HOW DO SENIOR LEADERS OFFER EFFECTIVE CURRICULUM RELATED LEADERSHIP?

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The introduction of *The New Zealand Curriculum* has brought curriculum leadership into the spotlight. One or more senior positions within many schools are identified as holding responsibility for curriculum leadership. The aim of this sabbatical was to investigate the nature of curriculum related leadership offered by senior management and to draw comparisons between relevant research and senior leaders' perspectives about their work in this area. All leaders placed emphasis on pedagogy and distributed leadership. While sharing the same position of senior curriculum leader, this project revealed a diverse range of significant aspects that made up leaders' roles in this area of their responsibilities.

A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE

My interest in this area is based in my work in curriculum and assessment development as well as in senior leadership roles. I have been closely involved in the development of *The New Zealand Curriculum* document as lead writer of the English achievement objectives. I held the same role in a subsequent MOE project to redevelop the English achievement standards and align them to the curriculum. Secondly, a significant portion of my work as deputy principal has focused on developing curriculum leadership strategies at a school wide level in the areas of curriculum and assessment planning and self-review. The significant impact *The New Zealand Curriculum* should have on schools and the high levels of responsibility that schools hold for its implementation have encouraged me to look more closely at senior leaders work in this area.

METHODOLOGY

A literature review was completed focused largely on approaches to professional learning and development, connecting leadership and the curriculum, and relationships between senior and middle leadership. Key aspects raised in research about curriculum leadership were used to frame discussion topics for meetings with senior leaders.

During the initial scoping of the project and contacts with schools, it became clear that the original proposal was too narrowly framed as leadership directed only towards a single group, teachers in charge of subjects. Schools have a range of middle leadership structures, such as cross-curricular team leaders. Also, all leaders envisaged their roles as working with all staff and not just those in middle leadership positions. By not targeting leadership of a particular group, the scope was appropriately widened to considering senior leaders' curriculum leadership role across the school.

Senior leaders were interviewed during visits to seven large secondary schools ranging from deciles 1 to 10 and located in Auckland, Hamilton and Christchurch. The selection of senior leaders, all deputy or assistant principals as well as two principals, included only those with a clearly designated and major responsibility for curriculum leadership. For the purposes of this investigation, curriculum based leadership was the focus and was separated from

curriculum linked administrative tasks such as staffing, timetabling and learning area budgeting. The myriad of other tasks undertaken by senior leaders which can also dominate their work, from relief to pastoral management to school marketing, were not the focus.

Interviews with senior leaders were audio taped and later transcribed. Leaders were asked to discuss and explore two broad aspects: defining what curriculum leadership entails for them and strategies for curriculum leadership. [See Appendix 1 for details of topics discussed under these headings]. However, the interviews regularly moved beyond these aspects. In several instances, related school documentation was analysed.

An investigation was also carried out at my own school into the nature of curriculum related leadership offered to heads of learning areas around teaching as inquiry. In addition to some findings being included in this report about this investigation, detailed conclusions are found in my article in NZCER's *set: research information for teachers* publication [2012: no. 3] which is also published online on the Educational Leaders website.

SOME FUNDAMENTAL CHALLENGES

Farnham (2008), and MacBeath and Dempster (2009) comment on the lack of alignment between senior leaders' tasks with too much administrative, pastoral and managerial work crowding out their curriculum leadership roles. Schools are faced with major concurrent changes through the implementation of *The New Zealand Curriculum* and the introduction of the curriculum aligned standards. Such changes require school-wide shifts in practice and senior leaders with curriculum leadership responsibilities have major roles to play. Yet, despite the importance of such far-reaching developments in curriculum and assessment, creating the appropriate conditions for leaders at the coalface to fully focus on curriculum related leadership has not been addressed. There was a consistent trend across all leaders involved in this project that insufficient space was available in their time-starved worlds to devote the attention they would like to give to curriculum leadership. There were significant competing demands impacting on these leaders despite having designated curriculum leadership responsibilities as a significant part of their job descriptions.

The issue of lack of time for curriculum leadership is compounded when considering the impact this has on other staff. Craggs (2011) identifies that it was the curriculum leadership aspect of their role in which middle leaders were most tentative and lacked confidence. Middle leaders have been expected to develop themselves for their learning leader roles in what Craggs describes as an ad-hoc and self-directed basis. This is an historical problem also identified by Wright (2002) and others for over a decade. Craggs argues that a senior management role in curriculum leadership is essential to avoid a limited response to both curriculum implementation and work on standards alignment, which has left a disconnection between the two initiatives in the eyes of the middle leaders. In Craggs's view, the increased focus on pedagogy in the curriculum document has yet to translate into middle leaders seeing the need to show pedagogical leadership. If this is the case, a first school based response must be for senior leadership to address this shortfall through initiating appropriate professional learning and development.

Despite these considerable challenges, there is no doubt that senior leaders must strive to make space in their busy professional lives for curriculum leadership. Elmore (2008) offers one compelling validation for an essential New Zealand curriculum component, effective

pedagogy, being at the heart of strong self-review. He describes a school in which decisions around pedagogy are delegated to the classroom level only, in which teachers have no relationships with each other around instructional practice, in which there are no discussions among teachers about evidence of student learning, as a school with extremely low internal accountability. Given the Education Review Office's (2011) strong focus on schools sustaining their own curriculum self review processes, such a position is untenable.

The conditions within a school are also a critical factor in fostering effective curriculum leadership. In Timperley's (2008) view, leading professional development involves a strong organisational component as well as a leader's ability to make things happen. Senior leaders exert a strong degree of influence over setting priorities within a school calendar. Along with prioritising the scheduling of professional learning events, providing suitable conditions also means that time must be created for all staff to engage in curriculum based learning. It is easy to give conflicting messages that learning about the curriculum is valuable while consigning it to be dealt with as another '"thing to do"' in meeting time at the end of a draining teaching day, or as an add-on to an existing staff meeting programme. Creating space in a crowded school programme is a challenge that must be overcome. Timperley suggests that as much as possible competing professional learning initiatives should be minimised, but that is easier said than done. It requires a robust professional learning strategy within a school with momentum monitored at an organisational level and adjustments made by senior leaders as required.

FINDINGS

Significant aspects of a curriculum leadership role
Senior leaders gave a diverse range of responses when commenting on a significant aspect of their curriculum leadership role in their schools.

For one leader, curriculum leadership was centred on realising the school's academic goals. Part of her work involved a formalised cycle of professional review and support. In term 4, she and the principal met with each curriculum leader to discuss and appraise their annual departmental plan, which included a review of the current year and their vision for the next. The process continued early in term 1 with a review of NCEA results. Each annual plan was linked to the school's academic goals which were based on excellence in teaching and learning, including using data to inform practice, blending IT and ongoing professional growth. For her, these goals become the filter which extended from the annual plan review to a year long process where she asked her staff on an ongoing basis how they were aligning their work to the goals.

A change in a leadership team led to the restructuring of curriculum leadership in another school and a consequent shift in roles. Where previously three senior leaders had each been in charge of one of three core curriculum strands [specialist subjects, tutorials, and impact projects, or applying learning within the community], all three leaders were now involved across all three. They worked with team leaders as well as specialist teachers in cross-curricular teams. A main focus was on building teacher capacity regarding impact projects and tutorials.

A senior leader in a third school used a non-directive approach which was a complete contrast to a micro-managed environment under a previous principal. Senior and middle leaders had developed a broad framework for the curriculum based on a whare motif, with the walls as the key competencies and values, the roof as the vision and in the middle of the whare, a series of doorways into learning areas. Learning areas had a large degree of autonomy with little senior leadership direction as to how they designed and implemented the curriculum. There was no single set model for a department scheme, with a broad portfolio approach used which learning areas could customise. Senior leadership's role was to reinforce the philosophy of this high trust model. They wanted Heads of Departments to take ownership of the fact that they were entrusted to lead. HODs were regarded as learning leaders with the mandate to direct the learning leadership of their departments. On reflection, the senior leader felt that while retaining a good degree of flexibility there was a need to guide, or as she put it, "journey with" middle leaders to a greater extent, particularly to support those who struggled with the autonomous role of department head now expected. She would have liked to build in regular opportunities to "catch up, converse, and coach" her department heads. Some HODs still perceived that senior leaders would direct them in regard to the curriculum, perhaps due to the previous senior management approach or their own lack of confidence. However, this senior leader saw curriculum leadership as a journey together.

In a recently opened school, the senior leaders with curriculum responsibilities encouraged their staff to take risks with the curriculum. They saw that teachers struggled to shift from existing practices unless actively encouraged to do so by senior leadership. Their view aligns with one of the Education Review Office 2011 curriculum related findings about addressing the needs of priority learners. ERO expressed their perceptions of teachers' lack of appreciation of the invitational nature of the curriculum in these terms: "considerable work needs to happen before teachers and leaders understand the **permissive** nature and intent of *The New Zealand Curriculum."* The senior leaders had declined to implement tightly defined structures in regard to the curriculum as a means to encourage teachers to "look outside the box", or take advantage of the "permissive curriculum." One leader explained their approach with a delightful reference to Michael Bottery's 'Six Ironies of Rationalist Management': "the more you define the bottom line, the more that this becomes the only line they are interested in achieving." In response to their assessment that secondary teachers' main focus was on content, they had taken a pedagogical focus and asked staff when applying for positions to reveal their thinking by writing about what they saw as effective teaching in a 21st century environment and how they could contribute to a school. Curriculum based professional learning was facilitated by all four senior leaders who wanted to be perceived as being readily accessible or "on the floor." Key work included building understandings about implementing teaching and learning initiatives such as building capacity as a learning adviser [a role in which all staff aimed to gain a detailed overall picture of each student in their mentored group], learning guide development, and the role of the teacher in a personalised learning environment.

Following his appointment, another senior leader's brief was to implement professional learning communities within his new school. The senior leader worked collaboratively with key staff and the professional development committee to gain support for how these would be structured and maintained. He ran workshops on what professional learning communities would look like as well as what the foci could be, which evolved into topics including formative assessment, differentiation, ICT, inquiry based learning and student engagement. While other senior leaders were community members, he was the only leader with responsibility for facilitating a community. In this leader's view, staff had bought into

the model. He regarded some communities as more or less successful due to quality of facilitation. While sustaining group cohesion was a factor in the demise of the community looking at student engagement, all other communities were continuing into their second year and most with the same membership. This leader was also undertaking work on building an academic learning culture within the junior school with a greater focus on the key competencies across learning areas. One challenge he faced in this work was to redirect conversations towards learning and less towards behaviour.

Another leader saw a significant aspect of her work with curriculum in a similar light, with her wish to move from a pastoral and discipline focus to a focus on learning. This involved her moving learning area leaders into a more prominent position within the school. She had given these leaders considerable scope in re-visioning how to deliver the curriculum, with the proviso that any plans must benefit and engage students. Specialised programmes were also being developed including fine arts, performing arts and sport as part of this initiative.

Leading Inquiry

To senior leaders participating in this project, understanding the curriculum's effective pedagogies was central to their philosophy of curriculum leadership. In particular, teaching as inquiry, which is prominent in *The New Zealand Curriculum*, was advocated by most leaders as effective teaching practice. While they viewed inquiry as important in their schools, there were a wide range of levels of engagement. One leader saw inquiry currently occurring just at faculty leader level and then only in a limited fashion. She regarded her role as providing professional learning for faculty leaders on how to use evidence to inform practice as an initial step towards implementation with all staff. The leader saw inquiry as part of a new culture the school was developing and that one positive factor was that there was widespread staff awareness that this was overdue.

At the other end of the scale, in two schools a formal inquiry process was undertaken by all teachers and led by senior leaders. In one setting, senior leaders were firmly focused on teaching as inquiry targeting priority learners, as seen in their "what's the crisis?" approach when setting the focus for the inquiry. For one senior leader, this aspect of curriculum leadership meant changing teachers' attitudes towards teaching a class. She explained that some teachers accepted as some sort of immoveable fact that some students would fail and never challenged this position. The leader saw her role as shifting such beliefs and mentality. She saw inquiry breaking down stereotyping that some students cannot achieve, as a trend observed in some teachers was to withdraw support for the students who were resisting or not making an effort. In the leader's view, these were the priority learners and the students whom the teacher should focus on.

In another school, the leader's focus had shifted in a similar way. Whereas in the initial year of all teachers undertaking inquiry the focus had been on selecting a topic, curriculum leadership was now targeted towards carefully identifying priority learners as a first step. This school has also developed a set of descriptors as a reference point for leaders and teachers to guide the inquiry process which had gained status as a code of practice. Teachers' inquiries were also documented in short written reports, which were shared with other teachers within curriculum areas. Reports were then placed on Moodle as a reference for all staff. At a school-wide level, meta-analyses of the inquiry work of all teachers had

provided opportunities to examine trends and set directions for school- wide professional learning..

Influence of the curriculum on senior assessment practice

The influence of the curriculum on senior assessment practice and the role leaders with curriculum responsibility played within this was of particular interest. The introduction of the curriculum-aligned standards has reinforced *The New Zealand Curriculum* as a major driver of teaching and learning practice at all levels, including the NCEA dominated senior school where achievement standards can become the de facto curriculum. Curriculum aligned standards mean more than alignment with particular sets of achievement objectives. There is also an alignment with the front half of the curriculum document including the key competencies, values and principles, as well as the effective pedagogies and their mandate for the integration of curriculum, learning and assessment.

I was interested in the extent to which the opportunity to influence senior assessment practice had been picked up by the senior leaders involved in my project. This was a less clearly defined aspect of curriculum leadership. Several leaders felt that they had no specific brief to guide their staff in developing assessment practices in Years 11 to 13. Only one senior leader worked with his subject leaders in encouraging staff to use assessment practices that reflected the integration of curriculum, learning and assessment in Years 11 to 13, such as differentiated approaches to assessment or using flexible models for collecting evidence over time.

While acknowledging variability in her own school around assessment practice, another leader spoke of her goal for her teachers to design more individualised assessment programmes that suited the student and not to work from a teacher or school perspective that suited teacher practice or generated improved school NCEA data. She fostered with staff an approach of personalising assessment pathways identifying the standards for each student and compiling a programme that worked for the individual. Setting positive student-centred goals about NCEA achievement involved negotiation with each student so that they had a sense of ownership as well as defining what NCEA success meant for them.

Context sensitivity

It is not a simple matter of implementing curriculum initiatives within a complex and busy school environment. Change must be handled appropriately. Attention to context sensitivity, the ability to be able to read an organisation's circumstances, is essential in effecting change (Dempster, (2009). At times, appreciating a school's circumstances does not necessarily provide leverage for change. In one setting the senior leader had experienced strong staff resistance. In order to create momentum for curriculum change, the senior leader had moved from a full staff focus to "pulling people around you who think the same way". Implementing a specialised academy provided the opportunity to develop curriculum related pedagogies and assessment design. Two curriculum leaders who were new to the school and supportive of change also added further momentum.

Another leader commented that being sensitive to her context meant knowing how to respond appropriately when curriculum change was resisted by some of her middle leaders. She took an individualised path. Using an 'open to learning' approach (Robinson, 2012), she "listened to the squeaky wheel" then got alongside the teacher in a one to one conversation to establish common ground and make a plan. She had found that a valuable asset was her attitude and approach. Through exhibiting a calm manner and modelling the behaviours she expected from staff, her goal was to create an appropriate professional climate as well as instill confidence. She noted a shift in her practice when faced with issues. Previously she had attempted to fix issues others had brought to her. Now, her approach was to walk alongside the teacher to help them solve the issue; in her view, both the problem and the solution were inside the person.

Distributed leadership

To a greater or lesser extent, distributed leadership strategies were in use in all schools where the senior leader led by actively participating in curriculum centred learning or by influencing and mentoring others (Swaffield and Dempster, 2009). In working with the curriculum in their schools, senior leaders had carefully considered the leadership style that suited their context. No leader operated using positional leadership. In many instances, it was a matter of leading by doing with the senior leader actively facilitating learning communities or professional learning groups. In four schools, leaders had deliberately developed cross-curricular approaches: in two of these schools, they operated alongside traditional department structures and in the other two, cross-curricular teams were the dominant organisational structure for curriculum learning. Critical friendship was the main strategy for one leader where she preferred to work individually with her learning area leaders. In two schools, leaders spoke of the challenges in working in a collaborative manner using what one leader termed as a "green fields" approach. The leader had resisted imposing rigid structures in order to encourage staff to consider new approaches, but had found it challenging that some still retained an expectation that the senior leaders would "tell us what to do".

In exploring the nature of curriculum leadership, it became evident that mentorship assumed considerable significance. A mentored approach is in essence a social process, sustained by what Gilbert (2011) refers to as relational trust. This takes time to develop. Leaders in two schools were coming to terms with establishing effective mentorship, due to staff working in new roles or new structures being introduced. Despite the challenges, curriculum leaders need to pursue the goal of fostering mentorship skills as it is a powerful weapon in their distributed leadership armoury. Leadership that leads to successful curriculum initiatives is about capacity building. Leithwood, Harris and Hopkins (2007) note that senior leaders can have a strong influence on working conditions, a moderate influence on fostering motivation and commitment, but they have a comparatively weak influence on building staff capacity. Therefore, they need to work through others and in particular through their middle leaders. Their middle leaders have the greatest potential to develop the capacity of other staff because they are interacting with them on a day-to-day basis. In three schools, such capacity building was clearly evident in the work senior leaders were undertaking with team leaders, faculty heads, or heads of curriculum areas respectively.

Reciprocity

In some schools there appeared to be an awareness of the importance of reciprocity. This goes beyond leading by doing, or being seen to be actively participating in curriculum leadership. The principle of reciprocity espoused by Elmore (2008) applies to the relationship between senior and middle leaders as well as to middle leaders working with staff in their learning areas. Leaders must place, and be seen to place, as much commitment into their roles as they expect from others. They cannot simply set strategic goals, pass over the implementation to their staff, then return at a later point to measure progress. In one school this was seen in how senior leaders, with the permission of those involved, recorded meetings they facilitated with middle leaders discussing their inquiry projects and mentorship strategies. They then transcribed these and developed discussion summaries and conclusions to share amongst those middle leaders. This is a powerful curriculum leadership mechanism, as noted by Robinson (2009). Leaders promoting and participating in teacher learning and development had the largest effect size for the impact of leadership on student outcomes nearly double the impact of the second ranked factor, planning and evaluating teaching and curriculum.

Conclusion

All senior leaders involved in this project indicated a strong commitment to their curriculum related leadership roles and an appreciation of the importance of *The New Zealand Curriculum* document. The leaders placed significant value on developing a variety of distributed leadership models, which in their view largely determined the impact and effectiveness of professional learning and development about the curriculum in their own schools. Curriculum related leadership needs to be valued and prioritised amongst the many responsibilities competing for senior leaders' time if the full potential of the curriculum is to be realised.

Appendix 1

Topics / starters for senior leader interviews in regard to curriculum related leadership

Defining what curriculum leadership mean for the senior leader:
- *Developing and articulating a philosophy about the curriculum and what it means in our school?*
- *Working with the front half of The New Zealand Curriculum?*
- *Fostering curriculum based pedagogies? How significant is teaching as inquiry?*
- *Influencing assessment practice? For example, how do senior leaders work with their subject leaders and teachers in developing assessment practices that reflect the NZ Curriculum in Years 11 to 13?*
- *What are the significant aspects of your current curriculum leadership roles?*

Strategies for curriculum leadership
- *What do you see in your school as ideal conditions for work around the curriculum?*
- *What is your reading of your school as far as responsiveness to curriculum leadership is concerned?*
- *What are the challenges with competing professional learning initiatives? What areas are given priority?*
- *What professional learning structures operate in your school? What opportunities do staff have to meet and work together on the curriculum? How are these utilised for curriculum leadership?*
- *What curriculum leadership strategies have you found effective? For example, are distributed leadership or other leadership structures used?*

References

Craggs, S. [2011] *Challenge and Opportunity: Middle Leaders and the Implementation of The New Zealand Curriculum.* Auckland: Unitec

Gilbert, R. (2011). *Professional learning flagship programme: Leading curriculum change.* Melbourne, VIC: AITSL.

Elmore, R. in Pont, B., Nusche, D., Hopkins, D. (2008). *Improving school leadership: Volume 2: Case studies on system leadership.* Paris: OECD.

ERO. (2011). *Directions for learning: The New Zealand curriculum principles, and teaching as inquiry.* Wellington: Ministry of Education.

ERO. (2012). *Priority learners in New Zealand Schools.* Wellington: Ministry of Education.

Gilbert, R. (2011). *Professional learning flagship programme: Leading curriculum change.* Melbourne, VIC: AITSL.

Leithwood, K., Harris, A., Hopkins, D. (2008). *Seven strong claims about successful school leadership*. Retrieved 7 May 2012 from http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13632430701800060

MacBeath, J., Dempster, N. (2009). *Connecting leadership and learning.* New York, NY: Routledge.

Ministry of Education. (2007). *The New Zealand Curriculum*. Wellington: Ministry of Education.

Robinson, V., *Open to learning conversations.* Retrieved 12 August 2012 from http://www.educationalleaders.govt.nz/Leadership-development/Leadership-programmes/First-time-principals-modules/Module-3-Building-trust

Robinson, V., Hohepa, M., Lloyd, C. (2010). *School leadership and student outcomes: Identifying what works and why.* Wellington: Ministry of Education.

Swaffield, S., MacBeath, J. in MacBeath, J., Dempster, N. (2009). *Connecting leadership and learning.* New York, NY: Routledge.

Timperley, H., Wilson, R., Barrar, H., Fung, I. (2009). *Teacher professional learning and development.* Wellington: Ministry of Education.

Wright, N. [2002] *A Narrative Analysis Investigating the Professional Lives of three NZ Secondary School Heads of English Departments.* Hamilton: University of Waikato