted the importance of learning coming first and again this was evidenced in the respondents answers where they talked about their enjoyment of working children (seeing them grow and making a difference in their lives), and improving teaching and learning. Work life balance was seen as important by the Principals and is essential for sustainability along with a listening ear, whether it be from their spouse, a critical friend or supervision. Another key factor in the findings was the importance of collaborative networks. All of these factors align with Hargreaves and Fink's model of sustainable leadership.

Whether the respondents are able to bounce back over time (resilient) is something that cannot be determined from this research. Several of these Principals (42%) did not feel they had a long term future in the profession (five plus years), which is disconcerting.

However, the fact that all of these Principals have remained in the profession over the last two years, despite all of the challenges they have faced during severely testing times, personally and professionally, means they should be congratulated.

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