Principals Sabbatical Report
Mary Tait- Jamieson
Tauranga Waldorf School

Sabbatical Proposal

Investigate post-heroic, social justice leadership practices and their application in supporting positive community school partnerships.

Acknowledgements

I feel very so grateful to have had the chance to take up this sabbatical, despite the delays and difficulties that presented themselves. I acknowledge therefore in a heartfelt and personal way, the very real importance of the Principal's Sabbatical Scheme in sustaining and growing leadership capacity in the educational sector.

As the principal of a state integrated school I interface with two boards at a governance level and need to warmly thank both.   The Waldorf School's Bay of Plenty Trust- our school's Proprietor, together with the Board of Trustees, both supported this sabbatical just and both have continued to help me shape my learning and skills over these many years, with a dedication, sensitivity and strategic nous, which is to be admired as well as acknowledged.

I need to thank the senior management team of our school and every single staff member who so generously showed up and stepped up to allow me this time and respite. I count myself as extremely fortunate to have such genuine and generous colleagues. And finally I need to thank the one who kept the home fires burning and is the keeper of my heart.

Background

I consider it an exceptional feature of the NZ educational landscape that a school that attracts government funding can be mandated to operate out of an alternate educational philosophy that in some key areas, has historically flown directly in the face of current educational wisdom and direction. I believe that the eight state integrated schools Steiner /Waldorf schools in NZ enjoy a unique position in that our practice can be positively shaped by our colleagues, in neighboring mainstream schools and our hope is, that as we mature as a movement we have the opportunity return in kind. We may in fact already be doing so.

For example I note that play pedagogy, the importance of oral language as a basis of strong literacy practice, thematically rich curriculum, multisensory learning, nature based learning, to name just a few, now feature in current educational discourse. With another key Waldorf principle - student wellbeing -now replacing national standard levels as both a priority and an essential learning foundation, gathering momentum in a discourse about how that can be achieved, I am encouraged that over time, interest may also emerge in another feature of the Waldorf paradigm- the relational basis for learning and leadership and the kinds of partnerships needed to sustain and grow both of these.

The sabbatical that supported this investigation was awarded after submitting a proposal to investigate the same question three times.   It was ultimately awarded in my 9th year as a

principle and after deferring a year, ironically for the very reasons I was seeking it, I was finally able to take it up in my 10th year as a principal.

The issues at the heart of that proposal have come to represent an essential and challenging component of my role. As principal of a Steiner/ Waldorf school, my position is situated within the context of an active and diverse community. The members of our community are attracted to this education for its guiding philosophy and the nature of the close collaboration between school and home. The integrated nature and special character of the school draws families and whanau who are looking for alternatives to mainstream education for a variety of reasons. These include previous negative schooling experiences, a desire to challenge the mainstream education system and/or an aspiration to live out of a free spirited and alternative notion of community.

This background further diversifies the multiple roles that a principal assumes as educational leader and representative of the school, to various stakeholders. The question of what further leadership skills, qualities or understandings might support me in dealing inclusively and respectfully with a variety of sometimes contradictory and competing demands and expectations to establish the engaged and fruitful community so vital to student wellbeing and learning continues to be of the greatest relevance. And despite having featured in my professional learning plan for the last three years, it also continues to confound me.

Structural and procedural aspects of this have also occupied the school's Board of Trustees who, also noting the challenge of meeting the needs of an increasingly diverse community in these years, have included various strategies in their strategic plan. Efforts to systemize communication pathways and protocols were a focus in the first year. Provision of a community facilitator to support the development of a parent mandate, by parents for parents, was an annual improvement plan goal in the second. This last year, the annual plan identified the need for development of a parent code of conduct to support clarity around productive and healthy partnership with teachers.

With these systems and structure in place what is now necessary is information, perspectives and strategies at the level of management, leadership and governance, which it is hoped, may be key to their successful implementation. My hope is that, despite the slightly alternative context provided by a state integrated Steiner/ Waldorf school, that wider perspective on parental /whanau engagement, could be of interest to others.

Sabbatical Activities/ Methodology

Deferring my sabbatical naturally caused me to have to adjust the planned activities also. For example, the Governance Leadership and Management conference in Australia, central to the original plan, was no longer on offer. The Australian principal who I had intended to shadow and interview had, in the meantime resigned, ironically, to pursue a doctorate closely aligned to this topic.

Her research, which I now eagerly await, involves a description and analysis of the practices of principal's in primary Steiner school's and uses an auto ethnographical / institutional methodology to explicate how leadership practice is interrelated with the ever shifting and changing ruling relations in the Steiner/ Waldorf and broader educational context.

Instead however, I had the privilege of attending a conference in the United States. Held in Portland Oregon and convened by the Association of Waldorf Schools in North America

(AWSNA) the conference was entitled, Exploring Collaboration and Leadership in Waldorf Schools .

My proposed professional reading project as a consequence of the above extended into an ongoing exploration of the application of family systems theory in management and leadership of community organizations, as well as organizational development theory.

Conference Findings.

Leadership in Steiner/Waldorf schools has necessarily been shaped by the 'lived experiences' of the ideology (which some describe as insanely utopian) that underpins it. The organizational threefold social order – Steiner's model for the formation of intentional communities dedicated to the education of the young and therefore the future of the planet, is categorized by what he calls the ideal reality, the social reality and the economic reality.

The health of any organization Steiner notes, depends therefore on the recognition of these realities as separate but interconnected; requiring different approaches and ultimately the finding of a balance between them.   Leadership is tasked with assuring that there is shared direction in the ideal realm, alignment in the social realm and commitment in the material realm.

The AWSNA Portland conference, acknowledging that the successful implementation of these ideals currently suffer from an absence of research, provided an interesting collaborative structure to include "lived' leadership key note presentations by a Board Chair, a business and administrative manager and a pedagogical leader.   Noting with interest that two of these roles are combined in the NZ principal role, in many cases and certainly in mine, I heard that sharing responsibility for guiding and leading our schools in a collaborative and effective manner requires us to crack the balance between power and trust.   Furthermore and by way of small consolation, I heard that this is a matter that routinely keeps schools leaders up at night and given the range of mandates and roles that need to be traversed is likely to be achieved in moments only.

Any collaborative form will be rich in the opportunity for interaction. So the question of the leadership styles and forms that can facilitate healthy interactions across multiple mandates and roles would seem to point to some form of what I heard referred to colloquially as 'adjectival leadership styles' being used.   These types of leadership are ones where the technique suggested is embedded in the adjective.

Offering an umbrella description for all of, empathetic leadership, liminal leadership, benevolent leadership, participative leadership, democratic leadership, transformational leadership and distributive leadership amongst many, many others, the advice given was that leadership in Waldorf schools requires stamina *over and above any and all* of these. The rationale offered was that forms of leadership that include significant levels of collaboration, cooperation or shared responsibility will result in greater conflict. The research tells us that hierarchical systems stifles conflict which logically if ironically suggests that if a school is having conflicts in social and organizational matters, it may well indicate a successful and authentically collaborative model, one in which everyone who has good will and an understanding of the mission can participate. However unhappily, this may be. It was hard to tell if this was the good news or the bad.

The human cost of such a leadership challenge including its sustainability, at least for those who operate from and have made something of a virtue of conflict avoidance, is therefore likely to be the single greatest challenge to leadership in any Waldorf school.   Managing, which is also a feature of the NZ principal role, appears to be possible and probable within stable constraints. Leadership and overt leadership on the other hand is what is required when things go awry. Another way of expressing this is that, in conflict, the manager stays on the jungle floor, the leader needs to be willing and able to climb the tallest tree to see what is happening.

The nature of effective leadership in Waldorf schools therefore includes an ability to work with a more of less constant cycle of birth, growth, destruction and renewal.   The skillful leader is able to uphold such a culture and makes space for the stories of all involved to be heard, because community culture, ultimately eats leadership strategy for breakfast.

Professional Reading Project Finding.

Waldorf School's are a community endeavor whose primary purpose is education of their young. Often schools are started by parents who have more knowledge and/or experience, of Waldorf educational philosophy, than the teachers that are hired to deliver it. This makes for an interesting organizational DNA, resulting oftentimes in complex community belief systems, especially concerning contribution and belonging.

This emotional system is made up of a continuum of experiences and skill levels over all the domains of community life with idealism and the wish for a different and better educational experience for the children seeming to be the only commonly held principle. The matter of how this could and should be achieved, are in fact matters that have far less commonality amongst community members.   In looking to understand and potentially align these differences and complexities I began to research in a world somewhat beyond education but whose research and literature base in my opinion needs to be routinely accessed by those in education. This is Organizational Systems Theory, from the field of psychology.

Waldorf schools have an avowed commitment to social renewal and operate from a spiritual viewpoint, which as already implied is very often not fully shared or understood by those who are attracted to it and indeed on whom they are reliant.   And it is this very interdependence, which points to possible insight from Family Systems theory as a subset or Organizational Systems theory.

The concept of a Waldorf school community as an emotional system viewed for example through a Bowen family system lense, leads to important considerations:

Why ideas that might no longer serve the organization, persist?
How does mythology of practice or ideal, enter into the DNA of a movement?
How innovative and flexible is a Steiner organization that claims to develop fixable living thinking in students and new social forms for the future. Actually?
As a leader do I accept the possibility that my functioning brings about crisis?

The Bowen family systems model and particularly his concept of **'differentiation of self'** provides a Systems understanding of maturity. The concept of differentiation refers to the ability to think and act as an individual while staying meaningfully connected to others. It describes the varying capacity each person has to balance their emotions and their intellect, and to balance their need to be attached with their need to be a separate self.

Bowen's work of the 1950's has been built on and extended by others notably Edwin Friedman, an ordained rabbi and family therapist who exposed the emotional connections between home and work in religious, educational, therapeutic, and business systems, and has writtn about their application in organizations and communities.

His Theory of Differentiated Leadership proposes that it is your presence as a leader within an emotional field that makes the most difference to the organization. Leadership from this perspective is less about personal traits, skill or style. Although these will be subject to positive and negative scrutiny and critique by all members of an engaged organization or community, ultimately success comes from the leader's system of self - regulation. This systems' perspective on leadership operates on the basis that the leaders ability to tolerate other people's discomfort maintains the path towards its mission to be walked, as opposed to sabotaged and importantly, allows the organization to be carried forward.

Friedman attacks the manner in which organizations primarily adapt themselves to their most dependent, recalcitrant, and anxious members, rather than to 'the energetic, the visionary, the imaginative, and the motivated in the name of being compassionate , inclusive or empathetic. Instead he argues that the devaluation of the importance of self-differentiation as the key to leadership is the origin of many of our problems in the area, causing leaders to depend more upon their 'expertise' than on their capacity to be decisive.

In Friedman's view, any level of technique and data cannot solve problems that arise from embedded emotional processes. A failure to understand the manner in which these processes operate causes us to believe that they can be resolved or regulated 'through reasonableness, love, insight, role-modeling, inculcation of values, procedures and policies and striving for consensus.' In this model the big question for leaders becomes: How do we stay connected to all the stakeholders in our communities and organizations without being fused? He notes that:

No connection to stakeholders plus autonomy = bully
Strong Connection to stakeholders plus no autonomy = chameleon
Strong Connection to stakeholders and autonomy = mature functioning self.

But he warns that Differentiated leaders threaten others because they won't fuse and that sabotage will then occur, rising to crisis in chronically anxious systems. Again the question arises is crisis and sabotage a sign that a leader is doing the right thing?

Noting that the same principles will promote optimal functioning in an organization as in a family unit, Friedman's contention is that the leadership crises we experience arise from conceptual and emotional dimensions hindering progress and encouraging 'regression'. He refers here both to the leader and to all other stakeholders in a community or organization. Instead in this system model, healthy competencies are built on. And leaders develop their emotional health in the job or sink.

Implications / Conclusions

Effective leadership in a Waldorf setting is most obvious by its absence . It is a relationship craft that derives its necessarily fluid nature from a responsibility for and to the wellbeing and success of others.

It is dynamic in nature as it responds to the vagaries and variations of time and place, biography of all the individuals involved in the school community as well as the past memories and future needs of the school itself.

Given this, it seems like training for the role could usefully provide an ongoing coaching/ supervision role. This is routinely provided for professionals who work with 'people-helping' and assists the development of skills, meaning personal health and professional growth. It has not to date been considered relevant for principals who work to help so many – children, teachers and parents.

Mary Tait-Jamieson.

References

Bowen, M. Family therapy in Clinical Practice (Republished 1994) Aronson Inc Noethvale, NJ US.

Brown, J. (2017). Growing Yourself Up: How to bring your best to all of life's relationships. Exisle Publishing.

Education Review Office (2016). School Leadership That Works. Crown copyright.

Freidman, W. A Failure of Nerve (2007) Seabury Books, US.

Freidman , W. Generation to Generation (2011) Guildford Press New York.

Ministry of Education (2008). Kiwi Leadership For Principals: Principals As Educational Leaders. Wellington: Learning Media

Robertson, J. (2016). Coaching Leadership: Building educational leadership capacity through partnership. Wellington: NZCER Press