

Standing Out:

What Makes an Outstanding Special School Leader?



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Introduction ... is it just me?

Five years into my role as Principal of a Special School in New Zealand I found myself still feeling 'new' as I tried to conceptualise my role. Principal induction training had emphasised my role as **the** educational leader of the school. In this conceptualisation I was guided towards a vision of myself, floating in and out of classrooms, observing and reflecting on teacher practice in a co-constructive way, hunkering down to happily navigate 'difficult conversations' and being the leading light for ensuring continuous improvement in student achievement through a never ending cycle of inquiry. To support this direction I was pointed towards the latest greatest School Leadership manifesto which that warned me that I must be developing 'the ability to initiate and engage in constructive problem talk: and the capacity to reveal, evaluate and revise theories of action'.¹ Phew!

This concept of pedagogical leadership was reinforced to me by the Education Review Office through their frequent public reports and in their visits to our school. The Ministry of Education provision of Professional Development was strongly linked to this concept of leadership also.

Job done? Well, not really, no.

It became increasingly clear to me that the kind of dilemmas I was required to wrestle with, as a Special School Principal, required a slightly different kind of leadership emphasis than this unrelenting focus on pedagogy. While it is true that we are a sector particularly prone to change, within the last five years, there seemed to be an accumulation of distinctive changes afoot in our particular Special Education niche. Our student profile was getting markedly more complex. In addition to the well documented increase in children diagnosed on the Autistic Spectrum, we were encountering what was described by researchers in the United Kingdom as a 'new generation' of children with Complex Learning Difficulties and Disabilities (CLDD), with

*2 or more 'coexisting, interlocking, compounding learning difficulties/disabilities' for reasons such as prematurity of birth, rare syndromes, road traffic accidents (RTA) and societal causes such as drugs, smoking, alcohol (e.g. Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders)*²

Given the greater propensity of Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) students to experience mental health issues³, and general trends towards more social dislocation and higher levels of family breakdown, it was clear that we needed to be continually revising and reimagining niche specialities within our school to provide personalised, holistic and evidence based programmes for these students. Double phew!

¹ Robinson, V., Hohepa, M Lloyd, C, 2009, 'School Leadership and Student outcomes: Identifying what works best - Best Evidence Synthesis Iteration (BES), Ministry of Education, Wellington, New Zealand p.190

² Carpenter, B. SEND Magazine May 2016 p. 26

³Emmerson and Hatton 2007, quoted in Carpenter, B August 2016 paper 'Mental Health - Who are the children? What are their needs?'

The result of these factors was an increasing demand for our services whether directly, through student enrolment, or indirectly, through requests for support from mainstream schools. The Outreach service, in which New Zealand Special Schools provided itinerant teacher support was anecdotally received positively by these schools and local Ministry of Education offices. In addition to this very individualised support, schools like ours were increasingly getting involved in finding ways to meet gaps in the wider community of disability, both locally and for some regionally. Like other Special Schools, my school driven by a passion for teaching the disabled community that didn't stop at the school gate. We wanted to share our expertise and improve the lives of these young people and their families.

Our school needed a leadership approach which ensured we were up to the changing dynamics of the job. We needed to ensure that our staff could keep pace with rapid advances in special educational practices, while simultaneously being supported to develop niche specializations.

Furthermore, the ongoing process of redefining the role of Special Schools was a continual touchstone for discussions within and beyond the Special School sector. Juxtaposed with the upswing in demand for our services however, was the somewhat ironic and irritatingly regular need for leaders like myself to 'watch our backs'. Justifying our existence in response to periodic attacks from the dogmatic end of rigid 'inclusionist' advocates⁴ was clearly another necessary part of Special School leader responsibilities in New Zealand.

This increased emphasis on Strategic Leadership was juggling for my time and energy alongside the ongoing challenges of pedagogical, never mind operational, leadership. In short my role was to try to lead my school to assure students' progress, while positioning the school to excel in new and evolving roles that were yet to be determined, all the while ensuring our staff were not injured and the sewage pump didn't block again. I was aware I wasn't alone. Managing these roles was an ongoing juggling act for most of my mainstream colleagues. In fact, the concept of the 'jack of all trades' principal able to turn his or her hand to anything at the drop of a terry towelling hat was a populist stereotype that deep down I suspect we all wished to live up to. Despite the quite purist pedagogical theory of successful principalship postulated by the Ministry of Education's manifesto 'Kiwi Leadership for Principals'⁵ this document didn't shy away from this 'can do' approach. In fact, the need for us to be intimately involved with Property, Finance, Administration and Personnel Management at a very hands on level was apparently inspired by the

*Kiwi "can-do" attitude that is characteristic of New Zealand principals.*⁶

In summary this documents confirms that 'principals are ultimately responsible for the day to day management of everything that happens in schools'.⁷ While I certainly recognised the demands on all New Zealand principals are problematically wide ranging and intensifying, the feeling that my

⁴ <https://www.google.co.nz/urNew-Zealand-failing-in-educating-those-with-disabilities> TRISH GRANT AND DAVID MATTHEWS **The Dominion Post 21 August 2015**

⁵ Kiwi Leadership for Principals, Ministry of Education, 2008' Wellington, New Zealand

⁶ *ibid* p. 6

⁷ *ibid* p.7

way of leading my school was, of necessity, markedly different, from the way my mainstream colleagues were leading theirs, gained momentum in my reflective meanderings. The emphasis placed on a purist pedagogical approach to school principalship seemed to be particularly out of kilter with the demands and experiences of my role and that of my fellow Special School Principals. Observing some of the most experienced and highly regarded leaders within the New Zealand special school fraternity led me to speculate about which qualities were most vital to ensuring success in our particular situations. It seemed to me that there was a need for a more nuanced and contextualised articulation of effective principalship for our sector.

My first port of call was to see what the research could tell me. The answer came fairly swiftly: not a lot. The lack of investigation into the nature of effective special school leadership was something that left me rather puzzled. Fair enough, we are a small proportion of the entire principal network in New Zealand, and beyond. Nevertheless, our roles are critical, as increased demand for special school expertise appears to be a worldwide trend. We are responsible for the educational provision of complex and challenging children and young people. Improving provision for such students is rightfully high on the priority list for most government level educational agencies worldwide.

Thus I commenced this investigation into the qualities of a highly effective leader of a Special School. In this undertaking I admit I am clearly motivated by self-interest- a wish to find ways to be better at what I do today and more importantly for the future evolution of my role. Like the other school leaders in this report, my own school leadership performance has been given a virtual ‘ thumbs up’ from our regulatory authority, Education Review Office (ERO)⁸, my school’s own governing body and professional appraisers appointed to assess me. That’s great, but it’s just too general. I want to know what qualities, capacities and skills I ought to be developing or enhancing, in order to meet today’s Special School challenges and to respond highly effectively to those of tomorrow. I suspect my colleagues would find benefit from this kind of analysis also. I suggest that it could also be useful for those tasked with identifying and nurturing the next generation of Special School heads. For these reasons I hope that my findings help in a small way to start answering the question: What makes an outstanding Special School leader?

⁸ Education Review Office <http://www.ero.govt.nz/review-reports/blomfield-special-school-and-resource-centre-15-05-2015>

Methodology

I began this process by reviewing relevant literature. This included generic publications on the nature of effective principalship and the more difficult to source publications on special school principalship. One article in particular was useful in framing my research, 'Leadership of Special Schools: Issues and Challenges', by Sara Scott and Di McNeish, which was published in 2013 and was commissioned by the National College for Teaching and Learning, Department for Education, United Kingdom. This paper, which was itself a literature review of relevant research (of which they uncovered little) and Ofsted inspection reports of 'best practice' in Special schools, offered some 'common themes relating to best practice in leading special schools'⁹: In summary these themes included the leaders ability to build an 'inclusive culture', with high expectations and a strong commitment to learning opportunities for all students. This was achieved through a 'collaborative leadership approach' with a strong focus on staff professional Development and 'cultivation of talent'. Students would be supported by the Leader's development of 'conducive' classroom environments, support of curriculum adaptation, peer support and effective assessment.

These leaders would build 'external networks and partnerships', engage effectively with parents and have the 'personal resilience to manage the additional practical and emotional stresses involved in Special School Leadership.'

I wanted to see which of these 'common themes' resonated most strongly in my research and what other strong and specific themes would emerge in my comparison of Special School Leaders in England and their counterparts in New Zealand.

I arranged visits with a range of Special Schools in England of a roughly similar size to my own in terms of pupil numbers. All the schools I visited had a current overall grading of 'Outstanding' by Ofsted, the regulatory agency whose role it is to audit all English schools. Furthermore, the Leadership and Management of the schools was specifically rated as 'outstanding' in the schools I visited.

My visits consisted of an in-depth interview with the Head Teacher and a guided tour of the school. School websites and written information supplemented my research, as did the most recent

⁹ Scott & McNeish p. 27

Ofsted report for each school. I recorded my conversations with these Head Teachers with their permission and used this material as the basis of this paper.

I also conducted an online survey of Special School Leaders both in New Zealand and England to broaden the scope of my research.¹⁰ New Zealand School principals invited to be included in this survey were all leading schools on a 3-5 year ERO review cycle. The English school Heads invited to participate were selected on the basis of ongoing 'Outstanding' Ofsted reports. Here is what I found out.

¹⁰ See Appendix A

Findings

Several themes emerged consistently in the course of my research. Distilling these down, I suggest that an outstanding Special School Leader is most likely to convey a leadership style based on:

- a. A strongly held moral imperative
- b. A highly distributive leadership approach
- c. A capacity building strategic focus
- d. An intentional approach to personal resiliency
- e. Modelling a highly positive school culture

A Strongly Felt Moral Purpose

I felt very strongly that I was, kind of, with the 'underdog.' Head, London

Heads involved in this research consistently expressed that they are driven by a sense of responsibility to seek equity and quality for their students. 100% of respondents felt very strongly driven by their belief that all students have the right to a quality education. They perceive that a significant sector of their students would be disadvantaged by enrolment in the mainstream educational system and that this is an imbalance that they wish to redress. Those surveyed express a strong belief in the ability of all students to learn, given the right conditions. In fact, 100% of those surveyed felt that their belief that 'All of our students have the potential to learn' was 'very important' in driving them in their roles. Special School Leaders felt that these 'right conditions' for some students were really only going to be created in specialist provision. Principals expressed both a sense of responsibility and a passion to meet this challenge.

Our children with the most complex needs don't get the best chances unless we in Special Ed work to do it for them. Head, London

We need to have some specialist teaching and learning activities for our most complex children and we also have to keep them safe.' Head, Liverpool

The changing nature and increasing complexity of SEND students was noted consistently by Leaders in both countries, who expressed that this strengthened their commitment to ensure ongoing specialised provision.

Prevalence of children with complex needs here in Liverpool is increasing year on year and the complexity of need is also increasing. That's a national picture. So the children with profound and multiple learning difficulties because of medical science, these children are surviving. The children with very complex ASC¹¹, so we're not just talking about children who you know are on the spectrum these are children who are really profoundly autistic children who are nonverbal

¹¹ Autistic Spectrum Condition

communicators , with some really really deep rooted sensory processing issues and some extreme challenging behaviour. Those numbers are increasing too. Head, Liverpool

Certainly the sentiments expressed by the Leaders and the beliefs they identified as driving their roles, are consistent with Scott and Mc Neish's conclusion that 'best practice in leading Special Schools' includes ' Having and communicating high expectations, including a strong commitment to the individual learning opportunities for every child in the school'.¹²

While most describe how in some way they 'fell' into the Special Education sector, without initially deliberately seeking this pathway, once they were 'in', those interviewed expressed very strong levels of commitment to their vocations. This was borne out by the service these respondents had given to their school, often starting as a classroom teacher and subsequently working their way through senior positions, to finally be appointed as the Head of the school. These leaders remain emotionally and intellectually engaged in their schools, citing their pleasure in seeing:

'children progressing, parents happy' London, Head

and relishing the ongoing dynamism of the sector:

I love it. I wouldn't have stayed without the changes. My satisfaction comes from not knowing what's going to happen next- embrace it! (ibid)

When asked how he would feel about his role should a current application to open up another Special School, he accepted an English Head gave me a one-word answer: *excited*.

For some there is a sense of giving back and the provision of equity. One London Head reflected on his own schooling and asserted that:

Everything that I have always enjoyed, we should enjoy here with our young people.

The strongest beliefs driving the Special School Leaders surveyed, centre on a holistic approach to student learning. 100 % of the respondents viewed student wellbeing as critical to learning success. This is in keeping with the research of O'Brien (2010) who proposed that effective Special School Leaders are those who recognise that 'the cognitive and behavioural domains of pupils can only be

¹² Scott & McNeish, 2013. p.27

addressed if the affective domain is also taken into account, by forming relationships, designing the provision around the child and, judging the behaviour not the person'.¹³

All respondents felt driven by the belief that diversity should be celebrated. This concept is consistent with the rationale for the role of Special Schools in providing a range of personalised (i.e. diverse) educational approaches. It reflects the emphasis Scott and McNeish put on our Special School Leaders' ability to build an 'inclusive culture and ethos, including having a strong personal commitment to inclusion.'¹⁴

Confidence in the ability of their staff to make meaningful differences to the lives and educational outcomes of their students was characteristic of the respondents, 100% of whom felt very driven by the belief that their staff have the ability to significantly improve student outcomes. To believe that what we do will make a critical difference is an overarching theme for the Special School leaders.

It sounds really twee doesn't it, but it's something about making a real difference isn't it? Because

I think what you can do in specialist support not just for the child but the whole family and I think you can really influence as well. Head, Liverpool

Challenges felt most keenly by the leaders were wide ranging. Thinking about the nature of their students, 68% reported feeling 'very concerned' about the increasing number of students presenting with mental health issues. Of equal concern was the lack of sufficient space for a growing student population. Physically challenging behaviour was 'very concerning' to 58% of leaders and of equal concern was the difficulty of employing sufficiently skilled staff. Each of these features of special school life is, of course, dependent on the other for success. Unsurprisingly, having the requisite space and staff to manage and teach our most complex and potentially physically challenging students and is fundamental to our success in engaging these students positively in learning.

¹³ Reported on in Scott & Mc Neish, 2013, p.20

¹⁴ *ibid* p.27

A Highly Distributive leadership model

*Who says **my** ideas are right?*

Head, London (roll: 128)¹⁵

All of those interviewed stressed the need for school leadership to be meaningfully delegated amongst the senior team. Outstanding leaders conveyed a sense of trust in the decisions and actions particularly of the Assistant and Deputy Heads in their school. There was a trend towards increased delegation as demands on the school increased and the role of schools expanded.

I have to work hard at making these key relationships with the heads of the schools.

Head, London (roll: 350)

I have had to hand things over and I have had to brief my leaders to say, 'Your role is Head even though you're not Head Teacher - some of these things are needing to sit with you now'

Head, London (roll: 128)

Rather than merely hand on operational areas however the Heads spoke about the need to have these co- leaders feeling empowered to innovate and make meaningful decisions. This wasn't seen as a 'nice to do', rather it was seen as an essential need to share the load of the innovative problem solving required by the complex issues presenting in the school.

I prefer to say yes rather than no, but measured – have a go, what's the worst that can happen?

Head, London

I call them my Dream Team- Head, Liverpool

¹⁵ Roll numbers have been provided where this is deemed relevant to the 'theme' being discussed.

Leaders expressed a need to balance this with remaining in contact with students and staff, and hitting this delicate balance was a tension for most, particularly where school rolls hit critical points. This was reflected in conversation with a Head whose school has grown over the last few years into an Academy of schools. Philosophically and pragmatically she concluded:

I can't hold 350 (students) in my head. The detailed knowledge has to sit with the Team Leaders.

Another with a roll of 128 also felt this sense of disengagement from daily school life as the school grew.

I'm no longer operationally the head of the campus.

All Heads talked about ways they could maintain contact with their students and staff and tried to build in opportunities to do this as much as possible. Generally, the contact was by way of phatic communion: a greeting at the school gate or a quick dip into classes- simply touching base was viewed as critical to the success of their leadership. Almost all found this aspect of their leadership role frequently vulnerable to increasing external pressures.

The survey asked Leaders who was primarily responsible for the following areas of school management:

- Property, Finance, Family Support, Staff Training, Human Resources

Interestingly the two areas most likely to be delegated by the leaders were Finance and Family Support, which would seem to be at two different ends of the skills spectrum. Whether these two areas are more specialised or more easily compartmentalised is debatable. It is clear however that the English respondents demonstrated a higher level of comfort with delegating than their New Zealand counterparts. In fact, all of the English leaders surveyed delegated day to day responsibility for **all** these areas out with the exception of one: Staff training. This fits with the Scott and McNeish expectation that:

‘best practice in leading special schools will include ‘ensuring staff have support and professional development, including cultivation of talent and ...opportunities ...to develop specialist expertise’.

¹⁶

Typically, a Head of an English Special School explained how she had a full time Site Manager, an Assistant Caretaker, a Pool Manager, a Business Manager, a Family Support Worker and a five Nurses on site. This specialisation of roles is in contrast to the typical New Zealand model where the bulk of property, financial, family liaison work remains closely in the orbit of the Principal's day to day work. In New Zealand it is most likely that Teacher Aides with wildly varying levels of training and experience take on the day to day health responsibilities of students with significant medical conditions, under the supervision of teachers, rather than having on site nursing practitioners.

¹⁶ Ibid p.27

In contrast about half of the New Zealand Leaders reported that they retained day to day management of all areas. Over 50 % of New Zealand Leaders retained primary day to day responsibility for Human Resource Management, while no English Leaders in this research held onto this area of responsibility. Leaders from both countries were most likely to retain staff training as their own responsibility. Certainly in interview the English leaders expressed the necessity of having Business Managers who took on responsibility for resource management freeing up the Heads to focus more keenly on matters to do with student learning, staff development and strategic planning.

79 % of those surveyed reported that they found managing the balance between Educational Leadership and School Administrative management either ‘challenging’ or ‘very challenging’. Whereas six of the New Zealand respondents identified this situation as ‘very challenging’, none of their English counterparts did. Comments around the number of hours worked by leaders and the increasing level of workload from New Zealand Principals underscored this point:

I am too office bound these days- compliance reporting of one form or another or on telephone to parents/caregivers.

Also compounded by external / MoE /Govt initiatives

Admin tasks seem to grow more and more every year.

Time is often fragmented as urgent overtakes important.

Means long hours and lots of work at home/weekends and evenings.

People and money are the areas where there is most stress and the areas where most problems can arise.

I work very long hours /usually 70 + hours/ week.¹⁷

¹⁷ All on line survey comments from New Zealand Principals.

A capacity building, strategic focus

Our vision is to always be there, to be outward facing. Head, London

The political landscape of Special Education both in New Zealand and in England could never have been described as peaceful or static. Against this background the role of School Leader has had to be a necessarily strategic one. Without this type of political awareness, either nationally or locally a special school becomes vulnerable to professional isolation and the perception of irrelevance within their wider community. 100 % of Leaders surveyed considered 'Strategic Planning' as a 'very important' skill in their role. Leaders reported that this pressure to be strategically literate and involved is intensifying. As one Head of a school in London put it,

It is almost a necessity to sit in panels or groups in the local authority.

And for a Head in Liverpool, with success came greater expectations about working more strategically for the wider school sector:

When you step into headship you've got to have the local authority picture and then you become confident as a head and ...we were lucky to get an outstanding Ofsted report and you sort of look much more nationally don't you, there's that expectation that okay you've got that outstanding Ofsted, what are you going to do with it, how are you going to come out 'outstanding plus'.

With the necessity of working beyond your own school the role had changed for this English Head:

It is a different job to the one I came to 8 years ago without a shadow of a doubt. At that point you were much more school based, okay - there was some Local Authority stuff, but that picture's got bigger and bigger and I think now the demands on you are greater... for example a lot more work being done on a local level with funding, banding and that requires us to be out of school.

Moderating panels and that sort of thing, again a huge draw on our time. We want obviously to have representation on these panels and things.

The strategic role of the Special School has become multi-pronged. We are reinventing ourselves to ensure we remain highly effective educational providers for the wider community. We are there to ensure that we are not overlooked as a viable alternative for parents looking for an enrolment option. We are there to ensure that our students' needs are not overlooked either locally or nationally in the context of new collaborations, innovations, policy development: that our students are considered with regard to any opportunity in general. We are there to ensure that we can exert some influence over expectations including, most notably in recent times, what Government requirements are to be applied to us with regard to producing 'achievement data'. Most of us are also there to contribute to perceived gaps in services which affect our students and their families.

While over half New Zealand Principals reporting feeling a level of concern about the vulnerability of their schools, no English Heads felt this was of any concern to them. Heads in England surveyed were inclined to be more concerned by the feeling of being under pressure to meet the gaps in the wider service provision for young people with disabilities. The gaps and the urge by Special Schools and their leaders to meet these for our community of learners can be unending. As one London Head put it:

Part of me would love to run the respite services but there is only so much capacity.

Simply educating the professional and the lay community about people with disabilities is a huge impetus for our leaders. Most describe this in terms of a responsibility, and they actively seek to educate others by providing services and resources (usually at no or minimal cost) to the community, which work in a complementary way with the school's aims for their students in the longer term. Some such initiatives include; school cafes open to the public, various business style 'enterprises', toy libraries, parents and family centres, teacher training centres and community courses. While such undertakings are welcomed by the community, and local authorities, leaders conveyed that they are needing to carefully monitor this role expansion, to ensure that their core business, educating their students, is not adversely impacted. In England leaders talked about pressure for their 'outstanding' schools to take on struggling schools, which they saw as part of the Government's push towards mandatory academisation.

Feelings about the prospect of academisation in the England were mixed amongst those with whom I talked. An academy head spoke of the advantage of being 'Masters of our own fate', while others rejected the idea of being 'swallowed up by a chain of academies'. Just prior to my visit to the United Kingdom, the Department for Education had softened the requirement in this regard, in response to threatened strike action. Rather than requiring all schools to be academies by 2020 they now needed to be 'ready' to 'convert'. An expert was quoted in the Independent newspaper summed up the situation up this way:

*"Given the combination of voluntary conversion, academisation under the Education and Adoption Act and direction at local authority it is possible that full academisation (or very close to it) could be achieved without forcing schools one at a time."*¹⁸

¹⁸ David Laws, Executive Chairman of Centre Forum, Quoted in *The Independent* newspaper Wednesday 11 May 2016.

Those interviewed shared this sense of inevitability around eventual academisation and thus their consequent role expansion to lead larger and more organisationally complex Special Schools.

Demographic pressure was being felt by leaders in both countries especially in the urban areas, where this was exacerbated by lack of space and, in England, by regulations limiting the ability to open up a new ‘maintained’¹⁹ school to currently existing schools. One Special School in London had been asked by the local authority to apply to open another special school under its own auspices. In New Zealand there is an expectation that existing Special Schools will open more satellite classes to meet this population demand. The understandable urge by our outstanding leaders, to rise to the challenge and fill such gaps, perhaps needs to be tempered by a reflection on what made these Principals outstanding in the first place: nurturing, positive and visible interpersonal connections with staff and students will inevitably become more difficult as the school and its functions grow.

In the New Zealand context as the Communities of Learners (CoLs) strategy is rolled out, Special School leaders are once again faced with a dilemma: how to manage increasing expectation around their role as a Specialist Education resource, while maintaining the integrity and quality of the teaching and learning within their school. Our Leaders are characterised by a professional need for new challenges, and by an ‘outward facing’ approach to new opportunities for their school communities, so they presumably will not want to overlook involvement in such developments. Whether such developments will lead to a clearer division between operational and strategic roles within the school’s leadership responsibilities, is something that most schools going down this pathway will need to tackle at some stage. In England some leaders I spoke to were uneasy about the Academy led trend towards appointing a CEO who dealt with the ‘big picture’ while the Principal’s role became to lead the leaders of the special school.

There are many parallels within the CoL model and the British push towards academisation. One is the concept of the ‘parachute principal’, who drops in and ‘fixes failing schools’. This approach in England was not met with particular enthusiasm by the leaders I spoke with, who felt that school improvement required a long term, intensive commitment:

Changing a school is hard work over a long period. You can’t expect to get a quick result. You have to recognise your achievements and chip away. Decide what your priorities are.

Head, London

¹⁹ Government funded.

An Intentional Approach to Personal Resilience

You need to be able to hold things together. And to separate things out a bit. Head London

89% of Leaders surveyed expressed either 'high' or 'very high' levels of job satisfaction. In terms of work related stress, 47% described that they experienced this as 'intermittent high level stress'.

Stress was recognised as coming in waves depending on what was happening.

So the stress comes from the quantity of stuff to get done. I need to make sure I'm using (delegating to) the people I hired 10 or 15 years ago. The big stress is around the gaps out there. The things we haven't got answers to. We have to be realistic about what we can do.
Head, London

There are times when you can't see the wood for the trees, when you wake up at 2 o'clock in the morning. Head, London

It was concerning to note that of the fourteen New Zealand based Special School Principals surveyed, eight described the work related stress they experienced as 'Intermittent High Level Stress'. Only one of those surveyed from England also described their stress level as 'Intermittent High Level Stress' and this respondent acknowledged this was due to the fact that this was her first year as a Head of a school. One New Zealand Principal described their stress as 'Ongoing High Level Stress'. All of the New Zealand Principals who rated their stress as 'High Level' had been in the role for 3 years at least, many for over 10 years.

Comments related to this question include reference to the range and quantity of workload that sits with New Zealand Leaders:

Disciplinary, property and fundraising all huge areas over the last two years and not finding decent teachers to appoint.

Some stress peaks around staff matters, and things I got wrong

And also the need for New Zealand Special School Leaders to be represented at the big picture, national advocacy level took its toll:

It was a year where the pressure of other work culminated in a near 'burn out', I take other roles very seriously and commit much time, energy and thinking and want to do a good job... the role of keeping MoE and others informed about us and what we can contribute is huge.

...I felt pulled in all directions. This impacted significantly on the hours of work.

While English Heads were also involved in out of school 'political' consultation and initiative development with their Local Authorities, they did not report the same stress levels as their New Zealand counterparts. With the one exception of the new principal (see above), English Leaders described their work related stress as either 'Ongoing' or 'Intermittent low level stress.'

Perhaps our English colleagues feel more secure about the place of their schools in the bigger scheme. Combine this greater sense of assurance, with a greater acceptability for Heads to 'be seen as Leaders of Leaders rather than **the** leader'²⁰ who find it more acceptable to completely delegate bundles of work, such as Property, Finance and Human Resource Management and we have leaders who are able to manage the necessity of representing our sector externally, and be part of the crucial 'looking outwards' role of Special Schools.

As Principals in NZ we have responsibility for too much other 'stuff' that causes anxiety and makes us worry- money, property etc.

While recognising responsibility for their own personal wellbeing, Leaders in both countries felt a keen sense of personal and legal responsibility for the wellbeing of their staff.

Our staff get punched and kicked and bitten and spat on really regularly. There is a culture where if you turn on the telly it's becoming quite American, where if you've been hurt at work, you should sue them...When I see those ads I think 'Oh my God'. Head, London

²⁰ Ashdown and Darlington (2007), reviewed in Scott & McNeish p. 24

The levels of stress discussed by respondents contrasted with the generally high level of job satisfaction reported by them. Feedback indicates that these outstanding Leaders plan and implement deliberate strategies to ensure they continue to thrive and enjoy their work.

All emphasized the importance of having ongoing support and contact with mentors and colleagues. For some this was focused around having ongoing dialogue with their Senior Leadership Team, for others this focussed around reflective coaching either with informal peer relationships or formal regular mentor meetings. Having a trusted knowledgeable ‘other’ to bounce ideas and feelings off, and share concerns with, was seen critical by most. This reflective process was complemented for most leaders by a concerted effort to compartmentalize work from personal life. ‘Having a life outside work’ was however becoming more difficult with the increased role of technology and expectations around it.

‘It’s a lot more 24/7 than it used to be with emails etc.’

Leaders were aware of the need to maintain a sense of perspective on their workload and the sometimes daunting sense of responsibility that went with their roles.

So long as it is not life threatening it can always wait and be prioritised

I do have a ‘at the end of the day it’s only a job’ philosophy- however this does not diminish in any way the commitment I have on a daily basis in the job.

Prioritising work, as I know I would never get all of it completed, ever.

It is hardly surprising that 78% of those surveyed regarded their Time Management Skills more highly relevant than their Teaching skills, in their leadership success.

Most planned to deliberately engage in leisure activities outside of school which were characterised by their focus on escape and solitude. These included:

Weekends away planting trees on a property

Owning a dog

Walking, gardening.

Running 2-3 times a week

Meditation and walking for miles

Physical activity

Walk every morning to clear head and 'ground me'

Given the priority the Leaders placed on having highly attuned Interpersonal Skills (100 % rated this skill set as 'Very Important' to their work success) one could surmise that respite from the ongoing, multifaceted interpersonal engagements of the job is a core component of Special School leader resiliency.

Modelling of a positive school culture

You couldn't wish for a nicer job than this one. Head, London

You just get hooked don't you? I got totally hooked- If you do get hooked you're never going to do anything else are you? Head, Liverpool

Leaders saw it as critical that they embody this positive vision they feel for the work of the school

Keep repeating your ethos, maintain a high visible presence in the school and model good practice.

Lifting school morale and retaining that sense of positive purpose was seen as critically resting on the Leader's shoulders, especially during traumatic events.

Come with a profound sense of purpose, and clearly articulated personal professional philosophy that puts students at the centre of all thinking.

One of the particular challenges facing Special School Leaders is how to sensitively and strongly lead the school community in dealing with grief. One Special School Leader reported five student deaths in the previous year and described how this felt 'like a great cloud descending over the school'. She felt that her role modelling was critical in these circumstances. By a range of actions including presiding over memorial assemblies and leading the way in remembering the positive legacies of these students she felt she managed to 'bring the school community through it'.

Anonymous regular wellbeing surveys amongst staff, sending flowers to hurt staff, and initiatives such as yoga, Zumba and social get togethers were cited as strategies designed to enhance staff morale in the face of difficult circumstances. Leaders reported that they had to work proactively not only to maintain a positive staff culture but also to recruit and retain highly performing staff.

In London this had its unique challenges. House prices were forcing employees to relocate further afield, as London weighting had become 'a joke'. Heads described the impact on succession planning when '*young potential leaders look outside our area when they want a leadership post*'. The solution for these leaders was to create a warm, positive school culture which offered high levels of professional training to staff and wherever possible pathways to promotion. Schools

wanted to provide the professional development themselves in many cases, as one Head expressed it:

We are absolutely passionate about our staff needing the training bespoke to their roles.

There was a commitment to recruiting the best staff possible, who with the right aptitude, could be taught the specialised pedagogical methods of the school:

We're trying to recruit, not 'bog standard', we're looking for teachers who are going to be flexible, and willing to change - reflective practitioners.

Of course a unique feature of Special Schools is that the biggest employee group is not the Teachers, but the Teacher Aides or Assistants. School heads spoken with had developed ways to advance the most capable of these paraprofessionals with tutor development programmes and enhanced Teacher Aide roles with specialities in communication or medical areas within the school.

Some English Leaders worked collegially with other local Heads to keep 'good people' in their area and recruit them to their area. Thus if a teacher was looking for a leadership role and the Special School wasn't immediately able to offer this the other area Heads could come to the party to retain the person for the future.

In England the ability to set up teaching schools to provide initial teacher training to work in Special Education also was also viewed as an opportunity to add more to the roles of their outstanding teachers and keep them challenged. One School Leader in Liverpool described the opportunity for her senior teachers to tutor in the training school this way:

I want my talented staff to be able to develop themselves in other ways which doesn't mean that they want to leave - so they still feel they are being developed and working beyond themselves and developing a different skill.

Conclusion

There are multiple themes that emerged in this investigation into what makes an Outstanding Special School Leader.

The leaders I have met in New Zealand and England are a diverse group of professionals. There are however some consistent themes which weave throughout their reflections which they have been generous enough to share with me. So, how did my research stack up against the conclusions reached in the Scott and McNeish review?

We are in agreement about the sense of purpose the Leader must bring to their vocation. Scott and McNeish characterised this as having ‘high expectations, including a commitment to the individual learning opportunities for every child in the school’. I would say my respondents’ feelings go above and beyond this statement. This passion for providing the best possible provision of education, through a deep and empathetic knowledge of our learner was consistently expressed by all participants in this research. Furthermore, this is driven by an understanding of the social model of disability – that there are barriers that we as educational leaders are responsible for removing – and an inherent understanding that we are not there to ‘fix’ or normalise the child but to teach them in highly creative, and constantly evolving specialised ways.

Scott and McNeish’s emphasis on the need for Special School Leaders to have a ‘collaborative leadership style’ is perhaps a little understated. Clearly the successful leadership of a Special School requires a particularly advanced capacity to distribute workload, to a highly capable management team, preferably with strengths in the more operational areas of school, such as Finance, Property, Health and Safety, and Human Resource Management. New Zealand leaders may benefit from harnessing some of the pragmatism of our English counterparts in more thoroughly relinquishing more of this work. This would enable them to grow their strategic roles, while maintaining a very active hand on the educational tiller of the school.

In their assertion that good Special School Leaders ‘build external networks and partnerships’ Scott and McNeish again somewhat understate the case. There is a huge awareness amongst outstanding leaders in both hemispheres that the role of Special School Leader is necessarily, and excitingly strategic. New Zealand Leaders must have this aspect of their role recognised and valued by their communities, so that they can be well supported in this ‘outward facing’ stance. Again, developing the highly distributive model of our English colleagues will enable us to do this role justice. Advocacy for the opportunities of our young people and their families both educationally and beyond is a legitimate and holistic act that sits at school leadership level.

Smart delegation may be the best tool for our Leaders in ensuring that they have a protected space in which they can ‘lead the leaders’ and champion the pedagogical trajectory of the school through their own professional development and that of their staff. This commitment to the professional development of staff and ‘cultivation of talent’ was resoundingly backed up by those involved in my research. What was interesting was **the way** our best leaders did this – primarily through the development and maintenance of a positive work culture. In deliberating cultivating a culture in

which learning is highly valued and staff are encouraged in their ongoing professional growth, our best leaders are working hard to attract and retain highly performing practitioners. Most of the English leaders have been proactive in partnering with tertiary providers to train others in teaching SEND students. This has contributed to the job satisfaction of Teachers, Teaching Assistants and the Leaders themselves who see this as a core part of their role as a learning enterprise.

The emphasis Scott and McNeish place on 'personal resiliency' is reflected by my investigation. Leaders in both countries understand that the holistic model, which they see as so important for their students, also applies to their staff and themselves. Personal resiliency must be planned for and prioritised so that the 'additional practical and emotional stresses involved in special school leadership' can be managed. If successful, this resiliency plan is likely to include elements of likeminded collegial or mentor level discourse and reflection. It is also likely to prioritise a compartmentalisation- where work is set apart and physical, social or creative undertakings allow the leader to 'switch off'. In terms of staff resiliency there was a clear need for our Leaders to model a positive work culture. Again this was successful when it was planned and undertaken with deliberation. The daily uncertainties of 'our line of work' can mean trauma, grief, violence and unpredictability are more frequently experienced for us, than for most of our mainstream colleagues. Staff look for a leader who will show resiliency and care in the face of such difficulties. Our outstanding leaders 'walk the talk' in this regard and win the respect of staff.

They are also generous and reflective in the advice they would give to a new leader of a Special School. Here in their words is some of their key advice:

Value and develop the skills of the staff - they are invaluable

Very easy to get bogged down in your own school.

Get a mentor who has been in education AND has the skill in analysis.

Release DPs so delegation is realistic.

Be approachable but keep it very professional.

Plan for foreseeable issues but realise that there is always something unexpected ahead.

Have a good support network both at work and home

Don't try to please everyone.

Ensure you understand the value of delegation.

Make use of your support network (or develop one).

Be an active contributing member of the special school network.

Align yourself with possible tricky families and students.

Act only when you have enough reliable information.

It's ok not to know everything- let others see your vulnerability...use others with more expertise than you.

It appears that to a certain extent, we in New Zealand are setting our sights on a similar path to the evolution of Special Schools in England. Central Government in both countries appear, albeit to different degrees) to recognise the need to retain our expertise. They are wise to do so, given the demographics discussed in this paper which indicate a rapidly growing wave of more complex learners, who will require appropriately personalised educational pathways. In England the Government clearly plans to meet this challenge within their drive towards academisation, which seeks to replicate schools of outstanding practice under the leadership of a CEO style Super Head. In New Zealand there is less clarity about the place of Special schools and the future shape they may take. Here the Government's quiet recognition (of the place for Special schools) sits uneasily with the dogmatic push on the Ministry of Education by interest groups towards an unsophisticated view of 'inclusion', which is promoted in a very narrow, literal sense -that of a highly complex student being co-located in a classroom with his or her mainstream peers. The Communities of Learning (CoL) initiative may offer Special Schools opportunities to share their expertise. If however, as is speculated by some, the CoL model promotes a future world of 'inclusiveness', in which Special schools remain only as 'Resource Centres', unpopulated by students there are clear risks ahead. In short, our communities will risk losing a highly specialised educational provision, actively working at the forefront of pedagogical development, with the most complex cohort of students.

Whichever way things eventuate it seems that Central Government in both countries are going to require more of their Special School Leaders. My sabbatical study strongly identified that our

English counterparts have a clearer sense of assurance about their role going into the future. This has enabled them to focus their energies on their evolving roles, finding ways to encompass high level strategic leadership with a passionate vision for tackling the upcoming challenges. With the benefit of the same vision and clarity, I believe New Zealand Special School Leaders have the willingness and expertise now to re-conceptualise their roles for the future. This is because we are passionate about what we do. As an English colleague summed it up:

Enjoy! Have integrity, passion and determination. It is the best job in the world.

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Rosehill School, Auckland
Sommerville School, Auckland
Spa School, London
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Appendix A: Results of online survey referred to in this paper

N.B. Where questions have asked for open ended comment these answers have not been included to protect the confidentiality of the respondents

How long have you been in this particular leadership position at this school ?

Answer Choices	Responses
– less than one year	5.26% 1
– one to three years	15.79% 3
– three to five years	15.79% 3
– five to ten years	26.32% 5
– Over ten years	36.84% 7
Total	19

Have you previously been the Principal or Head Teacher of a different school?

Answer Choices	Responses
– No	52.63% 10
– Yes, at another Special School	21.05% 4
– Yes, at a 'mainstream' school	10.53% 2
– Responses Other (please specify)	15.79% 3
Total	19

Which of the following best describes your school's main location?

Answer Choices	Responses
City /Urban , U.K	21.05% 4
City /Urban , NZ	57.89% 11
Provincial /rural, UK	15.79% 3
Provincial/rural, NZ	5.26% 1
Responses Other (please specify)	0.00% 0
Total	19

Approximately what distance are you from your nearest neighbouring Special School?

Answer Choices	Responses
less than 5 km/3 miles	21.05% 4
5-10 km/3 -6 miles	26.32% 5
10-20km/ 6-12 miles	21.05% 4
20-50 km/12-30 miles	10.53% 2
50-100 km/30-62 miles	15.79% 3
100-200k/62-124 miles	0.00% 0
200 k +/124 miles +	5.26% 1

What type of SEN students does your school cater for ? (tick all that apply)

Answer Choices	Responses
– Intellectual impairment	84.21% 16
– Profound Multiple Learning Disability (PMLD)	73.68% 14
– Autism	94.74% 18
– Sensory impairment	73.68% 14
– Physical impairment	84.21% 16
– Responses Other(please specify)	10.53% 2

Total Respondents: 19

Age group of students your school caters for

Showing 19 responses

5-21
5-21
5 - 21 years
5-21
2-19
11-19
5-19
5-16
5 - 21
5 to 21 years
5 to 21
5 - 21
5-21
5 - 21
5 - 21 years
5-21 years
5-21
11-19
5 - 21

Gender of students your school caters for

Answer Choices	Responses
– Male	100.00% 19
– Female	100.00% 19

Total Respondents: 19

Approximately how many staff are employed by your school (give whole number)

Answered: 19

67
82
80
65
250
78
195
110
85
73
70
44
130
127
30
180
50
70
110

How important are the following beliefs in driving your practice as

	1 Very important	2 Important	3 Slightly important	4 Not important	N/A	Total	Weighted Average
Special Schools have a critical role in the continuum of SEN provision	94.74% 18	5.26% 1	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	19	1.05
Specialist pedagogy is needed for students at my school	84.21% 16	5.26% 1	10.53% 2	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	19	1.26
Our students have the right to a quality education	100.00% 19	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	19	1.00
Our staff have the ability to significantly	100.00% 19	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	19	1.00

	1 Very important	2 Important	3 Slightly important	4 Not important	N/A	Total	Weighted Average
improve our students' outcomes							
– Inclusion is the ultimate goal of all of our educational programmes	31.58% 6	47.37% 9	5.26% 1	10.53% 2	5.26% 1	19	1.94
– All of our students have the potential to learn.	100.00% 19	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	19	1.00
– Diversity should be celebrated	100.00% 19	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	19	1.00
– Appropriate curriculum adaptation is needed by the students at my school	94.74% 18	5.26% 1	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	19	1.05
– SEN students are primarily disabled by their environment	15.79% 3	42.11% 8	31.58% 6	5.26% 1	5.26% 1	19	2.28
– Our students' well being is critical to their learning success	100.00% 19	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	19	1.00
– A secure sense of cultural identity is critical to our students' success	47.37% 9	42.11% 8	10.53% 2	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	19	1.63
– Literacy	26.32% 5	52.63% 10	15.79% 3	5.26% 1	0.00% 0	19	2.00

	1 Very important	2 Important	3 Slightly important	4 Not important	N/A	Total	Weighted Average
and numeracy skills are critical to our learners							
Supporting the student's family is a crucial part of our role	89.47% 17	10.53% 2	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	19	1.11

Who is mostly responsible for the day to day management of the following in your school ?

	Dedicated staff member	Me	Externally contracted	Additional Responsibility assigned to a staff member	Other	Total
Property maintenance	57.89% 11	21.05% 4	15.79% 3	5.26% 1	0.00% 0	19
Financial management	68.42% 13	26.32% 5	5.26% 1	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	19
Family support	68.42% 13	10.53% 2	0.00% 0	21.05% 4	0.00% 0	19
Staff training	36.84% 7	47.37% 9	0.00% 0	10.53% 2	5.26% 1	19
Human resource management	42.11% 8	42.11% 8	0.00% 0	10.53% 2	5.26% 1	19

What have been the focus areas for your own professional development in the last 1-2 years ? why ?

Open ended comments

How challenging is it for you to balance your role in the educational leadership (teaching and learning) of your school with the tasks of administrative management (e.g. property, finance, compliance matters) of your school ?

Answer Choices	Responses
not challenging	5.26% 1
slightly challenging	15.79% 3
challenging	47.37% 9
very challenging	31.58% 6
Total	19

Below are some aspects of Special School leadership which research has indicated are challenges, either specific to, or more pronounced in our sector. Please indicate which of the following currently present challenges to you, and if so, how concerned you are about them.

	not concerning	slightly concerning	concerning	very concerning	N/A	Total	Weighted Average
Students with increasingly complex special needs	0.00% 0	15.79% 3	47.37% 9	36.84% 7	0.00% 0	19	3.21
Students with life threatening medical conditions	5.26% 1	15.79% 3	57.89% 11	15.79% 3	5.26% 1	19	2.89
Students with mental health conditions	0.00% 0	5.26% 1	21.05% 4	68.42% 13	5.26% 1	19	3.67
Perception of Special School as	5.26% 1	31.58% 6	15.79% 3	42.11% 8	5.26% 1	19	3.00

	not concerning	slightly concerning	concerning	very concerning	N/A	Total	Weighted Average
non inclusive by educational community							
– Inadequate support from social agencies	0.00% 0	21.05% 4	26.32% 5	52.63% 10	0.00% 0	19	3.32
– Ensuring PMLD students are fully included in the school	21.05% 4	15.79% 3	36.84% 7	5.26% 1	21.05% 4	19	2.33
– Lack of sufficient space for staff and /or students	0.00% 0	21.05% 4	10.53% 2	68.42% 13	0.00% 0	19	3.47
– Vulnerability of my school's ongoing existence	42.11% 8	36.84% 7	10.53% 2	5.26% 1	5.26% 1	19	1.78
– External pressure to meet gaps in the wider SEN provision	5.26% 1	36.84% 7	42.11% 8	10.53% 2	5.26% 1	19	2.61
– Managing students' physically challenging behaviour	0.00% 0	10.53% 2	26.32% 5	57.89% 11	5.26% 1	19	3.50
– Employing teachers with sufficient skill and experience	10.53% 2	26.32% 5	0.00% 0	57.89% 11	5.26% 1	19	3.11
– Identifying and developing capable leaders	26.32% 5	36.84% 7	21.05% 4	15.79% 3	0.00% 0	19	2.26

	not concerning	slightly concerning	concerning	very concerning	N/A	Total	Weighted Average
within the school							
My increasing lack of contact with the students	15.79% 3	5.26% 1	31.58% 6	42.11% 8	5.26% 1	19	3.06

Which of the following best describes your style of delegation within your leadership team? (Choose the one that represents your most typical practice.)

Answer Choices	Responses
I remain hands-on with most matters	21.05% 4
I delegate but closely monitor	31.58% 6
I delegate and periodically monitor	5.26% 1
I delegate and provide a sounding board as needed	42.11% 8
I delegate full responsibility and await the outcome	0.00% 0
Total	19

Please rate the following skills or areas of knowledge that you consider have been most important to your success in your leadership role:

	Very important	Important	Slightly important	Not important	N/A	Total	Weighted Average
Property management	15.79% 3	47.37% 9	21.05% 4	15.79% 3	0.00% 0	19	2.37
Time management	68.42% 13	21.05% 4	10.53% 2	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	19	1.42
Human Resource	78.95% 15	15.79% 3	5.26% 1	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	19	1.26
Specialist SEN knowledge	63.16% 12	31.58% 6	5.26% 1	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	19	1.42
Mentoring/coaching	68.42% 13	31.58% 6	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	19	1.32

	Very important	Important	Slightly important	Not important	N/A	Total	Weighted Average
Networking	63.16% 12	26.32% 5	10.53% 2	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	19	1.47
Information Technology	5.26% 1	63.16% 12	31.58% 6	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	19	2.26
Interpersonal	100.00% 19	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	19	1.00
Strategic planning	94.74% 18	5.26% 1	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	19	1.05
Financial	47.37% 9	42.11% 8	10.53% 2	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	19	1.63
Delegation	57.89% 11	36.84% 7	5.26% 1	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	19	1.47
Teaching	31.58% 6	36.84% 7	15.79% 3	10.53% 2	5.26% 1	19	2.06
Pastoral/Social Work	31.58% 6	52.63% 10	15.79% 3	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	19	1.84
Health and Safety	36.84% 7	31.58% 6	26.32% 5	5.26% 1	0.00% 0	19	2.00

Q16

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Thinking of the last year, which of the following best describes your level of job satisfaction?

Answer Choices	Responses
Disatisfied	10.53% 2
Neither satisfied nor disatisfied	0.00% 0
Satisfied	47.37% 9
Very satisfied	42.11% 8
Total	19

Thinking of the last year, which of the following best describes your level of work related stress ?

Answer Choices	Responses
----------------	-----------

Answer Choices	Responses
– Not stressed	0.00% 0
– Ongoing low level stress	15.79% 3
– Intermittent low level stress	5.26% 1
– Ongoing average level stress	15.79% 3
– Intermittent average level stress	10.53% 2
– Intermittent high level stress	47.37% 9
– Ongoing high level stress	5.26% 1
Total	19

Please describe the most effective strategies you utilise to maintain your personal resilience and wellbeing. These could be leadership practices, workload management approaches, leisure activities, administrative processes etc.

Open ended comments

What advice would you give to a new leader of a special school ?

Open ended comments