

Sabbatical Report  
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## **Acknowledgements**

I wish to thank the Ministry of Education and NZEI for granting me this sabbatical which gave me the precious time for reading a myriad of professional material, reflection and new learning.

Whilst I initially found the concept of not going to school a little unnerving and challenging I soon embraced the 'gift of time' to grow professionally. I really appreciated and valued the uninterrupted time to read, to attend two international conferences, read a range of professional material, reflect and look to the future.

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*"Sustainable leadership is critical to sustaining change in the learning community. Sustainable leadership lasts, it is about succession planning. Sustainable leadership spreads; it means distributing the leadership through the school community, it must be seen as a shared responsibility. Sustainable leadership is socially just; it benefits all learners in all schools. Leaders who care about sustainability accept responsibility for the schools and students that their own actions affect in the wider environment (Hargreaves and Fink, 2004). Effective leaders must be coherence-makers".*

## **Purpose:**

To investigate how clusters of schools can work together, to sustain learning across the schools.

To explore how clusters, as learning communities, can collectively benefit from working together.

To explore the notion that, “sustainability is a team sport and not a race to the finish line.”

## **Rationale**

Across the cluster teachers regularly engage in professional development opportunities to enhance their skills as educators. Whilst teachers’ professional development needs may be identified and co-constructed during the appraisal process, they may also be imposed on teachers through whole school/cluster self-funded initiatives or Ministry of Education Professional Development Contracts. Despite the considerable investment of time and money, however, many pedagogical shifts are not sustained over time. Fullan (2001) attributes this to the fact that “in schools the main problem is not the absence of innovation but the presence of too many, episodic, piecemeal, superficially adorned projects” (p. 109). The challenge for principals and other leaders of learning is maximising the effect of the professional learning on teacher practice to improve outcomes for students within the cluster.

Darling-Hammond (1998) asserts that:

Today’s schools face enormous challenges. In response to an increasingly complex society and a rapidly changing technology-based economy, schools are being asked to educate the most diverse student body in our history. This task is one that cannot be teacher-proofed through management systems, testing mandates or curriculum packages. At its roots, achieving high levels of student understanding requires immensely skilful teaching and schools that are organised to support teachers’ continuous learning. (¶ 1)

The challenge for leaders of learning in the Glenfield cluster is how we can collectively maximise the effect of the professional learning on teacher practice to improve outcomes for students all our schools.

## **Methodology:**

Review of literature: From relevant literature identify key findings for each of the following themes

- sustainable leadership;

- the sustainability of professional learning;
- the essential elements of a professional learning community

Explore the focus questions with colleagues and identify key findings

## Findings

Sustainable educational leaders promote and practice sustaining learning. (Hargreaves and Fink, 2005). They sustain others. They believe that if change is going to matter, spread and last, sustainable leadership that stretches across many leaders must now also be a fundamental priority of the systems in which leaders do their work. It is therefore critical that the principals of the schools in the cluster understand that to sustain change in their own schools they must demonstrate a commitment to sustaining those shifts beyond their own school gate.

It is important that a learning community sees sustainability as cyclical and that they commit to fostering the attributes of persistence and resilience within it. Educational expectations within our society demand that professionals do more and more and embrace change at an ever-increasing rate of efficiency and effectiveness. Hence it is imperative that learning communities are able to articulate what sustainability looks like for them. Planning for sustainability needs to be a deliberate act and this needs to be underpinned by an understanding that embedding pedagogical change takes an inordinate amount of time and energy.

Pedagogical leaders must be explicit in the ways that they connect appraisal, professional development, teacher practice and student achievement for teachers, thus ensuring that professional learning is viewed as a continuous process embedded in their professional lives. It is imperative that principals view sustainability as fostering professional growth beyond their own school gates and foster the notion that it must be developed without compromising the development of other learning communities. Sustainability must be viewed as being a team sport not a race to the finish-line by individuals.

Hargreaves and Fink (2000) assert that sustainability does not simply mean whether something can last. It addresses how particular initiatives can be developed without compromising the development of others in the surrounding environment, now and in the future. Fullan (2005a) supports Hargreaves and Fink by defining sustainability as “the capacity of a system to engage in the complexities of continuous improvement consistent with deep values of human purpose” (ix). The drive for continuous improvement must be both an individual and system responsibility (Fullan and Sharratt, 2007 p. 116). Hargreaves and Fink (2007) believe there are seven principles of sustainability in educational change: depth, length, breadth, justice, diversity, resourcefulness and conservation and that they are intertwined. They use the phrase “they are a meal, not a menu” (p. 51).

A cluster of schools, if they are collectively committed to working together, must explore their own mental models of sustainability and develop a shared understanding of what sustainability might mean for them. Sustainability needs to be planned for and not treated as an article of faith. Timperley Wilson, Barrar, & Fung, (2007) found from their research that sustainability of professional learning is “treated as an article of faith rather than a condition subjected to empirical verification” (p. xxxv).

Sustainability was defined as: “the *contribution* that professional learning makes to the coherence of effective instruction in a school and to the knowledge and practices in that school about effective schooling improvement. That effectiveness can be *measured* by continuous improvement in student achievement, particularly for those students whose patterns of achievement place them at risk of not meeting expected levels over time” (Ministry of Education, 2006).

A quality professional learning community is underpinned by adults who engage in:

- Deep understanding: teachers actively involved in constructing deep understanding of pedagogy in ways that are connected to their daily work. Their learning is relevant, with direct transfer connections to their classroom practice.
- Inquiry: adults actively inquire into their own practice, and undertake action inquiries into issues of priority in the school. Risk taking and learning from error are essential aspects of these inquiries.
- Communication: staff engages in substantive dialogue with peers.
- Collaboration: staff commits to working together in a range of ways.
- Self-responsibility: adults engage in learning that is self-directed and learner-driven. Their professional learning community takes responsibility for establishing where they are at, their desired direction and for selecting appropriate strategies and processes to help them achieve them.
- Human development: adults develop relationships grounded in social-ethical values (Dalton and Anderson, 2008, PLOT).

There is consensus in the literature that trusting relationships, support, an open, positive environment for learning, collaboration and team work; skillful dialogue and communication, clear shared beliefs about learning and a collective vision, need to be evident at all times. Hargreaves (2007), Stoll and Louis (2007), and Fullan (2005a) support the notion that professional learning communities renew teachers intellectually by enhancing and increasing the ways they learn together, using evidence and experience to improve student learning, have demonstrable and measurable positive effects on student achievement (cited in Hargreaves and Fink, 2007).

It is essential in the New Zealand school setting that principals understand how to lead learning in the unique contexts of their own schools, how to develop strong learning communities and that learning can and does happen everywhere (Ministry of Education, 2008a). The closer the leadership gets to the core business of teaching and learning, the more impact leaders have on valued student outcomes. School leaders who build relationships through a collaborative and tight focus on teacher and student learning

can make a powerful difference to their students (Robinson, 2008). It is imperative that principals get out of their offices and lead learning. They need to be learning centered leaders.

Robinson (2007) through her meta-analysis of international literature, that empirically examined the links between school leadership and academic or non-academic outcomes, has identified the following five leadership dimensions. They are: 1) establishing goals and expectations; 2) strategic resourcing, planning; 3) coordinating and evaluating teaching and the curriculum; 4) promoting and participating in teaching, learning and development; and 5) ensuring an orderly and supportive environment (p. 8).

Robinson (2007, p. 9) is very clear about the critical role relationships play and asserts that relationship skills are embedded in every dimension. “Effective leaders do not get relationships right and then tackle the educational challenges, they incorporate both sets of constraints into their problem solving”. The nature of school leadership is values led, people centered and achievement orientated (Piggott-Irvine, 2008).

A key finding in the Best Evidence Synthesis (BES) has been that teachers need to have time and opportunity to engage with key ideas and integrate those ideas into a coherent theory of practice. Changing teaching practice in ways that have a significant impact on student outcomes is not easy. Policy and organisation that consistently shift priorities to the next big thing with little understanding/evaluation of how current practice is impacting on desired outcomes for students undermines the sustainability of changes already under way. Innovation needs to be carefully balanced with consolidation if professional learning experiences are to impact on student outcomes (Timperley et al., 2007).

To ensure the sustainability of pedagogical shifts it is evident that there needs to be deliberate acts of leadership-leaders making evidence-informed leadership decisions, deliberate acts of teaching-teachers making evidence-informed teaching decisions, deliberate acts of learning-students working towards meeting evidenced-informed learning goals, and deliberate acts of facilitation-facilitators making evidenced-informed decisions about guiding professional learning (Ministry of Education, 2005, p. 3).

It is argued that professional development for teachers is not sufficient to change instructional practice especially across an entire system. Teachers must believe that serious engagement in their own learning is part and parcel of what it means to be held accountable for continuous improvement in instructional practice.

One of the revised ‘Professional Standards for Primary Principals’ is Pedagogy. This professional standard clearly outlines the requirement for the principal to be the pedagogical leader of their unique learning community. Principals need to be able to demonstrate how they are building and sustaining a school community that has learning and teaching at its heart (Ministry of Education, 2008b).

For many principals there is a tension between their role as an educational leader and their responsibilities as a manager and administrator. The 'Kiwi Leadership' model of Educational Leadership sets out the qualities, knowledge and skills, recent research and consultation has identified as being necessary, to enable principals to effectively lead 21<sup>st</sup> century schools in New Zealand. Educational leadership is central to the model with relationships being the driver (Ministry of Education, 2008a, p.12).

In order to engage with confidence in the leadership practices that make a measurable difference to students, it is clear that school leaders need high- quality opportunities to update and deepen their knowledge of curriculum, assessment, and pedagogy and learn to integrate that knowledge into all leadership activities (Ministry of Education, 2008a).

A key role of the professional leader is to grow others as pedagogical leaders. Building capability is critical to sustainability. Strengthening pedagogical leadership is crucial for reducing gaps in achievement. At the heart of enhanced capability are the relationships built on trust, and a team approach where everyone collaborates to improve academic and social outcomes for students (Ministry of Education, 2008a). In terms of the link between a principal's action and student learning, Fullan (2010) asserts that there is one finding that stands out as being more powerful than any other, and it is: "the degree to which the principal participates as a learner in helping teachers to figure out how to get classroom and school-wide improvement" (Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008).

It is imperative that the Cluster Learning Community is underpinned by a continuous focus on its induction, monitoring, tutoring, peer training and coaching programmes. Action-based inquiry needs to be embedded into the daily lives of teachers. We need to pay greater cognisance to the fact that teacher development needs to encompass the multiple dimensions of the teacher's development: social, personal, emotional, moral, spiritual and conceptual as well as their professional expertise. Robertson and Murrphy (2006) found that the thinking around teachers' development has not yet been aligned with that of students' development where holistic education has long been recognised as vital to effective development and successful education.

Fullan (2007) states that student learning depends on every teacher learning all the time and that this occurs in the workplace. De-isolating teaching is critical to enabling teachers to work together to continuously improve instruction. It requires teachers to observe other teachers, be observed by others, and participate in informed dialogue on the quality and effectiveness of their instruction. It does require some risk-taking by teachers and other leaders; however, Fullan (2007) believes it is absolutely essential to the future of professional learning.

It is imperative that we understand the strong connections between learning and teaching practices for students and professional learning communities. When we do this we are empowered to hold a big picture of pedagogy for all learners in the school community and act on them in congruent ways. Doig (2008) believes that "what we focus on grows".

A professional learning community is about establishing lasting new collaborative structures that focus on building the capacity for continuous improvement. Fullan (2006) asserts that they are meant to be enduring capacities, not just a programme innovation. A professional learning community should contribute to other learning communities, in this case within the cluster. Fullan (2006) refers to this as “lateral capacity building” (p. 10). Fullan (2010), as a result of his research about being change savvy, concludes that “schools must become part of a network or cluster with a focus on specificity”(p.37).

The roles of the professional learning community are to support through working together, sharing ideas and being supported to update knowledge and skills and to challenge through raising student achievement through evidence-based learning conversations. The intersection of these two drivers is relationships. Relational trust is the biggest driver of student achievement. Trust and challenge need to be evident in the learning community. Timperley (2008) believes that “little professional learning takes place without challenge, change however involves risk, but before teachers take that risk, they need to trust their honest efforts will be supported, not belittled” (p. 16).

By building a professional learning community that directly supports and contributes to the kind of professional learning that makes a real difference to teacher practice for improved student learning outcomes is critical to ensuring the sustainability of the professional learning and strong, quality collaborative practices.

### **Focus questions key findings:**

What leadership attributes need to be evident to enable clusters to work together?

- Professional trust and respect and a strong sense of collegiality amongst leaders initially, and then amongst staff
- Shared vision for purpose – about the improvement to advantage ALL children in cluster not just the ones at my school.
- Distributive leadership – don’t be the one/s doing all the leading, get other staff on board to lead initiatives and share good practice
- Creativity
- A belief in the benefits of working together and the commitment to do so
- A willingness to share the workload when required
- The ability to listen, problem solve and negotiate

How do educational leaders across a cluster collaboratively build and sustain relational trust?

- Informally with social gatherings and networking opportunities
- Formally through shared dialogue and discussion
- Through observations of each other’s practice
- By meeting frequently to discuss educational issues and share common scenarios

- Through the creation of a shared cluster vision that has student learning at the heart of the matter
- By having the ability to have hard conversations with colleagues, and be honest in managing community perceptions

How do leaders of learning support each other to grow teacher capability to enhance teaching and learning?

- Dialogue and sharing of what is happening in each other's schools
- Shared commitment to excellence across cluster schools, not just own school
- Sharing of professional development opportunities across cluster Informal support between leaders of schools
- Mentoring of newly appointed leaders
- Sharing of costs to up-skill teachers/leaders i.e. DP/AP professional learning groups
- The establishment of working groups with a specific focus
- Cluster applications to support the professional growth of all teachers
- Whole cluster professional development
- The sharing of teacher experts across the cluster

How do successful clusters sustain the professional learning of their teachers in a multi age/discipline environment for the betterment of all?

- Focus on what really makes a difference for student outcomes: pedagogy, moderation, behaviour support that keeps students engaged and in school.
- Share good practice with each other – share effective teachers who model quality pedagogy for others to observe
- Provide opportunities for staff to network between schools and make those connections around successful practice and student outcomes for themselves
- Acknowledge good practice across the cluster – don't focus on just one school to be the one held up as a model for others
- Formalise visits to one another's schools with specific focus areas
- Use current research to underpin cluster practices and processes

How do the students in a cluster benefit from a strong working cluster partnership?

- Consistency of expectation and language as they move through the schools from primary to intermediate to college.
- Parents comfortable and familiar with expectations so can better support processes and learning for their children.
- Professional dialogue between schools and a focus on good practice will improve the quality of teaching and learning for all students in cluster
- Consistency for those students who are transient within cluster over time
- Greater access to a wider range of resources and opportunities
- Younger students benefit from the talents and abilities of the older students



- Positive dialogue between individual principals and their communities
- Alignment across the cluster when addressing common issues

## Implications

There is a broad agreement in the literature that professional learning will only be habitually embedded into teacher practice, thus ensuring sustainability, when the principals have the professional capacity to be the pedagogical leaders. A commitment to building leadership capacity across the schools through shared distributed leadership and succession planning needs to be evident. A culture of mentoring and coaching needs to be fostered. The cluster professional learning community should be underpinned by high relational trust to support the de-isolation of teacher practice. The professional learning opportunities need to be powerful and should be underpinned by a strong theoretical base. The learning community should have strong inquiry processes embedded in it.

Principals in the cluster need to commit to what Fullan (2005b) sees as being the essential elements for sustainability: 1) Publicly serve with moral purpose; publicly foster a community commitment to achievement. Collectively having a strong focus on closing the achievement gaps between students; 2) Commit to changing the context at all levels; being focused on 'tri-level development'; school, community, national; 3) Commit to lateral capacity building through networks by fostering deliberate strategies to build connections; 4) Foster intelligent accountability by ensuring local ownership whilst being responsible to external accountability. Focus on building the capacity of all the cluster schools; 5) Commit to deep learning by focusing on continuous improvement, adaptive and collective problem solving. Ensure there is a focus on developing new capacities across the cluster; 6) Demonstrate a commitment to short and long-term results by committing to fostering the eight elements of sustainability; 7) Understand cyclical energizing; value both the periods of energy and the periods of plateau; and 8) Foster the long lever of leadership by demonstrating a commitment to growing leadership capacity across the cluster (p.16-17).

It is essential, that the principals in a cluster look beyond their own schools to ensure the collective sustainability of the pedagogical shifts focused on in recent Ministry Funded Projects. It is critical that we collectively focus on embedding the eight elements of sustainability as identified by Fullan (2005b). We need to pay heed to the words of Hargreaves and Fink (2005) who state that "change in education is easy to propose, hard to implement and extraordinarily difficult to sustain" (p. 11).

As cluster we need to: 1) collectively articulate a vision and commitment to the priorities for all students and to everyone in the cluster; 2) develop a cluster plan for continuous improvement; 3) continue to use data to drive instruction and resourcing; and 4) continue to build principal and teacher capacity across the priorities, and commit to building learning communities at all levels. These deliberate acts of planning and explicit attention to continuous improvement will support the system's commitment to sustain the pedagogical shifts across the cluster (Fullan and Sharratt, 2007). We must be mindful, however, that sustainability, as in continuous effort and energy, is vulnerable

and that it can be destroyed quickly with different leadership and a change in political climate (Fullan and Sharratt, 2007).

As principals of schools in the cluster we need to continue to foster and grow the notion of 'the new professionalism' where there is a strong emphasis on building a strong, professional learning community, beyond our own schools. It will require teachers to collaborate, to open their doors to other teachers for observation, discuss the progress and achievement of their students and ways to improve student achievement. It will require them to accept direction from their leaders in changing their methods where clear evidence shows they need to change in order to move a student along, and it will require teachers to believe in their ability to make a difference to student learning and achievement" (Timperley, Phillips & Wiseman, 2002, p. 12).

To continue to grow and strengthen the current positive ethos' that are evident in so many clusters, it is critical that the following attributes continue to be maximised: reciprocity, clear structures, institutional relationships, transparency, continuity and regularity, acknowledgement of contributions, continual consultation, and a belief in the collaborative process. Fullan (2010) asserts that clusters must be "purposeful, specific and learn to link practice with outcomes" ( p. 38).

## **Conclusion**

Effective educational leadership builds the pedagogical, administrative and cultural conditions necessary for successful learning and teaching. Principals do not do this alone. Principals need to have the kinds of leadership skills and understandings that will help them to maintain the best possible conditions for teaching, learning and building community confidence not only in their own school but also in the cluster. Building strong learning communities where there is a shared commitment to investigating, exploring and evaluating practice is a critical leadership responsibility (Ministry of Education, 2008).

The self-managing model of educational leadership evident in the New Zealand school setting can be isolating. The model can lead to everyone solving their own problems. It can also by default lead to a highly competitive environment where schools are competing for students, staff and perceived reputation.

Cardno (2002) asserts that "if collaborative practices are to find their way into the fabric of school life, it will be as a result of the commitment of leaders to the notion of including others in the decision-making and problem-solving processes in the school". If the benefits of collaborative leadership are to be realised then the value of collaboration and the skills needed to practice effective shared decision-making should be made overt to staff and others involved. She also asserts that "features of collaborative practice in education may be identified as contributing to professionalism and collegiality, and community commitment to institutional goals".

Once school leaders see the slightly bigger picture and get to know each other in a common endeavor of great moral purpose Fullan (2010) asserts that leaders thrive on competitive collaboration.

Within clusters there are skills, knowledge and creativity that must be maximised to support student achievement. The effectiveness of a cluster however does come down to the willingness of the principals to work together with the upmost professional integrity. Principals are the essence of a cluster. There needs to be a predisposition to helping one another. It can be argued that neither students nor teachers within a cluster will get any benefit from being part of the cluster if principals don't foster cluster collaboration. A high level of goodwill must be evident at all times. Clusters need to be built on the power of 'allegiance' to each other. (Bolye, 2009, as cited in Fullan, 2010) states "allegiance reflects and demonstrates a genuine collective responsibility with full commitment to the cause" (p. 40). There has to be a common understanding and commitment to the fact that it takes time and energy to collaborate and that everyone needs to participate. A weak cluster is hard to strengthen. Clusters must learn and share and learn (Fullan, 2010).

Building trusting and learning focussed relationships within and beyond the school is central to the principal's role (Bryk and Schneider, 2002, as cited in Ministry of Education, 2008). Relationships built on trust are developed when principals respect and care for others and consistently "walk the talk" (Ministry of Education, 2008).

**Leadership, trust, risk-taking and communication are the essence of an effective cluster of schools working together**

*Kia kotahi te hoe*

*May the paddling be in unison*

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