SABBATICAL REPORT

Term 3, 2009

"School Leadership: the Theory and the Practice – What *do* School Communities Want and Expect From Their Principal?"

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Acknowledgements:
My sincere thanks to the Paraparaumu Beach School Staff and Board of Trustees for their enthusiastic support for, and assistance with my sabbatical research project; and to the Ministry of Education for the school staffing funding enabling my release.
Special thanks to Jess Ward for so efficiently running the school during the term of my sabbatical.

Purpose of Study:
Considering the current major emphasis on, and research around school leadership, and in the light of the multiplicity of tasks, responsibilities, and expectations inherent in the role of School Principal, to investigate the needs and wishes of *school communities* (the immediate 'consumers') -   parents, pupils, school staff - as a comparison / adjunct to current published research, directions, and emphases in Principal role-description.

Process:
I pursued a six-pronged process of investigation and development of the research topic:
(1) In the first 2 – 3 weeks, undertaking a wide range of background professional reading, with particular emphasis on recent relevant publications such as the 'Kiwi Leadership for Principals', 'Best Evidence Synthesis' and writings by various other New Zealand academics (see reference list at the conclusion of this report).   I was also able to delve into a broad range of international readings available on the internet, and to utilise excellent professional magazines such as NZPF's 'NZ Principal' for examples of current leadership initiatives, both formal and informal
(2) Designing and distributing a simple survey (one for adults -   school staff / parents; one for school pupils) which would elicit sufficient information to allow me to reach some conclusions regarding the research question itself
(3) Presenting, promoting, and distributing the surveys (via school principals)
(4) Retrieving, collating and analysing the data accumulated from the surveys
(5) Attending the Australian Council for Educational Leaders Conference in Darwin, with participation in a number of relevant keynote and workshop sessions
(6) Bringing all the above together in the findings detailed later

The planned process appeared very 'achievable' in theory, given that I had a whole term to accomplish it! The *practice*, however, turned out to be

somewhat different - but was in every way a valuable and refreshing experience.

Background Reading
The first exciting thing that occurred in my sabbatical term was that I had the luxury of being able to undertake extensive professional reading - something I hadn't had time for in many years. In the course of doing this, I not only developed a far deeper understanding of recent research and directions regarding school leadership…but also spun off into a myriad of interesting and exciting things (many of which were unrelated to my topic of study!) that schools and school leaders were doing! This 'professional refreshment' in itself was a huge 'plus' of my sabbatical.

Designing the Survey Content
Focussing next on the research question itself, the design of the surveys - on the face of it, a straightforward task - actually took a good deal of time and trialling. In the hope of getting a good uptake, I needed to keep the surveys understandable, clear and quick to complete. I also needed sufficient written explanation accompanying the adult surveys to ensure that people responding were comfortable with the intended purposes, uses and confidentiality aspects of the survey.

The survey formats are reproduced in full at the end of this report.

Briefly, however, these were the questions adults were asked to answer:

(1) For you *personally*, what do you need *most* from a school principal?
(2) In terms of *overall school need*, what do you think are the *three most important roles* of a school principal?
(3) What personal skills / attributes do you think are essential for an effective school principal?

For the pupil survey:

(1) What do **you** think are the *most important things a school principal should do* to make a school a good place for pupils?
(2) Describe the *sort of person* you think a school principal should be

Presenting, Promoting, Distributing the Surveys
After having finalised these formats, I then spoke to our local Principals group and individual principals, explaining again the purpose of the study (I had done some groundwork on this during the previous term) and enlisting their support in distributing the surveys amongst their communities. I was pleased to eventually have the involvement of 14 schools (Decile 2 – 9) from throughout the Otaki – Kapiti region, with responses from 188 adults (98 teachers, 39 other school staff, 51 parents) and 655 pupils (approximately 40% being Yr 4-6, 60% Yr 7/8)

Retrieving, Collating and Analysing the Data
The 'labour-intensity' of these facets of the research caught me by surprise - but it was a particularly interesting process!
Even the first stage was a time-consuming process, as in most cases it involved personal visits to the schools who had completed the surveys - and often ended up including detailed conversations with principals, staff, and in some cases, very interested pupils! Pleasingly, a number of principals and teachers had of their own volition used the surveys as a 'discussion-starter' - particularly teachers with their classes - and had become quite involved in the questions themselves! Collating the data, and summarising it in some sort of format which highlighted trends and patterns was also very time-consuming - due to the unexpected *detail* of responses received from all sectors.

Conference - Australian Council for Educational Leaders "Tipping Points - Courageous Actions, Powerful Stories"
Attending this conference - with its wide-ranging programme exploring many aspects of school leadership in different countries - at the very end of my sabbatical term, gave me many opportunities to consider the place and possible future of school leadership from a more 'international' perspective. Whilst the conference didn't feature any specific content from the perspective I was exploring through my survey, it enabled me to constantly measure a great range of 'leadership theory' against the broader findings of my survey - and was a very timely personal learning experience.

The Conclusions
As will be obvious from the 'personal learning' processes already described in this report, I am not a trained researcher or analyst! Nor do I make any claims that my research was conducted to rigorous 'scientific' standards, with the numbers, school-type, geographic, decile, age-group balances etc., which might be required to achieve this.

I do believe, however, that the information gleaned from my research is a valid and informative 'snapshot' of opinion from the *real and immediate* 'consumers' of a principal's work, attitudes, and priorities -   the school's pupils, parents and staff. These groups I feel have often been under-represented in formal studies, decision-making, and pronouncements as to the most important / influential roles a school principal should undertake. I think the data gathered through my surveys and discussions does provide some solid 'food for thought' regarding the role-focuses and personal abilities required in a school leader to meet the needs of *their school community.*

Summarising the Survey Responses
From the vast range of information collated from the completed surveys, I summarised the 10 most common responses in each category. These are detailed below, in order of descending frequency (i.e., most common response at top of list)

(A) Parent / Staff Survey

*Q.1 "For you **personally**, what do you need **most** from a school principal?"*
- To be approachable / accessible
- To be a leader
- To be a good listener
- To be supportive / interested
- To be a role model / mentor
- To be fair / equitable
- To provide guidance
- To be friendly
- To give praise
- To give positive feedback

*Q.2 "In terms of **overall school need**, what do you think are the **three most important roles** of a school principal?"*
- To provide all-round school direction / vision
- To provide leadership
- To establish / maintain school culture / standards
- To manage staffing / resources / finances
- To ensure student achievement
- To maintain discipline
- To maintain liaison with community and outside agencies
- To motivate and enthuse
- To bring and utilise experience / knowledge
- To make the hard / difficult decisions

Q.3 "What personal skills / attributes do you think are essential for an effective school principal?"
- To be approachable
- To be an excellent communicator
- To have excellent people-skills
- To be decisive
- To have an excellent sense of humour
- To be passionate / enthusiastic
- To display warmth towards others
- To be consultative
- To be calm / assured
- To be a multi-tasker

(B) Pupil Survey
(similar responses lumped together and put in 'adult' words where necessary!)

*Q.1 "What do **you** think are the **most important things a school principal should do** to make the school a good place for pupils?"*
- Make sure the school is a safe place
- Be nice to children
- Make sure school rules/discipline is fair/applied consistently across the school

- Have good teachers
- Have good equipment / resources (sports gear / I.T.) / classrooms / grounds
- Play games / have fun with children
- Look at good work done by children / visit classrooms
- Listen to children
- Make learning interesting for children
- Make new things happen

Q.2 *"Describe the **sort of person** you think a school principal should be"*
- Fair
- Nice / friendly
- Strict
- a Leader
- Happy / with a good sense of humour
- Interested in children
- Excited about school
- Good at sport
- Joins in with things we do

So, in summary, what *were* the conclusions that could be reached from the responses?

(a) Firstly, and importantly, **that from a parent, pupil and school staff perspective, it is not possible to arrive at a 'universally-agreed' role focus, or 'person-specification', for a school principal.** Though there were a number of common threads or directions, individuals from all quarters of my study had a staggering range of different priority-needs and beliefs as to what a principal should be doing, and how they should be doing it! There are several interesting questions raised by this outcome - for example, how well do we prepare new or aspiring principals for the reality of the vast *scope* of the job (strong leadership of literacy or numeracy in itself will *not* get you through!); and secondly, *who* should, in fact, decide what a principal's role focus and / or 'person-specification' should be? (see concluding comment on this later)

(b) That **a need for the principal to provide 'leadership'** was a very commonly-used phrase in the adult survey-responses (this applied equally to returns from parents, teachers, and all other school staff members). What was also obvious from the responses was that 'leadership' means *many* different things to different people! Again, this in itself raises some very interesting and important questions - what do we actually *mean* when we talk about *leadership* in a school? Are we all talking about the same thing?! (evidently not!)

(c) In very broad terms, **from a school community adult perspective, the most important skills of leadership seem to revolve around the 'human face' of the principal, and their personal abilities in effectively utilising 'people-skills' in the widest sense. A need for high levels of personal 'knowledge' about things, as such, was rarely mentioned.** For example, school staff and parents frequently commented that a principal's accessibility, availability, interest and support, ability to genuinely listen / consider / offer

advice, and ability to bring out the best in people were more important skills than an ability to *personally* lead or be an expert in things such as curriculum delivery or content. Question: - should not, therefore, a principal be the *best* example in the school of a "life-long learner"?

(d)   ***From a pupil perspective, a safe school environment*** was the most-repeated priority overall for a principal to focus on and ensure. There were, however, interestingly varying emphases at different age-levels - with Year 4–6 pupils focussing strongly on having personal contact / links / involvement with the principal; Year 7/8 pupils seeing the principal as a more distant 'rule-maker', who had the power to establish an effective school culture through edict.

A Final Question…

With reference back to point (a) above, I will conclude this report with a point to ponder, something I have increasingly dwelt on as my sabbatical term draws to a close. **Who *should decide what a principal's role-focusses and priorities should be?*** Is this something that can or should be centrally prescribed through utilising, for example, 'best evidence' research, 'effect sizes', the publication of 'professional standards', political doctrine, or whatever…? *Does* one size fit all? Or should it actually be something that will often differ quite considerably from school to school, being based more on a principal's professional judgement, in tandem with the identified needs and wishes of each individual school community regarding its' school leader?

Clarification around the above question brings its' own implications for future principal training and development. But that, as they say, is another story…

Keith A. Lambert

October 2009

References:

The following documents / publications formed background reading as part of my wider viewing of school leadership / principalship:

Ministry Of Education (2008) *Kiwi Leadership for Principals*   Wellington: Ministry of Education

Ministry of Education (2007) *Improving School Leadership: OECD background report, New Zealand* Wellington: Ministry of Education

Fullan, M (2006) *Turnaround Leadership* Thousand Oaks: Corwin Press

Duignan, P.A. (2006)   *Educational Leadership: Key Challenges and Ethical Tensions*   London: Cambridge University Press

New Zealand Principals' Federation (2006-09) *New Zealand Principal magazine (numerous articles)* Auckland: Cervin Publishing Ltd

Robinson, V., Hohepa M., Lloyd, C. (2009) *School Leadership and Student Outcomes: Identifying What Works and Why Best Evidence Synthesis* Wellington: Ministry of Education

SURVEY

Relating to research topic "School Leadership: the Theory and the Practice - What *do* School Communities Want and Need From Their Principal?"

The brief survey you are asked to complete (overleaf) will contribute to sabbatical research I am undertaking on the above subject. I am seeking input from all sectors of a school community - parents, school staff and pupils - with the aim of better defining a 'consumer perspective' of the most important actions and attributes of an effective school principal.

Participation in the survey is voluntary and anonymous. It will not be possible to identify any school or individual in any collated data or findings. The survey *does not* ask you to make judgements on, or comparisons with, any school principal you have worked with or known; rather, *it seeks to establish the role priorities, and personal skills / attributes you personally believe to be crucial in a successful school principal.*

The survey will be, of necessity, confined to around fifteen schools throughout the Wellington / Kapiti Coast region. It is hoped, however, that a good numerical response to the survey from these schools will provide a valid indication of community feelings / preference in regard to principal role emphasis and skill-development.

The results of the research will be published late-2009 on the Ministry of Education leadership website www.educationalleaders.govt.nz, and will be used in professional development opportunities for groups of interested principals and educators.

Your involvement in the survey is much appreciated.

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SURVEY FOR PARENTS / SCHOOL STAFF
(please read the notes overleaf before starting)

1. **For you *personally*, what do you need *most* from a school principal?**

2. **In terms of *overall school need*, what do you think are the *three most important roles* of a school principal?**

3. **What personal skills / attributes do you think are essential for an effective school principal?**

Please circle as applicable:

I am a…..   parent   teacher   teacher aide   office staff member
              property staff member   other
My school decile is….   1-3   4-6   7-10   don't know

Thank you for contributing to this research - your input is appreciated!
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SURVEY FOR SCHOOL PUPILS
(your teacher may help explain the questions first)

1. What do **you** think are the *most important things a school principal should do* to make a school a good place for pupils?

2. Describe the *sort of person* **you** think a school principal should be:

I am in Year___

Thank you for your help with my research!

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