Curriculum, leadership and learning in small rural schools: A study of seven schools over time

Sabbatical report by Matt Stockton, principal of Whatawhata School, 2016

Acknowledgements

I give my sincere and heartfelt thanks to the principals and teachers who offered to once again be part of this study. Their time, thoughts and reflections made this work possible for the benefit of all those small schools out there. I thank my own school Board of Trustees for supporting my sabbatical. I sincerely thank Laurel Benn, my deputy principal, for leading the school in such a successful way in my absence. I hope this report provides affirmation and food for thought for all.

Rationale

In 2009 I completed my Masters in Educational Leadership at Unitec and was awarded First Class Honours. My thesis was entitled “Meeting the demands of a new curriculum philosophy: A study of small rural schools in New Zealand.” It investigated the implementation of the newly released revised New Zealand Curriculum (NZC) in small rural schools and the associated opportunities and challenges of teaching and leading in such schools. I worked with 7 Waikato schools with rolls of between 50 and 120, interviewing principals and teachers, as well as two Ministry of Education leadership advisors. This project was, and remains, of great interest to me as a leader of a small, rural school myself.

My findings revealed both some exciting and unique opportunities that these schools were embracing and some significant challenges that their small rural contexts created. It also identified a number of potential future opportunities and challenges.

The aim of my sabbatical research project was to revisit the 7 study schools to reconsider the findings of my research, determining through conversations with school leaders and teachers the extent to which these opportunities were embraced and these challenges overcome and to identify other opportunities and challenges that emerged in the ensuing years.

A summary of my 2009 research findings

The revised New Zealand Curriculum (NZC) represented a significant shift in curriculum policy for New Zealand and created a number of new demands for schools that writers such as Dewey (2008) suggest may require significant change. There are numerous internal and external factors that may influence schools and the unique condition that the interrelation of these factors creates the schools context. There is increasing evidence that small rural schools share a number of common contextual factors that may create both opportunities and challenges for educators within them. The primary purpose of this study was to determine how the contextual factors of small rural schools in New Zealand have impacted upon the implementation of the revised New Zealand Curriculum (NZC) by considering the experiences of seven small rural New Zealand schools.

My Master's thesis study provided positive affirmation that small rural schools were not only able to manage the complex and demanding challenges of implementing the New Zealand Curriculum, but were also able to unite teachers, leaders and the community in a collaborative commitment to providing better learning opportunities for their learners.

It was also evident that the contextual conditions of the seven small rural schools in this 2009 study impacted on NZC implementation in many ways, creating both opportunities and challenges. Five major themes became apparent and the conclusions, implications and recommendations for each are summarised below.

For a much fuller picture of the literature review and results from this study I refer the reader to the original these at http://unitec.researchbank.ac.nz/handle/10652/1421

The New Zealand Curriculum - A new curriculum philosophy

Within this study there was almost universal support for the revised NZC's perceived educational and implementation opportunities, philosophies and priorities, a perception at odds with much previous literature focused on state mandated curriculum reform. The main reason for this appeared to be that the revised NZC was considered to represent a different curriculum philosophy to those advocated in many other countries and in the previous New Zealand Curriculum Framework (NZCF). Small schools believed this philosophy, considered student-centred, emphasised a focus on the needs of the learner, recognised the need to meet more holistic educational needs, provided flexibility for the development of a school curriculum focused on local wants and needs of all stakeholders and encouraged a collaborative approach to curriculum design. New Zealand was, and remains, one of few countries adopting a national policy that places so much control of curriculum development and implementation in the hands of schools themselves.

This policy was clearly one that small rural schools were embracing. As such, and as Hargreaves and Fink (2006) and Fullan (2003) suggest, the support and positive attitude of those involved made the likelihood of successful and sustained implementation and change more likely. Participants did, however, recognise that its success required teachers, principals and the wider school community to challenge and reconsider their current practices, values and beliefs. This was considered to require increased long term responsibility, reflection and commitment from all those involved.

School and community relationships

These small rural schools all enjoyed close relationships with their students, staff and communities. Through collaboration and support throughout their school communities, they demonstrated the desire to work together to develop a curriculum that best met the needs of their students and the wishes of their communities. Schools took further advantage of these relationships to develop more meaningful learning contexts and broader holistic learning

environments. They were also focused on developing the knowledge and capacity of staff and parents to make collaborative curriculum design more effective. Lambert (2003) suggests such meaningful participation may provide the cornerstone for the development of professional and school communities focused on improvement. The greater the participation, she believes, the greater the benefits for student learning. As such, these findings provide strong support for the suggestion that small rural schools are not only able to create a school curriculum that may best meet the needs of their students as viewed both by the staff and wider school community members, but that the collaborative process may lead to a more supported, more owned, more relevant and, ultimately, more successful school curriculum.

Professional communities

Small staff teams in these schools worked as effective professional communities, allowing ideas for change to be discussed, evaluated, designed and implemented collaboratively and, many believed, without the politics or delays of larger schools. In most schools these professional communities were based upon already established practices of collaboration and collaborative decision making, trust, care and support, and open and honest dialogue and discussion. Most schools were also working to improve the individual and shared capacity for reflective inquiry. These conditions relate closely to those identified as features of effective professional learning communities (Fullan, 2003; Kruse & Louis, 2009; Lambert, 2003).

Small staff teams, however, appeared to be one contextual factor that could limit the effectiveness of their professional communities in designing and implementing the school's curriculum as a result of their more limited pool of ideas. This was particularly evident when these schools spoke of discussing, developing and evaluating practices and ideas appropriate to a specific curriculum level. Almost all participants believed that this limitation could be overcome through networking, support and shared development with other small schools, a view strongly supported by Starr and White (2008). It appeared vitally important, therefore, that both principals and teachers in such small rural schools had the opportunity to regularly meet and work with other professionals to provide a broader range of ideas and support appropriate to the small rural school context.

Small school leadership

The small rural school principals in these schools all exerted a significant influence on student, teacher, organisational and system learning. They had a considerable direct influence on student learning as teaching principals and through their knowledge of student strengths and needs. They influenced teacher learning through providing and participating in professional learning opportunities, supporting individual learning, trialling and evaluating alternative practices for themselves, and modelling, sharing and reflecting on their own pedagogical knowledge. They influenced organisational learning through working alongside teachers in the process of collaborative curriculum design and implementation, by building the collective capacity for reflective inquiry, and through facilitating professional communities based on trust, collaboration, support and honest dialogue. They influenced system learning through developing partnerships with parents focused on school curriculum design and improving parents' knowledge of the NZC and contemporary learning. As a result, these small rural school principals appear to have a significant direct and indirect impact on the ultimate success of NZC implementation through leading the fundamental process of change required in most of these schools for learning at every level. Cowie et al. (2009) report that New Zealand principals are very important for successful NZC implementation. This study would suggest that small rural school principals are especially so as a result of their considerable influence on learning throughout their schools.

Two factors did appear to limit the potential successes of these small rural principals in implementing the NZC. Firstly, principals faced a considerable and varied workload, exacerbated for most by the dual role of teaching and leading. Although, unlike most previous studies into

small school leadership, their leadership role was not overloaded by Ministry sanctioned administrative tasks, teaching principals considered themselves as primarily needing to be leaders with teaching having to be considered a secondary responsibility. For some participants this created conflicts of duty between doing the best for their children and doing the best for the school as a whole. Leading change of this magnitude in small rural schools may therefore benefit from the provision of additional release time to allow small rural principals time to better focus on leading curriculum change.

Secondly, there was considerable criticism of the value of support provided by the Ministry through support days, and considerable need was expressed for a model or guide to help lead the implementation process. Considering the scope of change most principals in this study were attempting, their significant influence on learning and curriculum change and, for four of these principals, their recent appointments as principals, it appeared very important that these small rural principals were supported in this comprehensive programme of change.

This will require the Ministry to consider how it may better support these principals, and, as this study shows, that may be through providing more focused and context-appropriate professional learning support for both guiding the implementation process and developing principals' professional knowledge.

Staff turnover and sustainability

Staff turnover represented a challenge that appeared likely to impact on the likelihood of successful and sustained NZC implementation and change in small rural schools. When teachers and principals leave, the beliefs and practices developed over a period of time that support the school's curriculum philosophy are lost. Fullan (2001) describes the gradual watering down of capacity and knowledge through time as staff leave and are replaced. However, in small schools it may be more apt to describe capacity and knowledge as being washed away. Small rural principals, as discussed above, have a significant influence both on learning and on the success of NZC implementation and change. However, as this study concurred, small rural principals commonly remain in positions for a relatively short time and when they leave, any progress made may leave with them. The impact of this may be that these small rural schools may find themselves in a continual cycle of change and re-change, leading, as observed in some of these participant schools, to a sense of frustration and lack of lasting curriculum change. With schools given a limited period for curriculum implementation, this impact could currently be even more significant.

Lambert (2003) suggests that professional communities may provide a way for change to be sustained by supporting new teachers and principals through a significant and collective programme of enculturing into a particular school's philosophy. Considering the strength of professional communities recognised within the small rural schools of this study, this suggestion may offer a potential solution for ensuring implementation and change can be sustained beyond any particular principal or staff. However, this will clearly require further professional community development within schools so they may better support and transition new teachers and principals into their school's philosophies, beliefs and priorities for curriculum.

Methodology

The participants of this study were from seven small rural schools in the Waikato area. All schools participating had previously been involved in my research in 2009.

From each school, the principal and one teacher were interviewed, interviews lasting around 30 - 45 minutes. Four of the principals were new to the school since 2009, and of these, for three this was their first principal position. Of the teachers interviewed, two were interviewed in 2009. Participant and school names were changed, though using the same names as in the 2009 study to aid comparison over time.

All participants were asked the same questions which were as follows:

For principals:

1. Demographics - School size, time in current position, teaching component, previous positions of leadership

2. What is special about your school?

3. What are some of the biggest challenges you face in your role here?

4. How has your school curriculum changed over the last few years (or in your time here)?

5. What aspects of your school curriculum are most successful?

6. Can you tell me about anything that has made implementation of your curriculum more difficult?

7. (For new Principals) What has and what hasn't changed since you became Principal here?

8. How, if at all, have major initiatives of the last few years (e.g. National Standards, changes in PLD provision, Collaboration of Schools, HSWA 2015, etc.) affected your curriculum and its implementation?

For teachers:

1. Demographics - Time in current position, teaching component,

2. What is special about your school?

3. What are some of the biggest challenges you face in your role here?

4. How has your school curriculum changed over the last few years (or in your time here)?

5. What aspects of your school curriculum are most successful?

6. Can you tell me about anything that has made implementation of your curriculum more difficult?

7. (For schools with new Principals) What has and what hasn't changed since the appointment of the new Principal here?

8. How, if at all, have major initiatives of the last few years (e.g. National Standards, changes in PLD provision, Collaboration of Schools, HSWA 2015, etc.) affected your curriculum and its implementation?

Interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed. From these interviews, qualitative analysis was used to identify common themes and the varying views around these.

Finally, these common themes were analysed in respect to the findings of the original 2009 study to identify changes over time.

Findings: The 2016 picture

This section looks at common themes and ideas from participants. It is divided into the five key themes that the interview questions focused on.

Theme one: The school context and culture

Schools at the heart of the community (and in the community's hearts)

"Us, we are what is special, our community is what is special", John, Hihi School principal

Every one of the schools in this study spoke of enjoying close relationships with their parents, broader whānau and community. A common theme expressed was of being like a "big family" with a vested interest and commitment to the school by all. As Sally, Hoiho school's principal explained, "people care about what is going on here". Another commonly expressed feature of these relationships, especially from principals, was their down to earth, honest and open nature, with respondents expressing ease at having those tricky conversations when they're needed.

Learners at the heart of all we do

Almost all principals and teachers spoke of the knowledge that they had of the learners, of their progress, their interests and their challenges throughout their time at school. There was a clear sense of positive relationships between teachers and learners. Both of the fast growing schools spoke of this becoming harder but of their commitment to keeping this knowledge. Along with this knowledge, more than half of teachers spoke of being able to teach the children without the need to constantly manage them.

Location, location, location

The semi-rural nature of most of these schools (by virtue of their distance from urban areas) was seen to provide many benefits including maintaining rural values, learning in rural contexts, providing a better "fit" for children and a genuine connection to the local community while still maintaining more practical benefits of urban areas. A smaller number of respondents saw this as also creating a challenge at times with these schools considered a magnet for challenging children. The difficulty in finding relief teachers and short term positions was another challenge mentioned by over half of participants.

School as a professional community

"The staff are the best thing here, the principal too" Kelly, Whio School teacher

Four principals and most teachers spoke of the good team relationships within the school, the idea of everyone being focused on the school as a whole rather than with personal agendas. Perhaps as a result, almost all teachers and principals emphasised their absolute enjoyment of their roles.

The size of the team was considered a significant factor here, everyone knowing all that was going on and, as almost universally expressed, being closely involved in just about everything that was going on, and being able to have constant conversations with colleagues. While four teachers and one principal spoke of the feeling of being "spread so thinly" across many areas as a result, the majority of participants also spoke of the positive teamwork, collaboration, autonomy and mana that the staff community provided. As Jane, principal from Kakariki school emphasised, "we're a cohesive team here based on trust, accountability, conflict, commitment and results."

New teachers, new leaders

Along with this sense of community, there came an almost universal expression from principals (and a smaller number of teachers) of the need for significant emphasis on ensuring that the right

people for the school are appointed, that they have the appropriate pedagogical knowledge, that they are reflective, and that they are really supported to get up to speed with the school's practices, curriculum and priorities. While this was considered to require significant time to get right, there was universal recognition of the impact that getting this wrong had on the school and on the learners. As Emiri, a teacher from Tieke School explained, "it's been quite tricky, there are some tough things happening currently with new staff. It's quite different for me and for the school, it's changed the dynamic, we've been stable for so long, it's challenging to have new people not necessarily of the same mindset that we've created." In overcoming such challenges, it was the existing staff, not just the principal, that were seen as the critical determinant here, as emphasised by this teacher: "We all have a role in teaching our new people to be 'in the Hoiho' way" , Stephanie, Hoiho School teacher.

While teacher turnover was commonly spoken of by principals and teachers alike, only one teacher from the four schools with new principals spoke of the pressures that a new principal brought about.

Theme two: Teaching and leading in the small school

Small school leadership

"I love this school" Pio, Tieke School principal

Discussions with principals around the leadership of their schools revealed some quite significant differences and changes between those new and those experienced in the role. Four principals were new to the school since my last visits while three were still at the same school. In one school there had been two changes of principal. For three of these the current role was their first principalship.

The four principals who had been in their role for many years (or who had previously led other schools) all spoke of now having a broad knowledge to effectively lead the school and to complete mandated requirements. As Jane from Kakariki School expressed, "I've been here 11 years now, there's very little I find challenging." While there was common expression and in fact consternation of being told to do something new every year, they equally expressed the feeling that their knowledge and experience ensured these changes didn't create significant challenges, as Paul from Whio School explained, "[we] just take these things in our stride now, [we] don't stress".

For most of those newer to the role, the breadth and variety of what they were required to do, and the challenges of spreading themselves across were a common topic of conversation. The idea of "doing everything that the big school principals have to do", as expressed here by Hari from Kea School, was a common one.

For both groups there was a clear sense that the role has required a shift from "tasks" to a strong focus on the progress of individuals, groups and all learners and of the development and support of the teachers that work with them. This was almost universally stated as their primary leadership focus and considered to be the aspect that was most important. How this happened will be explored further in theme four.

The principal as teacher

"It's hard to do justice to both roles really well at times", Emiri, Tieke School

There has been a noticeable shift in principal teaching responsibilities over the time of these studies, with just one of the principals now with a fixed teaching component from six previously.

The primary reasons mentioned for this were around increased leadership responsibilities, the conscious decision (supported by school Boards) to focus on school leadership, the interruptions to teaching that became increasingly common, and growing school rolls, with six of seven schools experiencing growth of at least one additional teacher with one more than doubling in size. Most principals continued to work with children but in supporting roles such as leading additional learning opportunities, taking specific groups or teacher release. The one principal with a teaching component spoke of her constant need to now complete core leadership tasks outside of school hours. Her role, she stated, was "just not achievable in the time available at school" (Aroha, Hihi School)

Small school teaching

As stated previously, "the need to be everything", as Kahu from Takahe School eloquently captured, was a challenge expressed by more than half of teachers. As she continued, "we're fundraisers, librarians, music teachers, computer experts...". There was a sense expressed by this group of being too busy to sit down and relax with colleagues (or indeed with their own families) as a result of doing so many different things. Changes in curriculum, as will be considered later, were also seen as a key factor in this lack of down time.

Multi-level classes were universally mentioned by all the smaller school teachers, both as a positive and a challenge. They were considered to provide greater support for learners from peers, allow greater self-regulation and make teaching more interesting. At the same time, teachers spoke of finding it hard to be able to get to everyone when the needs varied so much and of supporting children with special needs. This comment in fact wasn't just confined to multi-level class teachers but was a common concern. The large size of classes, spoken of by three teachers, was seen to exacerbate the challenge.

A range of other challenges were expressed by individual teachers across these schools from overbearing parents to children being ready to start school.

Theme three: An evolving curriculum design

A curriculum of two halves

Curriculum had clearly evolved since my last visit. A common picture emerged of a curriculum of two halves within these schools, with structured learning of "essential" reading, writing and maths typically in the morning, and local context based "enquiry learning" in the afternoons. While this picture was common, there was less agreement on whether this was a good thing or not. For example, while Emiri at Tieke School believed "we have really good focus on core learning as well as hands on learning", Kahu from Takahe School suggested "that's why we have less of an emphasis on other learning now."

The "essentials" of reading, writing and mathematics

There was no doubt about it, a primary focus on reading, writing and maths was prevalent in all schools and mentioned by everyone. The majority of respondents considered this an important, even critical focus for learner success. A number of traits of these programmes emerged.

Both principals and teachers spoke almost unanimously of the development of school-wide structure, focus and programmes around reading, writing and mathematics. As Paul from Whio School stated, "we have a coherent platform across the school now, everyone has the same picture, the same goals, the same targets." There was a clear focus on learning in these areas being around pathways of learning throughout the school and of ensuring that everyone was on that pathway. This was considered beneficial for both children and teachers. For learners, common factors were of making sure children could move successfully from one class to another, of having a clear pathway that they could see and understand for themselves. For teachers

benefits were seen as making sure everyone was on the same page and of standardising practices. As Emiri, teacher from Tieke school explains, “we’ve created clearer guidelines in terms of what we’re expecting, what we want teaching and learning to look like... We now have a more focused curriculum and a clearer understanding of it.”

The pressures and importance of time were cited as another reason for this constant morning focus on “the essentials”, with the majority of principals and almost half of teachers talking of the need to get stuck straight into learning. As Kelly, teacher from Whio School explained, “we found we were often wasting time during the day, finding we were running out of time to do everything so we changed morning times around, hitting kids at their optimum learning time. 2 hours for literacy, maths then an hour for lunch.”

Strong emphasis, especially from teachers, was given to reading and writing programmes relating to the other learning “topics” that were happening in school. There was a clear sense of purpose in this learning, with real world contexts being explored that were often continued in more practical, locally relevant ways during “enquiry learning” times (below). Great benefit was seen to this, as Stephanie, teacher from Hoiho School explained; “reading and writing has changed, we’re not so much concerned with achieving specific objectives, we’re more inclined to look at contexts and how we can make these part of our reading, our writing and our enquiry learning.”

Enquiry learning

The concept of basing learning and in particular enquiry learning around local people, places, history and activities was common among almost all of these schools. More than half of schools also spoke of linking Māori learning (*Reo, Ao, T kanga*) through local marae and local kaumatua. A similar number also placed an emphasis on *Enviroschools* learning and *rural* learning. Teachers and principals alike spoke of these contexts providing more relevant, real, purposeful and practical learning opportunities, while creating meaningful relationships between learners and the school and the local and wider community. They were keen to express this learning through words like risk, challenge, relevance, meaning, not PC, family, community and us.

The main challenges that these two learning presented were a sense from three schools that curriculum was getting fuller, with a sense of “skating along the top” (Kelly, Whio School) rather than really being able to dig deeply into learning areas.

Other learning opportunities

Participants from every school spoke with pride around the other opportunities that they provide for the learners within these schools. The range included sports teams, rock bands, choirs, music lessons, science club, enviro clubs, robotics, coding, kapa haka and more. While, as stated previously, it was considered as adding to workloads by adding further roles for a small staff, it was seen as a core part of what these schools did. As John from Hihi School explained, “we work damn hard to provide a big range of extra curricular stuff, bands, gymnastics, drum lessons, school productions, guitar, singing lessons. So many of our kids are involved”. The other aspect related to this commented on by more than half of participants was the suggestion that these opportunities were open to all, that everyone got to participate in activities that appealed to them rather than opportunities for selected children only. This was directly attributed to the size and culture of the school.

Learners leading learning

There was an almost universal expression amongst these schools of learners taking an active role in shaping, leading and evaluating their own learning. This aspect appeared an essential part of school curriculum. As Pio from Tieke School explained, “there is an ever bigger focus on learners understanding and reflecting on their own learning - no longer is learning something done to kids”. Words such as understanding, control, partnership, coaching, conferencing, student voice,

critical thinking and self-regulation were common. A number of teachers and one principal spoke of the multi-level nature of their classes providing improved opportunities to learn with and from other children in genuine "*tuakana - teina*" (older-younger) relationships.

Key competencies and values

Only two principals and two teachers spoke of the key competencies and their school values as part of their curriculum. While Hiri from Kea School spoke of the key competencies being "really important, the guts of it all", Paul from Whio school suggested that in New Zealand in general there was "slacking around the key competencies these days, we don't hear about them much." Focus on school-developed values were more commonly spoken of, as tools for learning and for self-management.

Supporting those with special needs

For these rural schools the provision of special needs support was considered a significant issue. Both principals and teachers almost universally spoke with frustration of the challenges of gaining special needs support from the RTLB service (and Ministry of Education Special Education service), and the low frequency of visits from these services. Linked to this, three principals highlighted the impact that a small number of high needs children, particularly high behavioural needs, can have on the small school and its staff and students.

Theme four: The professional practice of teaching

So much time and emphasis was given to changes in the way that teaching was changing by participants that this is considered a theme in itself.

Shaping learning to learners

The targeting of students, groups of students (and teachers) was part of a larger theme expressed by every principal and over half of teachers. Common explanations were of a more individualised focus, really knowing the children (in some cases, knowing *all* the children in the school), understanding the progress (or lack of progress) they were making, identifying needs and specifically targeting these.

The rhetoric amongst principals was clearly around what teachers needed to do and know to better support learners, and how to help teachers get there. Commonly expressed building blocks of this were monitoring progress and achievement, accountability and autonomy, reflective enquiry and building teacher capacity through professional learning, and each is explored below. As Jane, principal of Kakariki School stated, "we're targeting teachers targeting learners, looking at the needs of the teachers so that they can benefit the kids."

Progress and achievement information

"We do an incredible job with how we use our assessment data for creating action plans for focusing on our kids, where they are and where they need to be", Emiri, Tieke School teacher

More than half of schools spoke of comprehensive use of data to understand how individuals, groups, classes and the school as a whole were going in terms of progress and achievement. As the statement above captured, there was an accompanying conversation of actually using this data to then make a difference by targeting learners (see reflective enquiry below) at a class or whole school level. It was seen as important amongst these schools that everyone had an understanding of the bigger picture of progress and achievement by looking at data together. As Hiri, principal from Kea school stated, "we need to generate a big picture for all to understand so everyone is singing from the same songsheet".

Reflective enquiry

From this information, these schools were evidently collaboratively setting goals and targets. A common thread was of "[us] all going in the same direction, how we get there is up to us." (Lisa, Kakariki school teacher). Principals and teachers alike spoke of the commitment to being reflective, to open up, to use the information, to take things on and of being open to improving practice. There was considered to be, as Pio, Principal from Tieke school captures here, "a constant stream of new ideas for improving practice, it's fast paced but staff are reflective, consider ideas for their kids. There's evolving practice all the time." There was also a great sense of expectation evident among teachers and principals, with considerable emphasis given to "getting them to where they need to be." (Stephanie, Hoiho school teacher).

The small number of staff was considered beneficial for this by 3 principals and 3 teachers, where the collective knowledge of all children in the school was high, where there was high trust between colleagues, where there was a reduced sense of isolation and where there was a less hierarchical structure in evidence. Two schools in fact spoke of actively focusing on removing the hierarchy from the school.

Accountability and autonomy

These two words were used by more than half of participants and, in particular, by teachers. These concepts were eloquently captured by Lisa, teacher from Kakariki school; "accountability is much higher amongst our team now. People know what they need to do and are autonomous to do it as you see best for your learners." These schools have spent time in aspects such as creating broad curriculum guidelines, critically evaluating data and establishing agreed targets. They then appear to place trust in teachers to implement these in ways they see best for their children. This was considered a positive change by teachers from a more prescriptive approach to teaching and the curriculum, with an increased perception of professionalism to do the job and more freedom. As Kea from Rapata school stated, "...we have high levels of trust now, high autonomy to implement the curriculum in the way that works best for our students".

Linked to these two concepts, a third buzz-word was much used by teachers and principals, and that word was *evidence*. It was considered important by both principals and teachers to show and to see what children had learned, not just through traditional assessment information but in evidence in everyday learning. As Sally from Hoiho school explained, "we should be able to see these children learning and growing every day."

Professional learning - A high standard of teaching

"There's an everyday emphasis here on teachers being better teachers", Hiri, Kea school principal.

Continual professional learning was an element almost unanimously spoken off by the principals of these schools. However, while a focus on professional learning has traditionally focused largely on learning areas, there appeared a real change in emphasis.

More than half of schools spoke of professional development around key authors or broad approaches to learning (examples given included Gaye Byers, Prime Maths, Sheena Cameron, Steps, Alison Davies). It appeared an approach based around adapting such models to local school contexts rather than the adoption of a particular approach per se, with ideas in one learning area being then adapted across others.

Just as many schools spoke of supporting teachers to become stronger learners. Closely linked with the concepts of reflective enquiry, accountability and autonomy, professional learning focused on aspects such as improving teacher efficacy, self-directed teacher enquiry learning, and the regular use (and discourse) of professional literature and research. As Jane from Kakariki school explained, "[it's a] massive focus, we've a big investment in teachers to continually improve, to develop their knowledge and practice so that it improves learning for every learner."

Such ongoing development wasn't considered easy and embedding these changes in pedagogy and practice was considered a challenge by more than half of teachers and principals, with a common need expressed of having time to ensure that any initiatives can be sustained to become part of everyday practices. As Tom from Hoiho school stated, "if we stretch things too far we'll never get there, we need to be slow and steady."

More than half of principals spoke of the challenge of needing to fund this ever more themselves, with common views of not receiving support as the schools are considered successful, of development not being offered by the Ministry of Education in the areas the school sees as most important, and of preferred providers not being funded.

Theme five: Change from above

The final theme focuses on the impacts of the major initiatives and policy changes implemented by the Ministry of Education in the years since my original study. There were two that most had something to say about and these were, for principals and teachers, National Standards and, for principals, Communities of Learning.

National Standards

Now several years down the road, the New Zealand Curriculum Standards (National Standards) have always been a regular and divided talking point and this study was no exception!

Participants were quite split around National Standards and its impact on curriculum. Around half of principals and teachers considered that they have helped to put learners and their achievement and progress at the forefront, providing expectations that we should all be striving towards and which, some suggested, were missing from some schools. Participants suggested they have strengthened focus on those "below" children who are "not quite there", and as a result, as Pio from Tieke school emphasised, "teachers work damn hard to try and accelerate progress for that group of kids." Three participants also stressed how it helped focus on maintaining progress of those working above Standard. Whether they had *actually* made a difference in terms of this group's progress over time was less supported. Other perceived strengths expressed were on focusing on reading, writing and maths every day, and on those areas considered most important. Finally, participants acknowledged how it had brought talking about learning, progress or lack of progress out into the open, as expressed here by Miriama from Hihi school; "It's an important part of what we do now, we own our numbers."

Conversely, four participants considered that National Standards had added undue pressure on children and on learning, especially during the first years of school when many of the other "skills for learning" are so important. Teachers in particular felt uncomfortable sharing when children were going well but were still below with parents. It was important, they suggested, to maintain the *mana* of these children. Similar numbers questioned the time involved for assessments, moderation and creating judgements took away from other things. Moderation between schools was emphasised, with disparity commonly expressed as Kahu, teacher from Takahe school explained; "we often get children arrive and their parents say, 'oh they're working above Standard', but there's no way they would be above in our school. That adds pressure."

As explained previously, all participant schools expressed their ongoing commitment to "other" enquiry learning and learning opportunities, ensuring that focus on reading, writing and maths didn't become the only thing that mattered.

The rise of Communities of Learning

Communities of Learning (CoL) are in the early days of becoming established. 4 schools were part of an approved or pending CoL, while 2 schools expressed they had no interest in becoming part of a CoL. All principals made comment on CoLs but no teachers did which may be a result of these

early days.

The most common view expressed by almost all principals was trying to understand how they were going to work, with many unknowns at this stage. Another common view was concerns over the hugely varied needs and priorities between schools. In particular concerns were raised over how small schools were just going to be "ruled over" by much bigger schools and, as Tom from Hoiho school emphasised, the possibility of "'we know best' mandating from lead principals when our school is so different." As Paul from Whio school further explained, "our school is really quite different from town schools and that's how we and our community like it." Two principals spoke of the nullifying of traditional relationships between local small schools with the CoL potentially becoming everything.

Clearly, from this feedback, it appears too early to say what the impact (positive or negative) CoLs will have on these small schools but none appeared particularly excited by the journey.

Discussion

It is beyond the scope of this sabbatical study to reconsider the views and opinions above in relation to the large body of literature referred to in my Master's thesis and in subsequent publications and that was not the intent. For a full literature review I refer the reader to my original thesis. What this discussion instead does is look at the 2016 picture and consider what has and hasn't changed, whether the identified potential opportunities and challenges were realised or overcome in the period between 2009 and 2016, and whether new strengths, opportunities and challenges had arisen. This discussion considers this in relation to the five themes identified in the original study.

The New Zealand Curriculum - An embraced curriculum philosophy

Comparing the curriculums of these schools between 2009 and 2016 was fascinating. As would be expected, there was a clear "maturing" of the curriculum in these schools to something that could be much more closely explained and demonstrated - after all the revised NZC has now been in place for 8 years. There appeared a quite consistent model of curriculum design emerging in these schools, with an increasing trend and focus around reading, writing and maths, while maintaining the locally based, hands-on and real-world learning within their school communities. It also remained apparent that the learner remained at the very centre of curriculum design and decision making, with considerable consideration also still given to embracing and involving the school's community and contexts. Providing "extra" learning opportunities also featured strongly in many of these schools.

While the introduction of National Standards has no doubt "forced" schools to give ever-increasing focus to reading, writing and maths, the general consensus was support for what it has achieved (albeit with concerns still remaining from some around Standards in the early years and variance of judgements between schools). These schools are increasingly focused on these learning areas (and actively ensuring this is not at the expense of "other" learning with schools appearing to make sure that National Standards hadn't reduced the scope of their own curriculum) and there has been, I believe, a significant change in the practice of teaching. These schools consistently spoke of the ongoing, detailed use of data and of evidence at the class and whole school level, of establishing shared and individual targets, of engaging in continual reflective enquiry processes to improve teaching in ways appropriate for the learner, of focusing on the learner's knowledge and ownership of their learning, of teacher accountability and autonomy in curriculum decisions, and of ongoing professional development based on school-specific wants and needs. The professional practice of teaching appears to have evolved from the viewpoints of both principals and teachers. Interestingly, all these areas are contained within the revised NZC as the primary elements of effective practice. With this has undoubtedly come additional pressures on principals and teachers and the lack of down time was evident. There was also a clearly expressed need to ensure that change has time to become embedded.

In my original study I suggested that success would require teachers, principals and the wider school community to challenge and reconsider their current practices, values and beliefs which would require increased long term responsibility, reflection and commitment from all those involved. Evidence from 2016 would suggest that, for the principals, teachers and schools in this study, this has clearly happened.

With these views in mind, I would suggest that these seven schools have continued to embrace and implement the opportunities, philosophies and priorities of the revised NZC, both in terms of learning and of professional practice. These small schools have clearly led, and continue to lead, ongoing processes of significant change in curriculum and professional practice to better meet the needs of the learners within them.

School and community relationships

The relationships between students, staff and communities remained a key strength and focus of these small schools. Almost all spoke of the shared commitment (despite the odd local challenge) to creating a local curriculum that was relevant, meaningful and that involved the community. Whether any more so that in 2009 and whether it needed to be was unclear. National Standards had, some schools suggested, changed the way that teachers spoke about learning and of progress and of some parents' expectations. These schools, however, spoke of how they worked to address concerns, educate parents or share information in positive ways. These schools clearly remain at the heart of their communities and, in many cases, the desired school of choice for those further afield too.

Professional communities

These schools continued to consider themselves as effective professional communities based upon collaborative decision making, trust, care and support, and open and honest dialogue and discussion. Most schools were also focused on open and at times challenging reflective inquiry both as individuals and the school as a whole. These conditions relate closely to those identified as features of effective professional learning communities.

In many schools the concepts of accountability and autonomy were evident, with schools having established broad frameworks of agreed practice which all worked by allowing teachers to implement programmes they themselves considered most appropriate for their learners. There appeared the sense that teachers "owned" their children's learning, progress and achievement more than ever, with both the satisfaction and the pressures that this created.

It was interesting that, unlike in 2009, there was almost no talk of the desire or need to work more closely with neighbouring schools to improve curriculum knowledge and ideas. In 2009 such views were strongly expressed, leading me to consider it "vitally important that both principals and teachers in such small rural schools had the opportunity to regularly meet and work with other professionals to provide a broader range of ideas and support appropriate to the small rural school context", a view supported by many authors. No schools in this study suggested they had more contact or involvement with other schools that previously, but rather this topic just didn't feature in the responses of participants. This could be as a result of schools' suggestions there was more collaborative reflection, evaluation, professional learning and planning within their schools. It could also be the result of greater knowledge, understanding and practical application of the NZC. Without further investigation, however, this is unclear. Whether schools could still benefit greatly from such collaboration leads us nicely onto discussion around Communities of Learning (CoLs).

CoLs are the government's model and funded approach to bring schools together to allow this to happen. The responses of the principals in these schools to them would appear that, at present at least, there is little confidence in them providing additional opportunities for working with other small schools (though it is too early to tell at present), and in fact fear of being "taken over" by larger schools. If the model allowed for similar schools to work together, for example if small schools could create Communities of Learning rather than just a geographic cluster, many of the concerns expressed about them could potentially be overcome and they really could provide the opportunities to learn with and along other schools in much more similar contexts. At present, however, this is not possible.

Small school leadership and teaching

The small rural school principals in these schools continued to exert a significant influence on student, teacher, organisational and system learning. While much less likely to be directly teaching learners, the small size of the staff teams allowed them to have detailed knowledge of the progress and achievement of learners at an individual level, class and school level. They worked

directly with all staff in reflective enquiry, professional learning and curriculum design, and had largely positive relationships with parents and the wider community. The school size was also considered to allow change to happen more quickly. These factors are all likely to ensure they continue to have a significant impact on ensuring the success of learners.

The challenge reported in the previous study of managing the dual role of leading and teaching was much less evident seven years on. The primary reason was not that workload had reduced but rather that only one of these principals now regularly taught as part of their role. Boards have increasingly recognised the pressures on small school principals and looked to provide funds so that the principal can focus on leading the school. The potential downside of this is that, with no increased funding for principal release, funds have to be diverted from elsewhere. The one principal still teaching spoke of the frustrations of having to complete so many tasks in her own time to ensure her dual role did not impact negatively on learners.

In regards to leading curriculum change, these principals (and their predecessors) have all appeared to have developed local curriculum that both the NZC and leading curriculum design authors would suggest are effective (as has already been commented on above). It is very positive to see that has happened despite the plea in the previous study for better Ministry support not being realised. In fact, the Ministry advisors that were directly supporting schools in the previous study no longer exist.

It was fascinating to see how conversations around small school teaching had changed over time. Teachers continued to talk of the real positives of their collaborative relationships with colleagues, multi-level teaching opportunities and their close relationships with all learners in a school, and of the challenges of the breadth and demands of the small school teaching role. New aspects such as the ownership of learner progress and non-progress, accountability and autonomy, and reflective enquiry now became more commonly discussed. In this sense principals and teachers in this study were much more likely to talk in similar ways around curriculum, teaching and learning than previously.

One concerning new aspect that emerged from a number of schools was the perception of the reduced support that they were receiving to support learners with special needs as a result on Ministry changes in support agencies and in funding. The impact that children with high needs can have is significant and the resources that these small schools have to support them are limited. It was saddening to hear the frustrations of teachers and principals alike in how they felt less and less supported. It would appear that only a change in policy at government level would help reverse this.

Staff turnover and sustainability

In 2009 I shared participants real concerns over the impact that principals and teachers leaving schools had. Teachers at that time spoke of the real frustrations of repeated cycles of curriculum change as principals came and went. Principals spoke of the loss of knowledge as teachers left. I suggested that overcoming this required the school community to have a strong shared culture, shared priorities and a clearly defined and practised collaboratively developed curriculum. It would also require significant time and energy given to “enculturing” new staff into these.

It was such a positive experience to hear from participants in 2016 how so many of these aspects were established and working in these schools. There was an almost universal expression from principals (and some teachers) of the need for significant emphasis on ensuring that the right people for the school are appointed, that they have the appropriate pedagogical knowledge, that they are reflective, and that they are really supported to get up to speed with the school’s practices, curriculum and priorities. It was also really positive to hear that it was the existing staff, not just the principal, that were involved in this process. What further reinforced this was that,

among teachers, only one spoke of the pressures that a new principal brought about. Clearly, such processes are benefiting not only new staff members but the whole school.

Conclusion

It was an absolute please to revisit these small rural schools that I have come to know over the last seven years. It was wonderful to see that, in these changing educational times, the focus in all these schools and the people within them was 100% on the learner and their needs. These schools remained a core part of their community and were continuing to develop curriculum that ensured this. Their teams worked together to support, challenge and collaboratively develop ideas. They had taken new ideas in education, mandated requirements, and foci on effective practice and considered how these things could all become a part of making their schools an even better place for learning. They also continued to manage the broad and varied demands of being not only principals and teachers, both those additional demands that are unique to small rural schools. Small schools form by far the largest proportion of schools in New Zealand. Based on the evidence in these seven schools, that is a situation that learners, parents, staff and New Zealand as a whole should be proud of.

References

The following texts represent a very small proportion of the literature that informs my knowledge in the key areas of focus for this study, namely small school contexts and learning, school leadership, change leadership, professional learning communities and curriculum design. For this I refer the reader to my Master's thesis at http://unitec.researchbank.ac.nz/handle/10652/1421

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