

Principal's Sabbatical Report 2014

Focus: Building and strengthening leadership capacity by helping other school leaders improve through the use of coaching strategies

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Executive Summary

My 2008 Principal's Sabbatical focussed on distributed leadership and since this time there has been a commitment to creating an organisational structure to enable shared and valued leadership to occur across the school as well as promote an environment that was going to foster growth of leadership in others. This current sabbatical has built on my prior sabbatical focus of distributed leadership and has concentrated on building and strengthening leadership capacity by helping other school leaders improve leadership effectiveness through the use of coaching strategies. This area of pedagogical leadership related directly to this, in the first instance, increasing my own knowledge and skills by being an active participant as a learner in a coaching relationship and secondly, to co-relate this to current leadership development of others through creating conditions to support teachers to perform more effectively teaching and learning practices that will influence student outcomes and student achievement.

With this in mind, the challenge for school leaders is how to manage the immediate running of the school and its subsequent demands, whilst at the same time give adequate focus to what represents good instructional leadership practices that can be used to enable teachers to teach more effectively. For this to work, it is reliant on the shared leadership of not only the principal as a leader of learning but also on that of the Senior Leadership Team. I have promoted the strengths of the BES work as a formative tool to use with both the Senior Leadership Team and staff. I sought staff responses to the Educational Leadership Practices (ELP) survey that was conducted by NZCER in two different years so it could measure the shift in teaching and learning practices that were made during a defined period of time (3 years). The Longitudinal Item Report gave the aggregated teachers' view in both of these years and it also gave the position of these views measured against the last national norm reference (2010). The tool focussed on the BES Leadership Dimensions that refer to the quality of broad sets of leadership practices that have the greatest impact on student learning. The BES research confirms that the quality of leadership matters and that it is worth investing in that quality.

There are a number of publications that weave the BES findings into informing teaching and learning effectiveness. Personally, I have found the 'Student-Centred Leadership' publication by Robinson rich, increasing my own understanding and enabling me to unpack the essential components with others, especially senior leaders and later the Curriculum Leaders and other Middle Leaders. The careful planning of how to successfully focus on these leadership practices complemented by strategic thinking has been a long-term effort and the adaptation of this in a way that Middle Leaders are able to apply the relevant knowledge and relate the main concepts to their own practice and the practice of those they lead.

Coaching is one of the most powerful strategies for developing leadership of oneself to influence and enable the leadership growth of others.

Purpose

The purpose of the sabbatical was to investigate and reflect on educational theories, research and practices that build and strengthen leadership capacity of other school leaders through the use of coaching strategies.

There are many researchers who have enriched our understanding of examining the links between leadership and student outcomes, but for the purpose of the work I have undertaken, my focus has been on examining the research work of Robinson, Hohepa and Lloyd (2009) who conducted a "high quality meta-analysis of published research" (Fullan and Levin, 2009). The Best Evidence Synthesis (BES) distillation of Robinson, *et al* (2009) utilised effect size to identify the specific instruction leadership practices that make the most difference for students' learning outcomes.

Senior and Middle Leaders were well placed to give emphasis to this work as a natural progression to build on the work already achieved through the distributed leadership work already undertaken for a number of years. Staff were also well-informed about The BES work and the potential it had for leaders and practitioners to make school and instructional improvements in relation to increasing learning outcomes and therefore, had sufficient staff ‘buy-in’.

The survey enabled some measurable component to assess the shifts being made in each area of the dimension to enable a greater focus in future planning, goals and target setting. For a school that was already doing well overall, by remaining focussed on specific practices within a dimension, it didn’t allow for any complacency that can exist with some staff. There is always room for improvement, even in a school that is doing well.

Background for My Sabbatical Research

In 2010 I was a participant in the University of Auckland Experienced Principal’s Leadership Programme and the college participated in the NZCER Longitudinal Research project on Educational Leadership Practices. This project was based on the Best Evidence Synthesis dimensions of leadership that have the most impact on student learning (Robinson).

These dimensions were:

- **Establishing Goals and Expectations:** This included the setting, communicating and monitoring of learning goals, standards and expectations, and the involvement of staff and others in the process so that there is clarity and consensus about goals and priorities.
- **Strategic Resourcing:** This involved aligning resource selection and allocation to priority teaching goals.
- **Planning, Coordinating and Evaluating Teaching and Ensuring Curriculum Quality:** Direct involvement in the support and evaluation of teaching through regular classroom visits and provision of formative and summative feedback to teachers. It also involves direct oversight of curriculum through school-wide coordination across classes and year levels and alignment to school goals.
- **Promoting and Participating in Teacher Learning and Development:** Leadership that not only promotes but directly participates with teachers in formal or informal professional learning.
- **Ensuring an Orderly and Supportive Environment:** Protecting time for teaching and learning by reducing external pressures and interruptions and establishing an orderly and supportive environment both inside and outside classroom.

As Robinson, 2011 asserts, “If existing leadership practices were adapted so they aligned to the BES leadership dimensions we would realize our overall goal of instructional improvement”.

In 2010/2011 The Middle Leaders and teachers in the English, Mathematics and Science Faculties at Glendowie College were involved in a research project conducted by Dr Camilla Highfield, University of Auckland, which investigated the impact of middle leadership on student academic outcomes in Secondary Schools. The findings of this study (which encompassed 10 New Zealand secondary schools) revealed that when the middle leaders ensure a positive learning environment, develop goals and expectations and manage resources for the benefit of students there is a positive relationship with student academic outcomes in the senior secondary school. The design of this study examined the middle leadership practices and correlated them with academic student results at three levels of the senior secondary school over a 3 year period. This project further purported that although middle leaders in secondary schools cannot control the home background, socioeconomic status, or ethnicity of their students, they *can* make decisions about how best to provide the most positive learning environment for students within their department. “If all staff in a department are supported to work strategically and collaboratively to identify and implement strategies that strengthen teaching and learning (Chapman, Mongon, Roxby, & Manns, 2009), and these leadership practices are consistent within a school, there will be less within-school variation and schools can expect superior levels of performance across all departments” (Highfield, 2013). The research findings were discussed with the Senior Leadership Team and will be shared with the Middle Leaders.

Glendowie College with its consolidation, over the past three to four years, of the distributed leadership model is now in a pivotal position to fully exercise and focus on the leadership practices described within the dimensions that will build teacher leadership capacity. There are already considerable opportunities for the members of the Senior Leadership Team to extend leadership roles to Middle Leaders, and, in turn for Middle Leaders to impart leadership practice opportunities to teachers. These processes extend to all personnel within the school the opportunity to process, and reflect on, different ways to practise educational leadership. This leadership practice is reliant on the participation of many people, but especially Senior and Middle-Leaders, in order to encourage every adult in the school to have the necessary interactions with others that will ultimately contribute to developing the leadership mix. Multiple leaders and differentiated leadership practice in schools contribute towards building sustainable learning.

The Principal and Senior Leadership Team has engaged in leadership coaching by educational experts external to the college for many years and over time this has increased our own leadership capacity to enable and influence others with building leadership capacity. This authentic approach to school leaderships has required energy, commitment and contributions of all those involved.

Capturing Leadership Potential

People skills are integral to effective leadership. As Ramsden (1998) states, ‘leadership is to do with how people relate to each other’ (p.4) This idea is supported in literature where effective leaders are viewed as educators who provide their staff with the opportunities that help them develop, take ownership and responsibility and become leaders themselves (Kouzes & Posner, 2002). The Principal plays a supportive role as well as one of challenge. They show their staff that they value them and their growth, demonstrate trust, and promote cooperation and collaboration. The Principal as an educational leader builds and nurtures connections with others and encourages risk-taking in a supportive environment (Kaagan, 1999). The coaching work has enabled myself and members of the Senior Leadership Team to grow, develop and demonstrate these important elements, each year becoming stronger individually and collectively. This work doesn’t promote one element in isolation to all the others and becomes infused in all the work we do. The work with the Middle Leaders started with discussions on how these practices play-out and what the ‘good’ in them looks like.

Credibility is the integral essence of leadership – or as Leavy, 2003 defines it ‘the dynamic currency of leadership’ – since it depends on the performance of the leader. Leaders set an example and act as role models for their staff.

It is important that the Principal communicates vision to their staff. A key effective leadership practice identified by Kouzes and Posner (2002) is inspiring a shared vision where leaders invent a future based around the vision and help staff to commit to it. To do this it is essential that the Principal operationalizes the goals and vision. This was achieved by involving the staff in goal-setting, the strategic vision and the essential planning work, empowering staff to be part of the operation process and thus owning the vision, goals and targets being set.

“Learning to lead is a lifetime responsibility” (Ramsden 1998, p.227) and this notion is crucial for not only the Principal’s own development but also for the ongoing learning and development of his/her staff. Leading and participation in all the above dimensions is critical for senior and middle leaders to build capacity in.

Developing Middle Leaders through Leadership Coaching

As Foster (2010) and other academics such as Hattie, Dinhim, Robinson and the late Dr Ken Rowe maintains, given the evidence available and published over the last two decades there is strong evidence that supports that pedagogical skill has the ability to create the largest impact on student outcomes above all other variables within the school. With this in mind, a collaborative approach is taken by the Senior Leadership Team to discuss, plan processes, communicate, relationships and culture that are critical elements for engaging with Middle Leaders. Each Senior Leader becomes a coach to one or more Middle Leader(s) and works with the Middle Leader to improve and develop the conditions that promote and support teaching staff in their practice on a day-to-day basis and deep learning processes and

outcomes. At a faculty level, goals are aligned to school-wide goals and the goals drive individual goals that become performance and learning goals. As Busher and Harris (1999) maintain middle leaders significantly influence the performance of others within their team and can in turn have a portentous impact on whole-school performance.

If the development of middle leaders is central to influencing teachers as leaders and teacher effectiveness, then the result will be superior pedagogy in the classrooms.

Middle Leaders play a pivotal role in supporting teachers to be actively engaged in dialogue, debate and critique on key learning and teaching challenges and opportunities. These areas and more make for good dialogue when the Senior Leader meets with their Middle Leader(s). The ‘how’ this transfers from the Middle Leader to teacher is a discussion in itself.

Fullan (2008) notes: “the top performing school systems recognise that the only way to improve outcomes is to improve instruction. They understand which interventions are effective to improve instruction – coaching, practical teacher training, developing strong leaders and enabling teachers to learn from each other – and then find ways to deliver those interventions” (p.23)

Leaders can be taught to learn and practise their skills; and in thus doing, so gain the essential criteria of self-belief and self-efficacy. Leadership should emerge out of expertise rather than position.

Foster (2010) describes the following practices that support building leadership capabilities and should include mentoring, empowerment, accountability and professional learning and development:

- The provision of leadership and support to staff to ensure quality teaching/learning within the learning area, by developing the strengths of staff whilst also working on the challenges. The coaching meetings is an opportunity for discussing these and present the evidence that supports that supports any challenge. Coach and Middle Leader work through a process for managing a complex issue together, with the Senior Leader coach using the support of the Principal and the Senior Leadership Team if necessary.
- Staff involvement in relevant professional learning opportunities (professional reading, modelling best practice in teaching and providing feedback based on classroom observations/walk-throughs). Careful planning of questions to be asked and actions to be taken to bring about the change can be identified.
- Professional learning community within the department (eg regular engagement of professional dialogue amongst staff). Collegial best practice can be shared, is useful and inspiring. Most often, the staff have created a safe environment for any teacher who might make a mistake while embracing any challenge to change or adapt their practice.

- Involvement and participation in the operations of, tough decisions and keeping teaching and learning as their core business and priority.
- The fostering of student voice as this feedback is generally honest and informs the effect of any change in a student or colleague's learning.

A Collective Approach to Strengthening Leadership Capacity

There must be a collective approach to, and leaders' support for, how vision, policies, and practices are put into place. A team culture, where all members of the leadership teams seek opportunities to collaborate and cultivate leadership capacity, is essential for growth to occur. All school personnel should be involved in the building of professional trusting relationships and there should be a shared commitment to learning and growth. There must be sound planning and resourcing of Middle and Senior leadership roles/activities and opportunities provided for leaders to be involved in professional development and learning. Ideally the school should use research evidence to inform and bring about change and develop practices that will improve student outcomes. Leadership should be responsive to student ethnicity.

The move from the focus on the Principal as being the leader of the school to a focus of shared leadership in the school should never be underestimated. As West-Burnham (2004) observes, "Such a process involves the deliberate and systematic creation of opportunities to lead, to reflect on that experience and to consolidate that learning through extended practice". It is a complex process and should always be viewed as a transitional and learning process for all personnel within the school.

In conclusion, professional leadership is the role of many people within a school. To build and strengthen the leadership capacity of other school leaders, the Principal must enable his/her staff to present occasions where there are opportunities for development of a school culture of the recognition, and validation, of the contributions of all individuals. Schools must create openings where teachers are regarded as leaders who are leading learning in productive and pedagogic ways.

The essence of the advancement of school leadership capacity for staff is high levels of trust, autonomy and respect for teachers' professionalism. There must be an environment where the promulgation of promoting 'best practice' and the use of mentoring and coaching is encouraged and nurtured in order to support learning and leadership practices.

As with any change process, the move from a middle manager being an administrator/manager to a leader will take time, effort and a willingness to adapt to this change. However, the Principal, Senior Leadership Team and the Curriculum Leader/Faculty Leader/HOD must recognize the importance of the emerging leadership capacity of the Middle Leader and the potential to make a real difference to student outcomes.

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