

# **Sabbatical Report: Investigation into Principal Learning**

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## **Acknowledgements:**

My thanks to the Board who allowed me to apply for a sabbatical and the school staff who were so encouraging. I am grateful to the Ministry of Education for awarding me the sabbatical leave which gave me the opportunity to step back from the day to day work of a principal and reflect on my learning and what could benefit me in the future. I had the time to read and reflect on leadership and learning which was extremely valuable. To have the time to take four Religious Education papers to build on my knowledge for leading the special character in the school was a bonus.

## **Executive Summary:**

I wanted to know what learning principals had undertaken which was of benefit to their role. I decided to choose Catholic principals as we work in similar schools and special character is part of our leadership role and a common focus for our learning. From the findings I hoped to deepen my understanding of the different learning that is available and how it could help me plan for future professional development.

The more I read about leadership and learning and reflected on the responses from my colleagues I realised that although we have similar contexts within which we work, our learning is unique to our situation and learning needs at the time. Principals may choose different pathways or experience similar learning journeys but the result is specific to the principal and the unique situations we all experience.

In BES (2009) the research shows that leadership matters. It impacts on the leader, the quality of teaching in the school and the achievement of its students. Such research reminds principals of the importance of ensuring we have the knowledge and skills to do the job. The content of this report presents some of the leadership literature and research along with my findings.

## **Purpose and Investigation Focus**

The focus of my sabbatical investigation was that of principal learning. I wanted to know what learning principals had undertaken and its benefit to their role as principal and leader.

Questions for my investigation:

1. What learning did you undertake as a principal (or anything relevant before this)?
2. How was it of benefit to your leadership (personal/school)?
3. What learning has been the greatest value for you as a leader?

I chose to survey experienced principals. I anticipated that the variation in length of service would mean that the learning that would have been undertaken would be varied. The information from the

two retired principals I surveyed would provide some background information for comparing the learning over time. My own experiences would provide a comparison to my findings.

## **Rationale and Background Information**

I wanted to find out about the learning that other principals have chosen and whether that learning would be of value to me in developing my leadership in the future. Over the fourteen years I have been a principal my learning focus has changed from trying to manage and react to events to a more leadership focussed approach. Learning has become centred on how to more effectively lead my school, how to lead teachers and be the lead learner, how to raise achievement and teaching and how to support emerging leaders within the school.

Over my leadership journey I have signed up to professional development contracts, attended one off seminars and days, occasionally attended conferences and spent many years studying for a Masters in Teaching and Learning. Since completing this degree I have taken up study again towards a Diploma in Religious Studies. In the last five years I have become more selective in my attendance at one off courses and signed up for two professional development (PD) contracts that fit the school's strategic goals. The difference now is that the PD contracts have been a long term commitment and the whole school has been involved. The Numeracy and ICT PD contracts have made a lasting impact on teaching and learning in the school and showed the effectiveness of whole school learning. Ongoing learning is kept up with membership of a professional learning group of Catholic principals led by a facilitator who is the Catholic Principals' advisor. I still go to seminars if they are relevant and to the occasional conference. Membership of the various principals' associations opens up other learning opportunities.

## **Methodology**

I followed an Inquiry based process through using the action research model. The action research model follows a flexible process of planning, action and reflection allowing for repeated cycles of learning and putting that learning into action. It allows for different methods of data gathering and most importantly is manageable.

Barth (1990) presented a model for the professional development of principals that appears to follow a similar path and offers guidance for developing a learning and inquiry focus:

1. Engage in practice.
2. Reflect on practice.
3. Articulate practice.
4. Better understand practice.
5. Improve practice.

The knowledge I gained from this investigation is specific to the individuals surveyed and interviewed, but it may be similar to what other principals have found in their experience. I chose to use a mix of surveys and interviews to keep the process manageable for me and an option for principals if one data gathering method was easier for them than another.

## Literature and Research about Professional Development and Learning

Much has been written about leadership and I have read only a small fraction of the research and literature available. My reading focussed primarily on the aspects of leadership that demonstrated why effective learning is so important for principals. I present a summary of just a few I have found useful. I include references to the Ministry of Education published Best Evidence Synthesis (BES, 2009) which shows how the varied dimensions of leadership impact on our core business i.e. student achievement and illustrates the many leadership strategies that are required in the variety of situations that exist for leaders.

Barth (1990) emphasised that “learning is a sign of life” and that it is a “life long expression of our sense of wonder and of worth” (p.72) which is allied to a clear vision and a sense of professionalism.

There are many challenges in the role of principal and the Ministry of Education (2008) in its focus on kiwi leadership acknowledged that principals “need to have the personal and professional qualities, knowledge and leadership skills required to meet these challenges” (p.8). There is no doubt that our students have differing backgrounds and learning needs and the principal is required to manage and lead schools in a changing world but change is our reality as leaders. We are change agents (Fullan, 1999) in our school. To resolve the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) vs. professional leader dilemmas we face is not easy (Southworth, 2002). In times of change there will not be any one best model for change as each situation is unique. What is required though is quality learning as leaders so we can lead that change.

Adult learning has been shown to be most effective if it focuses on practical issues, takes into account prior knowledge and experience and allows self-pacing and learning from each other. Joyce and Showers (2002) promote the Nike slogan which says “just do it.” In their opinion it captures what people do in the process of creating learning and putting what is learned into action.

Professional development, however, is more than learning tricks of the trade (Mitchell, 1999) it requires building on previous experiences. It requires leaders to think about the type of leadership and learning that is relevant to the job (BES, 2009., Townsend, 1999). We can select from café type offerings or we can take a more systematic approach to our learning.

Professional development opportunities can be as many and varied as we want. They can vary from a seminar or day course but can be e-learning through the MOE educational leaders’ site, reading sabbatical reports, and reading educational research. The learning may be through study, courses and conferences or it may be by accessing external advisors and engaging in professional talk or learning conversations with other leaders or with teachers. We may be involved in a mentoring role or benefit from this or professional supervision, or have a critical friend, or a coach. We may be a member of a professional learning community where we are led in our learning by a facilitator. It is all about each leader finding a balance to meet his or her learning needs and learning styles.

What we have learned previously we bring to any new learning. Townsend (1999) found that learning takes different forms; foundational (prior learning), experiential (continual), situational (job related), emergent (personal growth), and intentional (formal and informal). This is supported by the research about the concept of leadership presented in BES (2009) where leadership is described as positional and distributed; highly fluid; and embedded in specific tasks and situations.

It is not the model or even the amount of learning but the learning focus, content and structure that make the professional development activity effective. Learning should be sustained, content-focused, coherent and active (Campbell, McNamara & Gilroy, 2004). Learning from experience does not seem to be enough.

Central to any choices about learning is the purpose of principalship i.e. the child and the child's learning (ERO, 2009). We may have a more indirect impact on learning than when we were teaching but we create the conditions for learning within the school and influence teachers to think and act differently to ensure any change is positive and effective (BES, 2009). Just as teacher learning should be focused on improving what happens in the classroom so too should the learning of leaders. The principal needs to be part of whole school learning and principal learning should reflect school priorities to raise student achievement. The principal will also need up to date knowledge of educational research in order to lead learning within the school.

Sustaining professional learning is vital to leadership development. Learning has to be sustained in that it is continually built on over time and not only job related but part of the job not separate from the school. Professional learning and development analysis from the BES report (2009) refers to the importance of the acceptance of professional learning and development as an 'inquiry and knowledge building cycle' by leadership and schools. A balance of experiential, situational and intentional learning will help leaders build on the foundational learning of what went on before (Townsend, 1999) with the links between new and old creating a scaffold for future learning ensuring learning is authentic and meaningful (Cardno & Piggot-Irvine, 1997., Duignan, 1999). Just as leadership changes over time so too do learning needs.

If schools are to improve it will be unique to that school as each school's context is unique. This applies to principal's professional learning. Learning is always contextual and is about capacity building (Fullan, 2006) which in the case of the principal's learning, the individual's capacity to lead. Just as a principal puts in place learning for teachers so too do principals need to ensure there are good learning opportunities for themselves, both at a personal and professional level. A principal needs to be aware of themselves as a learner and be able to identify their learning needs to undertake a process of deliberate and intentional learning (Townsend, 1999). This learning may be collaborative or individual (Bolt, 2006) but should focus on personal development and problem solving. Coaching as reciprocal learning is one way of learning with a peer, based on real experiences with a problem solving approach to develop new ways of thinking and leading (Robertson, 2005a). It can provide a challenge and develop deeper learning. The goal is to link theory to practice so it is more than the learning from previous experiences.

Alongside a balance in learning choices and sustaining new learning, another vital factor is time (Robertson, 2005b). Leaders need time to meet, to talk about the learning and time to reflect on and evaluate that learning and its application to the school. This can happen through a professional learning community, a coaching or mentoring context or the more formal process of professional supervision.

The professional learning group emphasis on reflective and collaborative learning led by a facilitator has a similar focus to coaching on developing leadership capabilities through sharing dilemmas and experiences and engaging in professional talk but with the addition of a more formalised professional reading component (Robertson, 2005b). It too develops deeper and sustainable learning.

Effective learning opportunities may be varied but learning is not isolated, it is cumulative. Reading showed that principals learn through a variety of professional development opportunities both organised and more informal experiences. Growing as a principal is an ongoing process with new learning created by building on many learning experiences. Whatever the choice of learning the learner must be actively engaged in the learning and the content and structure of that learning must be future focused and build new learning. It is more than school goals it is about personal goals too.

The findings from this investigation appear to be typical of principals generally.

## Findings

What I found out from my investigation of the learning of twelve principals (including me) of Catholic schools in Christchurch and two retired principals. This gives an overview of the varied learning pathways of the fourteen participants and what is seen as valuable learning.

Question 1. What learning did you undertake as a principal (or anything relevant before this)?

### **Valuable learning has been gained from:**

1. A structured programme; examples are First Time Principals' Programme; Experienced Principals' Development Programme; NZPF Mentoring Project; Aspiring Principals' Programme.
2. Ongoing professional development in its many forms.
3. Learning opportunities that are relevant to the work both as part of the job and deliberate choices related to leadership.
4. Professional networks such as area Clusters; ICTPD Clusters; Associations of Principals; NZEI; NZPPF; NZCPPA; MOE working parties; local clusters.
5. Professional learning groups such as the Catholic Principals' Learning Groups.
6. Discovery.
7. Reflection.
8. Personal study which varied: examples are Masters in Teaching and Learning; Masters in Educational Leadership; Masters in Educational Management; Diploma in Educational Management, Diploma in Religious Studies; Upgrade to Bachelor in Teaching and Learning; AST Papers; Sabbatical and Study leave.
9. Personal professional reading e.g. BES Leadership; Kiwi Leadership; Kahikitea; NZ Curriculum Document; the latest educational research on the MOE site.
10. Mentoring; examples given are the value of the principals as mentor and role model to the teacher before becoming a principal; mentor for principal in his/her role; professional supervision.
11. Working with experts and advisors: examples are Rural Advisor, Catholic Education Office Principals' Advisor;
12. Secondment: MOE reading charters; ERO: Advisory.
13. Being a leader and the experience in the role.

Question 2. How was it of benefit to your leadership (personal/school)?

### **The value of the learning has been and is seen in:**

- Confidence. Reassurance about effective practice.
- Being up to date.
- Learning what is relevant to the job.
- Having an educationally sound basis for making decisions.
- Reflective practice; being a reflective leader and learner.
- Developing a leadership style.
- Being able to develop leadership skills and knowledge for oneself.
- Being able to implement change.
- Developing the leadership of others within the school i.e. shared or distributed leadership.
- Learning with others at school e.g. curriculum; ICT.
- The development of strategic thinking, vision and philosophy.
- Effective practice.
- Time to learn leadership.
- Time out opportunities to reflect and see the big picture.
- Time to be engaged in professional learning conversations and reading.

Question 3. What learning has been the greatest value for you as a leader?

### **The most valuable learning has been:**

- Learning that has been applicable to the job.
- Developing knowledge about the job through the learning chosen.
- Confidence to do the job and be a leader.
- The confidence gained that you are heading in the right direction.
- Reflective practice.
- Being up to date.
- Ability to recognise and celebrate what is good.
- Insight into leadership style and how that helps work and relationships with others.
- Learning that is done later in principalship when you are ready to look at leadership and it relates to real leadership rather than managing.
- Learning at the right time.

### **My Conclusions**

- Learning is related to the context of the principal as leader of a school but also as leader of a school which is unique.
- The learning required by the principal is dependent on the situation at the time and specific to the school context.
- Learning is unique to the person, their experiences and learning needs.
- Professional learning works best as an ‘inquiry and knowledge building cycle’ by leadership and schools.
- Learning is related to the school’s strategic and learning goals but there must be an opportunity for personal goals and learning.
- Time is required for learning to have a deeper impact on practice.
- There will be little or no learning without reflection and critical thinking.
- Professional learning conversations with colleagues in both formal and informal learning situations are effective in building knowledge and skills.
- Outside expertise can be useful.
- The principal needs to be involved in learning with the teachers.

What is relevant for one may not be relevant for another although there will be common leadership skills and knowledge that will benefit all leaders. It may be that principals chose a similar learning pathway but it was very much related to their learning needs at the time. Those of us who have been principals longer have not had the advantage of the First Time Principals’ programme which has been in action for 10 years in 2011. Not all of us have been part of the Experienced Principals’ programmes available but most principals have undertaken personal study and carefully chosen opportunities to maximise their learning so it is deeper learning rather than surface learning.

The learning that these principals have undertaken over the years reflects the elements of the Kiwi Leadership model (MOE, 2008) with the emphasis on teaching and learning, building networks within and beyond the school and growing leadership within the school. It also reflects the changing needs of leadership and how leadership is an adaptive process. Learning must adapt too.

For future learning principals need to ensure that what they choose to learn has meaning for them and is relevant to the job of leadership, that they focus on building their capacity and sustaining improvement for themselves, the teachers and the school. The principal does not have to know it all. Distributing the leadership and supporting leaders in the school will add complementary skills to the leadership team.

Learning needs constantly change. Principal learning will always be a personal response and application within the unique situation that is the school. It may at times be similar to others’ and it

may vary. There is no one model that is the best or only way but it must be quality learning. Growing as a principal is an ongoing process with new learning created by building on many learning experiences. It's about learning how to do what is needed to do (BES, 2009). This is what I take from this investigation. What I have chosen to learn has been right for me and in planning future learning I will carefully choose what will provide the most valuable learning for me with the greatest benefit for the school.

## **Implications for Schools and Principals**

Leadership learning needs to be a priority for Boards.

Principals need to:

- Be open to learning all the time.
- Be the lead learner.
- Stay close to the core business of teaching and learning.
- Keep up to date with educational change research and practice including leadership theory and practice.
- Keep up to date with teaching theory and practice, learning with the teachers and keeping the focus on whole school pedagogy.
- Focus on improving yourself not just teachers.
- Take the time to learn to undertake personal study.
- Take the time for quality reflection on practice and hearing and reading about leadership theory and research.
- Ensure the management and leadership demands are balanced and that whatever learning is required is done.

## **Conclusion**

Learning pathways will vary. What is right for one principal may not be useful learning for another. Ongoing and sustainable learning is vital for the leader and the school. Principals have the responsibility to be learners, to focus on improving ourselves, not just teachers and students and ensure that learning happens. A balance of experiential, situational and intentional learning will help leaders build on the foundational learning of what went on before. Links between the new and the old learning create a scaffold for future learning. Principals also need the time to learn away from the daily routines to allow for quality reflection, critical thinking about their actions and the reading about leadership theory and research. If this does not happen there will be no change or growth and life long learning will remain an ideal not a reality.

Barth (1990) presents an argument that is as relevant in 2011 as in 1990.

If ways can be devised to help principals reflect thoughtfully about the work they do, analyse that work, clarify and reveal their thinking through spoken and written articulation, and engage in conversations with others about that work, both they and their colleagues will better understand their complex schools, the tasks confronting them and their own styles as leaders. And understanding schools is the single most important pre-condition for improving them. (p.85).

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