

*Investigating ways in which primary school principals utilise various practices to support them in their role as educational leaders.*

**Sabbatical Report** (25 July – 23 September 2016)

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## Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the opportunity the Teach NZ has provided with the provision of a sabbatical. This time has been very valuable, as it has provided me an opportunity to step back and reflect on my role as principal as well as recharge after the challenging times following the Canterbury Earthquakes of 2010/2011.

I would like to thank the St James School Board of Trustees for agreeing to provide me with leave to undertake the sabbatical, and for arranging for an Acting Principal who has been very supportive of my study as well as keeping school functioning in a very positive manner.

To the Principals who shared their stories with me, I am extremely grateful for their willingness to openly share their journey and experiences.

## Executive Summary

Reflective practice involves regularly making time to think about your practice, what you are doing and why you are doing it that way. The need to take the time to reflect about your work in order to keep you, your team and your students safe, and to generate change, growth and professional development.

Professional supervision is for you. It is meant to be for you to enable reflection and growth as a leader. Reflective practice is a crucial element in learning to be able to observe, review, question, evaluate and own the process and development. It is an opportunity to find meaning and make sense of your practice.

Professional Supervision can lead to better leadership as you become stronger and more confident in your decisions and daily challenges.

## Purpose

What do principals / Boards of Trustees have in place to enable leaders to feel supported in their complex role?

I have visited other schools to interview current Principals to find out about the support they have received in their role as a leader, and the areas where they think they could have had more support. As I often hear how lonely the role of being a Principal is and how the only ones that can relate to that are other principals, I wanted to investigate this more and research some possibilities.

As principals are ultimately responsible for the day-to-day management of everything that happens in their schools it is critical that their learning and

development needs are catered for in ways that will enable a more reflective leadership style which can respond to the changing needs of the school and community.

## Rationale and Background Information

As noted in the *Kiwi Leadership for Principals (2008) – Principals as Educational leaders Ministry of Education* “Principals can benefit from personal reflection, sharing ideas and initiatives with their peers, and working with others to clarify situations and solve problems. Relationship skills are embedded in every dimension of such actions and involve much more than simply getting along with others. They play an important part in managing conflicts of interest, supporting and challenging teacher practices, and dealing with a range of challenges and situations.”

I wanted to do further research into Professional Supervision and mentoring that will not only help in the capacity of supporting another Principal, but will also strengthen my leadership and team building within our school.

I interviewed Primary Principals with varying years of experience, from the Christchurch area across a variety of schools and deciles.

Through my talking with the Principals I could see that there were varying uses of mentoring and coaching and also some use of Professional Supervision.

In order to understand the roles of mentoring, coaching and professional supervision I decided to create a summary of each role to help my thinking for moving forward.

## Defining Mentoring, Coaching and Professional Supervision

### Mentoring:

A mentor is an individual with expertise who can help further develop the career of a mentee. It can be a dual role whereby the mentor also gains from the experience and can learn different things from the mentee. A mentor can help support in a practical way with offering career related advice and professional guidance and also as a role model and support for the mentee.

For Principals this could be as practical as advice around leadership and the demands of managing a school. It can strengthen pedagogical leadership and the quality of teachers' practice.

The mentoring role in schools is also used in supporting teachers such as PRTs

The Education Council of NZ says that

- Mentor teachers need to have
  - access to appropriate curriculum and professional development
  - time to develop the conceptual thinking and the skills needed for the role
  - time and recognition for carrying out the mentoring role

Whatever career stage, mentors can help you improve your satisfaction with your work and develop your professional skills, confidence and professional identity. Working together to meet the diverse needs of a mentee, also gives the mentor a deeper understanding of himself or herself and helps them identify their strengths and weaknesses.

The mentoring relationship is flexible and can vary a great deal in its style and purpose. The mentoring relationship exists between one person in need of developmental guidance and another person who is both capable and willing to provide that guidance. As the mentoring relationship develops it supports and develops the mentees professional development.

The mentor is personally involved. They have a deep interest in you and your development throughout time and into the future. Mentoring is often a two way beneficial working relationship.

## Coaching:

In a coaching role, a coach facilitates and coaches in order to provide leaders with a variety of capabilities to deal with any situation.

A coach looks at the skills they use to assist with building reciprocal relationships that take the learning leader forward. Examples of this are reflective questioning, listening, self assessment, goal setting, and feedback.

Jan Robertson (The 3 Rs for coaching learning relationships) suggests that such a professional culture among teachers has benefits for the development of positive student-teacher relationships.

Over time schools can do this for and by themselves, and build a strong reflective practice, based on trusting reciprocal relationships.

“Good learning relationships places the control for the learning with the learner. Learning partners ask the learner what they plan to focus on, what they feel will be the facilitators and resistors to their achievement, what the expected outcomes might be, and what they would like the learning partner to focus on for the purposes of support or feedback or expertise.” (Robertson)

The learning in leadership does need to be the responsibility of the learner. Having the belief in their ability to be able to make a difference in their work enables them to continue in a positive, supported way. When coaching runs throughout a school it adds to the culture of the school. It needs to be intentional, reflective talk so that educational leaders have many opportunities to observe, talk, experiment and reflect on their practice. Coaching can provide these in a structured setting throughout the year. This can help develop leaders and can be a powerful agent of change in adult learners.

Through coaching the learner is able to work on their own needs and focus on their own experiences and issues. They can critically reflect on their practices in relation to the issues they are facing.

One process advocated by Robertson

*Meeting to set focus for observation of teaching or learning.*

*Reflective interview to explore the goals and intended outcomes of session being observed or undertaken.*

*Context interviewing for coach to understand the situation.*

*Conduct session or complete project.*

*Give descriptive feedback.*

*Self-assessment by partner:*

*Partner highlights all of the strengths and missed opportunities or areas for further development.*

*Coach listens without interruption or discussion to all self-assessment (perhaps 3/5 minutes).*

*Coach then gives evaluative feedback.*

*Only after listening to the partner's self-assessment in its entirety, the coach then gives a perspective of strengths and areas for further focus or development.*

*The coach and partner engage in discussion and reflective interviewing as future goals are set.*

The coach develops specific skills for the task, identified challenges and performance expectations at work.

Although leaders will be at different stages of their careers, there is always a need for continued updating, refreshment and redirection in educational leadership practice.

Whether it is a Coaching or a mentoring model that is being used in the school context, it needs to be coherent and integrated and not disjointed activities that just happen.

In order to strengthen a teaching team, develop leadership and overall improve teaching and learning, a planned approach for support is needed. Coaching is widely accepted as a base for effective leadership. Many leaders in Education corroborate its impact on professional growth and performance.

### Professional Supervision:

“Professional Supervision is a particular process of support that is used to help individuals review, reflect upon and resolve the issues or problems that they face in carrying out their work. It has a focus on pastoral care and emotional support of the individual, as well as on support for professional learning. It involves a trusting relationship with another person, or sometimes a small group. Confidentiality is central to the discussion associated with the support. Its outcomes are personal support, growth and on the job learning as a professional”. (Eddy & Cardno)

The term Professional Supervision is probably a little unfortunate in the way it implies that the relationship between you and your supervisor is an uneven one in that the supervisor is in charge and checking on the supervisee’s work. This is not the case. The main purpose of professional supervision is to provide a space for the supervisee to reflect on their practice.

It is a partnership between a supervisor and a supervisee whereby the supervisee is in charge and chooses what they want to discuss in their sessions. The sessions are most effective when the supervisee has chosen the most useful topic / issue to discuss.

Good professional supervision is regular, protected time in a private space where a supervisee can reflect in-depth on their work with the guidance of a supervisor; so that they can continue to develop and grow in their role.

It is an opportunity to celebrate successes, reflect on any worries or issues and also be supported and encouraged to keep improving the quality of their work. It helps the supervisee to be the best practitioner that they can be.

Professional supervision can help recognise your strengths and work on your weaknesses.

It is not a chat, performance management, or counselling, though sometimes it will contain aspects of these. Confidentiality and trust between the supervisor and the supervisee are paramount for good supervision to be successful. It is not a form of appraisal.

Professional Supervision is well-imbedded into the Health Sector and is used in a variety of ways through internal supervision and external supervision. In 1993 the Department of Health defined supervision as “a formal process of professional support and learning which enables practitioners to develop knowledge and competence.....and should be seen as a means for encouraging self-assessment and analytic and reflective skills.”

Professional Supervision has also been defined as a process in which the supervisor guides and facilitates the individual in meeting professional and personal objectives, and organisational goals. There is a need for professional supervision to be at the centre of professional learning for principals and leaders. It has the potential to be of great value. As in other professions such as the Health sector, it can strengthen capability and add to leadership skills.

Julie Hewson describes professional supervision as “an oasis or a fireside, a place where a weary traveller can take some respite and nourishment to continue on his or her professional journey.”

David Eddy in his article *‘Professional Supervision for Principals: research findings and reality checks’* found “ Approximately two thirds of New Zealand’s school principals have no current or recent experience of professional supervision of any type, other than coaching or mentoring for a few. Those who did participate in professional supervision indicated that the activity was self-initiated and took an individual (mainly mentoring or coaching) or small group form, with the groups being either self or externally facilitated. Purposes and arrangements for professional supervision varied greatly overall, with a very small number reporting having a professional supervision experience with a professional counsellor or psychotherapist, as may occur in some other professions.”

BES Leadership research on the importance of relational trust among leaders and teachers in a school. How do you and your teachers develop and maintain the level of relational trust which underpins all the professional learning opportunities that occur in the school?

Themes that have emerged from Principal interviews:

*Need for support as a Principal:*

All the Principals spoken to were very strong on the fact that they do need support in their complex role. Some have utilised mentors, coaching and Professional Supervision. All value the support of Professional learning groups and the support of colleagues, whether they be other Principals or teaching colleagues.

*“You can’t keep going at this pace forever.”*

*“I have always had some mentoring, usually an hour a term.”*

In a report by David Eddy it was noted that among those principals who had experienced professional supervision, nearly half indicated that the highest level of satisfaction was associated with their experience of mentoring and coaching.

The role at times is an isolated one. Principals’ were aware that it is challenging to show their vulnerability as a leader. For those that did have Professional Supervision experiences as leaders they really appreciated that their Supervisors aim was to help them to become more effective in their role. They look forward to their sessions, feel safe, respected, listened to and leave feeling great.

Many commented on the importance of having someone you can talk to that you absolutely trust and feel that it is a confidential relationship.

One said she can talk about celebrations, positive things and be challenged by her supervisor, The supervisor will ask questions such as ... have you thought about? Her supervisor reflects back and she can decide what she wants to work on. She can solve her own problem. She likes the fact that she has the ownership and yet there is a feeling of accountability because of the openness and the regular nature of her meetings means that honesty is at the forefront of her discussions.

*“I liked the reflecting back at me. I love the challenge and taking the time.”*

*“How do I look after my team, if I’m not practising looking after myself?”*

The CPPA offers Principal support and this was mentioned by three Principal’s. This is a programme of support implemented by the Christchurch Primary Principal’s Association since the events of the Christchurch earthquakes. All have found that the experienced Principal’s contacting other Principal’s to offer support is valuable especially for just in time problems that arise. Even though the Principal’s

interviewed acknowledge how busy these other Principal's are, they have found their support valuable and don't hesitate to contact them if they need to.

The opportunity to contact either of two past Principal's who are in the roles of Principal support through the local Ministry has been invaluable. Both of these people are pro-active at contacting, visiting and following up which is certainly appreciated by all. This type of support is good for 'just in time' problems and it was felt that other support running alongside this such as coaching or professional supervision would enable a consistency within their practice.

All acknowledged that the need for support such as professional supervision should be to support and challenge their professional practice, particularly their handling of issues and problems that they have difficulty making progress with or resolving. Often this related to people problems such as managing staff and working with parents. Two mentioned that it would be good to have the trusting relationship to be able to practice a difficult conversation.

Many commented on their involvement with group supports such as professional learning groups, but the theme that came through strongly was the need for individual support and wanting to support their staff in the same manner.

*"I really would like Professional Supervision for myself, but how can I take it and not provide it for my senior management team?" I really think it would be of best benefit for all of us as they have an extremely challenging role too and might be having some issues with the management that they would like to talk through too!"*

Some said that they have had a mentor that pops in and sees how they're going. This was intended as support but as it wasn't regular and planned, the principal's felt that the other person seemed too busy to actually have the time for them. There was the comment that they felt that it was a cursory visit and not really support as they needed.

An experienced principal that receives regular professional supervision for the purposes of reflective practice, leadership development and emotional support said that she looks forward to her sessions, and plans what she wants to discuss. She had often thought that it would be helpful to have support such as Professional Supervision, but it wasn't until experiencing regular, reflective time that she realised how important it has been to her development as an educational leader. She also found a huge support in her supervisor during the Canterbury earthquakes and their aftermath as different, unique situations arose. She said that her supervisor asks questions that make her think more deeply about the situation. She likes the analogy of the supervisor being like a mirror and reflecting back to her. It helps her to explore her role and how she does things more in-depth. The feedback provided by the supervisor is also valuable in affirming her practice and the process she has used.

A Principal early in their role commented on how the support is better if it is 1:1. This can help directly. Another said in the early years it was important to get support from colleagues in a variety of ways. All had received good support from colleagues in their early years as a principal. Those that had had mentoring or coaching felt very supported and prepared for the job, helping with their performance and ability to cope.

One has a Board Chairperson who is a huge help as the Chairperson had been a Primary Principal, and she finds that she can rely on the Chairperson as a mentor at times too. There was a comment around the realisation that as an experienced Principal she still seeks mentoring but also can be a mentor herself. She is still open to learning from others and sees that support through coaching / professional supervision is necessary. Trust needs to be built for a strong relationship and an opportunity to reflect on practice is ideal so that you don't make the same mistakes again.

*“Principals need to talk and build relationships so you can gravitate to those you can work with. Support needs to be scheduled and regular.”*

### *Strong Relationships are essential*

As part of being successful 21st Century leaders such as is stated in the *Kiwi leadership for Principals (2008)* document “school leaders who develop a climate of mutually trusting relationships with staff will be essential to fostering the kinds of innovation, creativity and confidence that will address new complexities in student learning.”

This came through strongly in the interviews with the Principals. They all reflected on the strength of the relationships that they have developed and are still developing and the impact this has on their ability to be the best Principal that they can be.

*“The important thing is to have someone you can talk to that you trust.”*

Work / life balance was seen as important by the Principals along with a listening ear, whether it be from a person at home, a coach / supervisor, a critical friend or someone that they trust. Another key factor was the importance of collaborative networks such as the Communities of Learning that are developing. All of these factors align with Hargreaves and Finks model of sustainable leadership.

Through coaching or professional supervision some principals noted how they felt confidence with their role, especially with having the confidentiality of the relationship with his or her coach / supervisor.

A principal that participates in Professional Supervision once a fortnight sees the benefits of professional supervision as an opportunity to identify and act on, facts, thoughts and feelings rather than assumptions. "To be taken into deeper thinking can be very challenging, but at the same time very rewarding."

She takes the time to keep in touch with personal and professional goals, beliefs and motivations.

At the heart of her thinking is to preserve good relationships with those she works with by being able to plan actions thoughtfully.

### *Barriers to Professional Supervision / Coaching*

For most of the Principals spoken to the major barrier would be affordability of the Board to pay for the opportunity, though two said that they felt that their Board's would be willing to support Professional Supervision financially as they have an understanding of it through their own work experience, and would understand the benefits. There was agreement that it would be beneficial if Professional Supervision provision could be built into the Principal's agreement.

All agreed that time can be a factor but when they thought about it they didn't think that every two to three weeks of uninterrupted time was too hard to timetable and make happen if it was for their development and leadership practice.

The principals I spoke to agreed with the David Eddy report that there is a preference by principals for professional supervisors who have successful experience as principals and who are trained for the supervisory role. A few principals wish to have counsellors, business and corporate mentors and coaches as supervisors. There is a strongly held view that the principal should self-select their supervisor to best meet their needs and context.

David Eddy also reported that the majority of principals clearly want professional supervision to be an entitlement but not a mandated requirement. They believe it should be available to every principal each year as of right at their discretion.

A challenge for many was how to find someone that is suitable and available. Some commented on the best thing being the relationship and that the supervisor would challenge and maybe not having the background in education could also be an advantage in that the questioning may deepen the principal's reflection on their practice. They discussed people they knew that provided Professional Supervision and thought they would follow it up now that they had had "a seed planted" through the discussion.

## Mentoring / Professional Supervision and Performance Appraisal

As in the findings in David Eddy's report when asked about the relationship between professional supervision and performance appraisal, the majority view was that these are and should continue to be two different performance related experiences.

The Principals believe that they should be responsible for any professional supervision arrangements and that outcomes remain confidential between the supervisor and themselves.

In their view professional supervision should be conducted in response to on-the-job problems or issues a principal is experiencing in their school and context, and requires a confidential, high trust relationship.

### *If Professional Supervision was available:*

All thought that they could benefit from Professional Supervision if they had the right person. They could see that it would need to be planned and regular (once a fortnight / three weeks) to maintain cohesion and a sustaining relationship.

One had received Professional Supervision in a different sector (before teaching) and found the process invaluable and supportive. This person would like to have Professional Supervision available for themselves as well as senior management within the school to help strengthen them all.

## Implications

To maintain sustainable leadership in our schools, I believe that we need to be making sure that we look after our Principals and our staff.

One principal commented on well – being surveys that have been implemented by the Canterbury Primary Principals' Association that show there is a need for support and that maybe more coaching / professional supervision availability / uptake from the sector might help support that need.

The Canterbury Primary Principals' Association survey in Term 1, 2012 noted that 70% of Principals and 86% of staff reported they were more fatigued and stressed than usual. Incidents of student stand down and suspensions had more than doubled in Term 1 of 2012, in Canterbury schools, (compared to 2011), and there was a far greater take up of external support services for schools in Term 1, than in previous years at this time (eg RTLB, GSE support, social service agencies). These factors place great pressure on the leadership teams and show that support is really needed.

A Principal who had professional supervision during this time said that it was the support of the supervisor and the opportunity to reflect on what was happening in the school, that helped her to continue in what were at time very challenging

circumstances. She sometimes felt vulnerable as a leader and really appreciated the fact that their supervisor's only motivation was to help her to be effective and supported in her role.

Throughout a year there are many challenges that leaders are faced with on a daily basis. My challenge is to enable reflective practice for my team and myself to enable support and future growth.

### In conclusion

In the changing educational environment where we are asking teachers to work collaboratively it is vital that the relationships that are developed are of the utmost importance whereby people are willing and able to take responsibility for their learning and the development and learning of their students. Through their ability to focus on critically reflecting on their work, self-assess and seek feedback in order to improve their work, they also identify and build on their strengths to enable themselves to develop further.

As part of the work with my management team we will be looking at the ten principles that Jan Robertson suggests underpin the coaching approach. We will question each other and look at the ways these principles make a difference to our school. We will look at a time frame to implement the ones that we decide would make most difference in our school.

The opportunity to undergo initial training in Professional Supervision and the time to look at research and talk with colleagues has inspired me to want to continue encouraging others to have professional supervision and for me to try and strengthen this part of my leadership. I would like to further encourage Principals and leaders to make connections with Professional Supervisors that they can work with to help support them and improve their reflective practice.

“An oasis or a fireside, a place where a weary traveller can take some respite and nourishment to continue on his or her professional journey.” (Julie Hewson)

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