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Sabbatical Leave Report 2006

Introduction

This report is an attempt to summarize and share findings from my sabbatical leave in term 3 2006. The main intended audience is fellow principals, but I hope it will also be of interest to family, friends and the staff and community at Fairfield School who shared the journey with me.

My main topic of study proposed in application for leave was peer principal appraisal. In this report I would like to reflect on a wider range of topics. Following sections are set out under the headings of; principalship, principal appraisal, ICT, hauora and other.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to the Board of Trustees at Fairfield School for granting me leave, to the Ministry of Education for funding it, NZEI and principal representatives for negotiating it and the wonderful staff at Fairfield who acted up in my absence. It is great working with talented people and I am especially grateful to Donna Rowe who acted as principal.

I also thank principals who welcomed me to their schools in Horowhenua, Kapiti, Auckland, Wellington, Picton and Christchurch.

Special thanks go to John and Tania, Trev and Jenny, Fraser, Gabrielle and Jonathan and Barbara for accommodating me during my travels. It was great to share most of the travel and experiences with my wife Maria.

Activities Undertaken

- NZPF Conference, Hawkes Bay
- Holiday, Port Douglas
- School visits
- Reading and writing
- PDPC, Wellington
- Ulearn 06 Conference, Christchurch
- Holiday, Christchurch, Kaikoura, Ngakuta Bay

Principalship

Being a principal is a wonderful privilege. Tony Ryan talks about the ability people have to influence others. In New Zealand in our self-managing schools principals have great ability to be influential. I enjoyed the chance to visit over 25 schools and to spend time with colleagues. We can learn a lot

from one-another so the chance for me to build and maintain a network of colleagues was awesome. Yes there are differences between different parts of the country, but we also have lots of common features. A warm welcome and generosity with time was universal, especially appreciated with those of you I met for the first time. I am increasingly aware of the expertise we have within New Zealand. It is always good to keep in touch with overseas developments, but the solutions to most New Zealand needs already exist within our schools. Face to face visits enable direct experience of good practice which can be uplifted and adapted.

At the wrap up session at the PDPC in Wellington one of our group expressed pride in being a principal and pleasure gained from interaction with participant and facilitating principals who had been brought together for the week. I share the sentiment, and had similar experiences during the excellent NZPF conference in Hawkes Bay and while visiting schools. It is good to be part of a special professional community.

One of the articles I read during the term was "A Fine British Blend" by Geoff Southworth and Jane Doughty, published in Educational Leadership. They discuss stages of leadership from middle-level leaders, emergent leaders, leaders preparing for their first headship, advanced leaders and consultant leaders and how different programmes at England's National College for School Leadership address their differing needs. The article goes on to share lessons learned. In New Zealand we are making progress in supporting principals through the 'First Time Principals' programme and the PDPC. There is more to learn about preparing middle managers for principalship and especially about making better use of the expertise held by our advanced leaders and consultant leaders. Sabbaticals offer an important way of sustaining experienced principals as they continue in their roles.

The dust jacket introduction for Steven Covey's *The 8th Habit* says: '*The crucial challenge of our world today is this: to find our voice and inspire others to find theirs.*' I guess I have rediscovered that the opportunity to do this is what I love about being a principal.

Principal Appraisal

In 2005 I graduated from Massey University with an MEdAdmin. My research topic was titled 'Principal Peer Appraisal: Guiding Performance Management and Professional Development of School Leaders in Aotearoa New Zealand.' If anyone is interested in a copy or in summaries of the main sections please email me and I can send it. During the sabbatical I wrote a version of this work which is to be published in the NZPF magazine. I spoke with principals I visited about their appraisal experience and practice in order to update my knowledge.

My 2004 research showed that just over 40% of principals surveyed used their BOT Chair as their main appraiser. It also revealed that more principals were happy with feedback received about their performance than about their

development needs. I argued that both types of feedback are important, and that for more experienced principals and for principals who have been in the same position for a number of years development feedback becomes increasingly important.

Discussion during my sabbatical visits indicates that principals are developing some effective ways of collecting evidence of their work which can be used in the appraisal process. Some of these systems are common to groups of schools eg in Canterbury where advisors are contracted to conduct principal appraisal in a number of schools. Similarly in Auckland, processes advocated by Eileen Piggot-Irvine are spreading. Groups of senior principals or recently retired principals are being trained in Auckland, Manawatu and Horowhenua to work as appraisal consultants. I also found other consultancy services engaging in appraisal facilitation.

Principals who express higher levels of satisfaction with their appraisal process have some common practice:

- Three or four visits are made by the appraiser
- The appraiser assists in development of a performance agreement which includes some developmental goals (3 to 5 goals seem typical)
- A monitoring visit or visits are made during the year
- The final visit involves the principal providing evidence of having met the goals
- The BOT Chair is involved throughout and either attends during the final appraisal visit or is interviewed by the appraiser
- In many schools the final appraisal visit involves interviews of representative staff, parents, BOT members and students to allow the appraiser to get feedback
- The same appraiser is used for three or four years
- Meeting the 'professional standards' may be covered each year, but emphasis shifts to greater focus on agreed performance goals once it is clear a principal has met the standards
- A written report is produced by the appraiser for the host principal and BOT Chair
- Through dialogue between appraiser and host principal meaningful performance goals are set for the following year
- The appraisal cycle often occurs over a year which varies from the calendar year eg May to May, July to July or October to October
- Goals may take several years to achieve
- A robust appraisal system can protect a principal from when things turn to custard or assist in career progression

There is variation in the amounts charged by consultants. It seems possible to have a successful experience for around \$1000 and in some cases less.

As mentioned above, principals are developing some effective ways of keeping evidence used in their appraisal process. I think it would be useful to share good practice. Again I am happy to share what I know but

to compile a large resource would take more time than brief and informal visits during a sabbatical allowed. Because of regional differences, my best advice would be to ask trusted local colleagues to share what they do. There would be benefit in sharing good practice at a national level.

ICT

Having been a co-director of an ICTPD cluster from 2003 to 2005 I took the opportunity to look at what schools are doing with ICT during school visits. From small beginnings a lot of exciting developments are happening at every school I visited. Again some common themes and experiences seem to be developing despite huge variation. Principals are excited and challenged by opportunities for learning and the cost pressures they face. Common themes:

- Development of inquiry learning models
- Use of thinking and organizing tools
- Groups of students working together on projects
- Need for powerful reliable school networks
- Move to wireless or part wireless
- Purchase of pods of laptops
- Talk about authentic learning
- More use of other ICTs; eg data projectors, digital whiteboards
- Computer labs or suites, preferably beside library
- Increasing numbers of classroom computers
- Integrated big units of work, topics lasting whole term

In Auckland I saw some great work such as podcasting, TV broadcasting, a student radio station and digital classrooms. Some of the new information centres being built in primary and intermediate schools are wonderful.

My sabbatical ended with attendance at the Ulearn 06 Conference in Christchurch. This was an exciting conference where the energy of teachers, principals, techs, sponsors and presenters converged. Getting a broad range of age, experience and cross-sector groups together created a real buzz. It was also great for me to be there with my school staff group.

Hauora

Having the opportunity for personal refreshment was a huge benefit of the sabbatical time. Thirteen weeks without the pressure of leading a school after ten years teaching and eighteen and a half years as a principal was excellent. Lying on the beach or sitting in cafes in Port Douglas, my grin was a permanent reminder of not-school. Taking the break there at the start of my time cleared the head for experiences which followed. Quality and sustained time with my wife Maria, with family in Auckland, with other family and with friends was welcome.

I read novels and can particularly recommend; Ruth Eseki, Bill Bryson, Adeline Yen Mah, Chris Bohjalian, Miles Morland and Ron McLarty. I listened to more music than usual, watched movies, watched DVDs. I went for lots of walks, sat in beautiful places, went fishing. I ran a lot, including my first 10km run this century and lost some weight. Our dogs will be hoping I slow down next term! I have done lots of thinking about all sorts of things.

I guess hauora is about finding a sense of balance and becoming centred on things that matter most. Often in normal work time it is hard to take a step back. Steven Covey in his excellent book "The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People" offers great advice about how to set priorities for effective living.

Other

Because I had time to visit a large number of schools during the sabbatical time I would like to make some further observations which sit a little outside of comment included above.

Many principals I visited were engaged in applying for Enhancing High Standards Across Schools funding. Large amounts of money available make this an attractive opportunity. Working more collaboratively with neighbouring principals is also a positive. All ideas I heard seemed worthy so I hope the effort of applying will be met with suitable levels of funding from the MOE.

Visits coincided with the release of the new draft curriculum framework. Principals are optimistic about the framework and believe it will allow their schools to continue journeys already underway in creating coherent learning communities with visions about values, key competencies, curriculum and thinking/learning tools. These are sometimes called different names, but similar elements are common.

Flexibility and opportunity are themes. Our teachers and principals are part of an international workforce. There is pressure on us, but in a knowledge society, teaching is a high level skill which is becoming more valued. New Zealand is part of the global society and we are part of it through ICTs and the growing cultural diversity of the children in our schools. I sensed some optimism and excitement around these ideas.

Concluding Comments

My sabbatical experience began with colleagues at the NZPF Conference in Hawkes Bay. Speakers there talked about personal effectiveness through focusing on what matters. I followed this time with some quality family time. I guess our families are where our ability to be effective is most closely tested and where the relationships that sustain us are built. There is life beyond work! I read, reflected, thought and wrote; even starting a reflective journal. Visiting schools and meeting with other principals enabled me to test my ideas

and to pick up lots of new ones. In between the visits a week at PDPC challenged me to think about and develop my personal effectiveness as a leader. I plan to be more strategic in managing planning and reporting. I will work to have those difficult conversations earlier and to be a more effective coach. The Ulearn 06 Conference brought me back to the excitement of learning and thinking about our children and their future. To do this as part of a community of educators added to the experience.

I think I return to my job excited and refreshed, equipped to do a better job because of the time allowed to step aside and gain a different perspective. Thanks again to everyone who has been part of this journey and to those who allowed me the opportunity.

Graham McDonald
October 2006

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