

Primary Principal Sabbatical Report

Term Three 2009

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“How school leaders make a difference through their influence on staff motivation, commitment the working environment and the impact this has on student achievement. What does the research say, what do Principals say.”

Acknowledgements

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The school principals who gave up their time to allow me to interview them and then show me around their schools.

Executive Summary.

The focus of my study was to look at leadership styles and practices and how this impacts on school culture, staff motivation and student achievement. In short, how much does the way a school looks, reflect the style, nature, personality and pedagogical knowledge of the principal.

I was keen to see if there was a clear link between what the principals I interviewed told me about their experiences and practice, and the leadership dimensions established by the work of Professor Viviane Robinson (School of Teaching, Learning and Development; Faculty of Education, Auckland University, New Zealand, October 2007). I guess therein lies an implied or subliminal search for the link between research and reality.

The principals I interviewed are from a range of schools; low and high decile, state, integrated and private, contributing, full primary intermediate and secondary, single gender and co ed. These principals are regarded as highly successful practitioners and they lead schools that are doing well in terms of achieving and validating student progress. All of the schools are or have been involved in in – depth P.D. in literacy and numeracy and gather and analyse data to inform teaching and learning. The interviews provided a valuable insight as to how professional practices reflect their personality and values.

I accept that this is a small local investigation and the definition of successful principal is my own. I did check recent E.R.O. reports to give some wider credibility to my choice of interviewees. I have not named the principals in this report but names and taped interviews could be provided if needed to validate this investigation.

I also resolve to present this report in plain English and not the research language that plagued my background reading for this report.

Purpose.

- To identify the key features that characterise effective leadership in schools.
- Investigate the link between the leadership dimensions (Robinson 2007) and those from my interviews.
- Reflect on my leadership practices and identify strengths and areas for development.
- Report on key professional practices that sustain school community vision and impact on Professional development and employment of staff. What underpins these key issues?
- To identify common practices and values between my own school and the schools of the principals I interviewed.

Methodology / Ideology

The most important issue I faced as an incoming principal was in staffing the school with highly competent individuals with a range of skills across the curriculum and a personal value set that included work ethic, empathy, pride, humour and trust.

The next issue was, having built such a staff how would I avail them of on going high quality P.D. that would have a direct and immediate impact in the classroom and across the school. How would I then empower staff members to take educational risks, make discretionary decisions and not feel totally hamstrung by the demands of in depth P.D.? and ministry driven demands at the expense of science, arts and physical activity based aspects of school life.

How do we retain the fun and joy of teaching and the ability to embrace the teachable moment in tandem with the demands of the hard core evidence based teaching and learning that is necessary to improve standards in numeracy and literacy.

Certainly the pot has to include evidence based teaching and learning and school wide analysis of data and moderation to ensure consistency. It has to include effective P.D. and the resulting practice underpinned by pedagogical knowledge. There has to be a focus on literacy and numeracy and kids have to sing, dance, play, paint, learn to win, learn to lose and learn to be resilient.

Managing the mix in the pot – notwithstanding all the other issues principals deal with – and investigating my own practice and what other principals do and making the link to the research was fundamental to my inquiry.

Before I conducted the interviews I made sure I had reflected on how my own values and ethics contributed to managing the mix in the pot. I then read the research of Viviane Robinson, Helen Timperly and John Hattie to give me some understanding of what the research identifies. I interviewed the selected principals then set about identifying common factors and differences.

Key aspects of the interviews were:

- Informal talk.
- Formal talk (interviews)
- Spend some time in classrooms.
- Spend some time looking around the school.
- Discuss initiatives that have impacted positively on student achievement and the role of leadership in the intervention.

School Leadership and student outcomes:

Identifying what works and why (Professor Viviane Robinson, School of Teaching, Learning and Development, Faculty of Education, University of Auckland, New Zealand, October 2007)

The Research.

The five Leadership Dimensions.

Establishing Goals and Expectations.

- Setting, communicating and monitoring of learning goals.
- Setting, communicating and monitoring standards and expectations.
- Involving staff and others in the process so there is clarity and consensus

Strategic resourcing.

- Selecting and aligning resources to priority teaching goals.
- Providing appropriate expertise through staff recruitment.

Planning, Co - ordinating and evaluating Teaching and the Curriculum.

- Direct involvement in the support and evaluation of teaching.
- Regular classroom visits.
- Provision of formative and summative feedback to teachers.
- Direct oversight of curriculum through school – wide co – ordination across classes and year levels and alignment to school goals.

Promoting and Participating in Teacher Learning and Development.

- Promote and participate with teachers in formal and informal professional learning.

Ensuring an Orderly and supportive Environment.

- Protecting time for teaching and learning by reducing external pressures and interruptions.

- Establishing an orderly and supportive environment inside and outside classrooms

School Leadership and Student Outcomes:

Identifying What Works and Why (Interviews Conducted with School Principals Weeks 1 – 5 Term Three 2009)

I asked principals to focus entirely on the personal attributes, skills and actions that they felt had been most important and successful in building a positive school culture and promoting positive outcomes for students.

Principal 1

- Relationships and inclusion.
- Integrity, trust and honesty.
- Work ethic; show you can do the yards.
- Being able to articulate your passion and sustain the culture you believe in for your school.
- Recognise and employ quality staff
- Open to criticism and don't overreact to it.
- Recognise your mistakes and fix them.
- Promote higher level thinking.
- Promote best practice in terms of literacy and numeracy.
- Don't buy into an over credentialed environment that may not recognise work ethic, passion or ability.
- Don't follow templates always customise to suite your school.
- Be prepared to do all the jobs e.g. clean the loos if necessary.
- Recognise that you don't have to be the expert but you have to nurture others to be in their specific area of responsibility.
- Trying to think too far ahead not always wise.

Principal 2

- Relationship building, knowing who your key people are.
- Knowing direction.
- Collegially oriented environment led by senior management.
- Recognition and use of staff strengths.
- Not having to be the lead learner or the expert but setting up teachers to take those roles.
- Dialogue and consensus.
- Deal with conflict; be prepared to front up where necessary.
- Deal with the issues without attacking the person.
- Employ quality teachers.
- Understand what makes a staff tick.

Principal 3

- To have that innate skill, instinctive knowledge of how to judge people.
- Earn respect. Integrity and honesty.
- Charisma; be able to earn respect and lead.
- Ability to keep all the balls in the air.
- Do the hard yards and be seen doing it
- Ability to make critical staffing appointments.

- Manage staff workload and stress that is inevitably compounded by intense P.D; assessment, analysis, and ever mounting compliance.
- Recognise that you don't have to be the curriculum expert.
- Recognise good / bad practice and where to pitch P.D.

Principal 4

- Vision; how you want the school to look now and in the future.
- Want the school to be a place I would want my kids to go.
- Finding a team and knowing who your allies are.
- Dealing with the silent passive / aggressive element that undermine change.
- Flatten management structure.
- No walking D.P's / A.P's best teachers in the classroom (all teachers in the classroom)
- Close working relationship with the board of trustees and the P.T.A.
- Do the hard yards. Work ethic.
- Pedagogical knowledge.
- Leadership involves an X factor and a presence; you have to commit to making significant change.
- You have to commit to strategic thinking and planning and then its implementation.
- Don't have to be the curriculum expert or the lead learner but you empower others to be.
- Student and staff welfare.
- Employment of staff critical; i.e. the right fit for your school culture.
- Be prepared to go in to bat for your staff and school.
- Over reliance on policy and regularmania not good for any organisation.
- Recognise, develop and nurture leadership potential and character and personality within your staff because you can't P.D.it
- Keep up to date with professional reading, leadership issues and keep abreast of educational research reading if you can understand it.

Principal 5

- Relationship building
- People skills
- Empowering people
- Recognising the skills you haven't got and filling the gaps
- Knowing your strengths and weaknesses
- Be able to make the tough calls
- Finding out who your allies are and being able to release inert potential in people
- Recognising key people
- Developing leadership in others
- Keeping the balls in the air
- Being able to employ quality, passionate, people
- Lead P.D. but don't have to be the expert
- For your own credibility recognise and own your mistakes

Principal 6

- Earning respect and building relationships
- Don't have to be the expert
- Be responsive to needs and manage change
- Be courageous and make the tough calls
- Recognise that everything in the school has to be directed towards quality teaching and learning
- Be able to be a good role model as a teacher
- Being able to validate student achievement
- Own your mistakes and respond to them
- Be a constant presence in front of pupils; class / duty / sports

Principal 7

- Didn't know what to expect spent first weeks trying to head around multiple tasks
- Having someone to run the finances
- Having well established good teachers on the staff
- Having a supportive board and P.T.A.
- Setting up I.C.T.cluster
- First time principals course a great help
- Setting up networks
- Knowing who to ask for advice
- Employing new staff very stressful
- Dealing with funding issues
- Biggest challenges are staffing issues, building relationships (keeping it all positive)
- Walking the talk

Principal 8

- Hasn't got a clue, seat of the pants stuff really, doesn't use a template and doesn't have a hard and fast philosophy, which seems to work.
- Make sure your staff is supportive of you if they are not find out why
- Work very hard to ensure personal relationships are top notch
- Consultative and non autocratic
- Employ good people then be a good employer
- Consultation, negotiation, feedback.
- Hate conflict will avoid it if at all possible but deal with it if necessary

Principal 9

- Have a vision; employ staff to go with you and sustain your vision
- Build effective board, senior management, staff relations meet regularly and listen to each other.
- Empower everyone to do their jobs properly
- Make sure each level of hierarchy acts effectively
- Regularly meet with all school leaders
- Constantly promote school philosophy
- Create and maintain culture reiterate themes each week
- Create an atmosphere of respect, honesty and open communication
- Leadership style based on interaction rather than theory

- Ensure structure, discipline, pastoral care and effective learning
- Second curriculum (common sense) very important
- Protect staff from extrinsic influences that may compromise their ability to teach
- Create physical environment that reflects your vision
- Make sure all pupils are safe and want to come to school
- Make effective decisions in the best interest of the whole school community

Principal 10

- Scoping the land, knowing the quality of your staff
- Getting rid of incompetent staff (either at the classroom teaching level or at the relationship level)
- Incompetent staff don't deserve your support they put student achievement at risk and your reputation at risk and in most cases you inherited them so you owe them nothing
- Replace incompetent staff with competent, passionate, good people
- If possible (without creating human rights issues) try to create a balance age / gender / experience. Its nice to have passionate young people you can mould to your own image and likeness
- Ensure staff are not resistant to change
- Don't change for the sake of change but if your vision isn't working change it
- Be a good employer ensure staff and student emotional and physical welfare and safety
- Always ensure the principles of natural justice when dealing with issues
- Ensure quality P.D. and practice in numeracy and literacy because they are fundamental but try to give equal importance to the Arts, P.E. and the social sciences and teach them all to swim
- Teach children about the past (History)
- Kids have to dance, sing, act and paint make sure they do it; make your school a happy place and make it fun.

Conclusions.

The principals interviewed felt that the things they talked about defined their attitudes towards leadership and their practice. The bullet points have not been listed as a hierarchy.

All the principals recognised that overseeing quality P.D. and evidence based learning to improve outcomes for students are critical overarching factors that define effective leadership.

None of the principals interviewed felt that actively participating in all professional learning was critical to effective leadership. Most felt regular classroom visits desirable not always possible and most pointed to a multiplicity of factors that prevented them from doing this as often as they would like. Actively leading and facilitating all P.D. was acknowledged as being fundamental to the role of a principal. However, the "lead learner," curriculum expert, font of all pedagogical knowledge Paragon, who knows and leads everything, was felt as being somewhat utopic rather than realistic. These aspects of the third dimension required an intensity that most of the interviewed principals felt was hard to sustain. The vast range of issues that

principals deal with on a daily basis but are important aspects of the job seem to be minimised by the leadership dimensions but they are a daily reality for principals.

All of the principles felt that the critical factors were relationship building, integrity, trust and the ability to employ quality staff.

Many of the key characteristics talked about by the interviewed principals are encapsulated in Viviane Robinson's paper but are articulated very much at a practice and experience level as opposed to a research level. The principals I interviewed seemed to place far more emphasis on empathy, curricular diversity and school as a place where there was still fun to be had.

Unequivocally all of the principals felt that teachers were being increasingly drawn into an environment of data gathering, analysis and moderation that puts pressure on the time spent planning and gathering resources to provide on going quality teaching. The researchers would say that data gathering, analysis and planning and teaching go hand in hand but the realities of achieving work life balance and reducing teacher stress would suggest otherwise.

Footnote.

The planned interviews with three principals of school in England did not take place because I got my timing wrong and schools were still closed for summer holidays while we were in England.

I did actually get to visit a school during our time in Europe, more specifically during our visit to Malta. I arrived in Malta with the superior attitude of the Tangata Whenua because I was born there and this set me above the common garden, run of the mill tourist. I was there with moral purpose; to investigate my Mountain and River as it were.

The Maltese were not exactly conversant with these concepts as there aren't many mountains or rivers in Malta as we know them, but they did help me find the place of my birth and our former Whare in Sliema.

I was born in the village of M'tarfa in 1954. It was a British army hospital then but since 1995 it has been a junior high school for boys. Even though it was the second day of the new school year the principal met with me for about half an hour and released his executive officer to show me around the school. One thing was clear; Deputy Principals are the same the world over from Manukau to Malta. This D.P. was severely dressing down some unfortunate who had incurred the wrath of the authorities. Rest assured a tune up in quick fire, loud, Maltese, sounds very impressive.

References.

Robinson Viviane M.J.

The Impact of leadership on student outcomes: Making sense of the evidence.

Keynote address.

Robinson Viviane, Hohepa Margie, Lloyd Claire. (University of Auckland 2009)

School Leadership and Student Outcomes:

Identifying what works and why.

Timperly Helen, Wilson Aaron, Barrar Heather, Fung Irene. (University of Auckland 2009)

Teacher Professional Learning and Development.

Leithwood and Steinbach (1995)

Expert Problem Solving:

Evidence from School and District Leaders

Note:

I didn't read these documents in their entirety but focused on sections that were relevant to my investigation.