

Leadership for Principals and the Desire for Continuous Improvement.

Bruce Cunningham. Belmont Primary School, Auckland. Term 2 2012.

Acknowledgements include the Belmont Primary School Board of Trustees, the staff of Belmont Primary School and the Principals of the following schools. Campbell's Bay Primary, Murray's Bay Primary, Red Beach Primary, Marton Primary, Hurapaki Primary, Greenhithe Primary, Takapuna Primary, Birkenhead Primary, Ascot Primary, Donovan Primary, Waihi Central and Willow Park Primary. I am grateful for the discussions with Jan Hill and Dr Kay Hawk.

Executive Summary:

Effective principals are effective leaders. Common traits of effective leaders show they are enthusiastic and passionate towards the success of students; they have pride and self belief, undertake critical self reflection, have positive work ethics, are resilient and are approachable. Effective principals can communicate to a wide range of audiences and show a commitment to personalised learning, embrace diversity, rethink learners' and teachers' roles and can forge new partnerships with their ever changing school communities.

To be effective leaders, principals need to keep their focus clearly on the central vision for their school. Effective principals are therefore knowledgeable, are not afraid of change and take their own learning seriously.

Effective leaders recognise that learning has to be personalised, not standardised as the current government would want us to believe, while understanding the importance of assessment which affects teachers' planning and students' progress.

Purpose of Sabbatical:

This sabbatical has a focus on leadership, continuous improvement and assessment. The purpose of this sabbatical is to help me stay professionally up to date, improve my knowledge, skill and performance and give me time to reflect on my current and future practice.

I want to extend and strengthen my own professional knowledge and leadership of Belmont Primary School, Auckland and give fellow principals some food for thought.

It was also a time to refresh myself after 32 years of education and 7 years as a principal.

Rationale and Background:

I subscribe to the world of continuous improvement for students, staff and of course myself. Changes in society, government and education reform are three factors that an educational leader has to deal with for the good of their learning community. I want to be able to reflect on my educational and life experiences and have the opportunity to share, listen and learn. A critical aspect of raising achievement relates to having robust formative assessment practices functioning in all classrooms. Assessment should directly impact on what classroom teachers and school leaders do to improve achievement. It has to be purposeful and understandable. Finally I fully subscribe to what David Stewart wrote “One of the most crucial skills that a principal must have is the ability to be involved in reflective action. That is to say that she/he must be able to think critically about the events that have occurred, and are occurring, and be able to plan future action.”

Activities undertaken:

I was fortunate to be able to interview principals of like schools, teachers of like schools and I was able to read research articles. I was able to interview principals of rural schools, lower decile schools, smaller schools I was able to spend time with educational leaders New Zealand wide and discuss at length “What makes a leader effective?” These anecdotes were from experienced leaders of successful schools all who have time to be reflective, thoughtful and honest in their theories of why they are successful leaders of successful schools.

Findings:

To start this process of reflection, establishing what effective leaders do and what changes I will need to make to be effective in a career that has change at the forefront of most practices, policies and initiatives, I first of all took time to review my career and reflect on the highlights and lowlights of being a principal for 7 years of a high achieving successful inner city decile 10 school.

My conclusions from this self review included reviewing appraisals, reviewing ERO reports and discussing leadership with parents and staff.

Some of highlights include positive appraisals and ERO comments, however I need to know why these comments were made and what can I continue to do.

Kay Hawk wrote “this is one of the most positive appraisal reports I have had the privilege of presenting. Bruce has performed at an exceptionally high level over all the areas...” I surveyed the staff as part of my self reflection to find out why they thought the school was effective. The findings showed that I valued staff, I had retained and retrained quality staff, moved ineffective staff on and recruited very well. This simple task according to staff had ensured that the staff were of high quality, were cohesive, supportive, cooperative, collegial and congenial. These attributes ensured that the quality of education was very strong, that the Leadership team was effective and therefore a culture of success, a culture of openness and a culture of risk taking was formed. Very soon the community was talking and we quickly formed a reputation in the community. Parents started enrolling due to communication, high quality teachers and visible leaders. I also surveyed the staff to ask them what they thought my personal attributes were. Their responses included forming positive relationships due to communication, having a passion, being enthusiastic, valuing staff by encouraging and acknowledging them, having a focus on learning and developing leaders throughout the staff. Their final comment was that I had a vision that was shared with staff and this vision became the cornerstone of all decisions.

Changes staff wanted included no more initiatives (2 staff), consult more (2 staff) while 13 staff indicated there were no improvements required.

In my conclusion I made a mental note that what I believe makes an effective leader after reviewing my notes, readings and interviews was that my own staffs thoughts were very similar to those leaders of our schools nationwide.

This self reflection is good for self esteem however I need to ensure that I don't stop. I want to keep ensuring that I perform at a constant high level. Discussing the roles of principals, effective leadership, assessment and the future of schooling in New Zealand with principals, with educational leaders and reading articles will allow me to grow and hopefully enable principals who want to keep improving to do so.

This review and sabbatical has led me to believe that effective leaders are those who put student learning at the forefront of all decisions. This calls for a greater focus on recognising and working with learners' strengths, and thinking about what role teachers can play in

supporting the development of every learner's potential. This is simply personalised learning. All school leaders I talked to were not in favour of National Standards as learning needs to be personalised, not standardised. Learners need to be in control of their own learning, due to feedback, goal setting and structuring their experiences so that they are able to maximise their potential. Therefore school leaders need to radically rethink how they operate. Many schools are still traditional in their building designs, how they make up their cohorts, class numbers, the lesson and the teacher as the 'transmitter.' These traditions and now National Standards prevent personalised learning. One of my questions to today's principals so they can reflect and think is 'what obstacles do you have in your school which prevent personalised learning?'

As principals who want to lead change we need knowledge and insight as to what the key drivers are. My research indicates that if principals have a central vision for the school, which is collaborative, and this is their focus they will be successful. Therefore principals need to ensure they have the necessary professional development to improve their knowledge and thinking, they gain a deeper appreciation of the conditions teachers need if they are to achieve and sustain improvements in the learning of each student. While teachers are responsible for ensuring all students achieve to the best of their ability, they need to be supported in their work by principals' deep knowledge about teaching and learning.

As part of my research passion for learning was a common theme amongst my fellow principals. Leaders, who take their own learning seriously and keep their own passion for learning alive, act as a role model for their staff and students. Keeping up to date with evidence for professional leadership is now a fundamental requirement. Which leads to unanswered questions such as why are some leaders still traditional in their thoughts, why are the majority of leaders opposed to charter schools, why have some of the older principals not engaged in professional learning at Universities, why do some principals of failing schools not seek support and why do some principals not effect change?

To lead change, which will enable continuous improvement, principals need knowledge and insight into the complex processes of change and the key drivers that make for successful change (Fullan, 2003). In particular they need to keep their focus clearly on the central vision for their school, even in the face of distractions. A principal's ability to establish relational trust among all members of the school community contributes to building a collaborative

learning culture that can help bring the school community together around the core values that underpin the vision.

Although the principal is in a critical position to lead change, he or she cannot do it alone. Empowering others throughout the school to develop and exercise leadership roles and to share in the leadership of change is both desirable and achievable.

Effective leaders recognise that change can bring about counter-productive emotional responses. It can also challenge established practice and professional values. Principals leading significant change need to pay particular attention to ensuring all staff feel their concerns are listened to and understood, that the staff are empowered and that changes for improvement are for the benefit of the student's progress. Most effective principals who I engaged in discussion break the rules and keep asking the simple question, who is schooling for. And to my surprise, it is not just for the students. Effective leaders ensure that their staff are also an important part of the equation, for without high quality, collegial staff and staff who want to be there, the students will not progress.

There has been much research and there is a clear widespread belief that leaders make a difference to student achievement and progress. My anecdotal findings from successful leaders also show that these leaders also value the well being of their staff and if the staff are congenial, collegial and there is a culture of fun, wanting to come to work and there is recognition of the work teachers do then the students benefit from this as there are no distractions from the key task of teaching.

If teachers care about what they do and how they do it and there is recognition for progress and achievement, recognition for enhancing the well being of students then the teachers self efficacy improves and their expectations for student progress increases. The expectation of student success was more noticeable at higher decile schools.

All principals and teachers agreed with the premise that teachers internal satisfaction comes from student accomplishments and this gives teachers certainty about their own capacity to affect student progress and achievement. High quality teachers care about what they do and how they do it and feel a sense of responsibility for their efforts. What was interesting and supports some of Dr. Christine Rubie Davis' research is that of expectation. I found through discussion that teachers, perhaps subconsciously, have perceived information concerning the values and attitude of the community they teach in and this effects the expectations teachers

have on student progress. To be an effective leader, principals need to ensure all their staff have expectations of progress and achievement and need to provide resources and professional development that will support the teacher and therefore the student. Lower decile schools receive the necessary funding to provide resources and professional development and it must be imperative that leaders and Boards use the funding according to the needs based on solid, reliable and valid data. Effective education leadership makes a difference in improving learning. There's nothing new or especially controversial about that idea. What's far less clear, even after several decades of school reform, is just how leadership matters, how important those effects are in promoting the learning of all children, and what the essential ingredients of successful leadership are.

There have been many educational reforms to improve teaching and learning and National Standards is yet another one, which as we are all aware is fundamentally flawed as children learn at different rates, it is not national and the assessments are not standard. Unfortunately for this current government the chance of this reform improving teaching and learning, for improving progress and achievement is remote as our leaders are breaking the rules, which is an essential ingredient for effective leadership, as principals do not agree with its purpose and do not appreciate the extra work and effort required for little improvement of what was happening prior. The leaders I discussed improving progress and achievement with, thought that there were many other areas the government could address. These included higher quality of students at the Universities being selected and trained for a career in teaching, the government acknowledging that lower class sizes do make a difference if the teacher is effective, addressing poverty and housing issues and the continuation of professional development covering instructional practices and monitoring and analysing student progress.

Another finding of what is effective leadership is that of having a vision. All the leaders I talked to were not interested in National Standards as a reform for improving progress. All the leaders I met with had a clear vision, which was supported by teachers and the Board. Effective leaders provide direction and then exercise their influence on how they want this vision to be achieved. Effective leaders are relentless in their pursuit of the goals they set to see their students progress and achieve. There is no one model. All principals had different ways to ensure success. There are many different models of leadership. This is the major issue of the current government reform, they expect all schools to have one model to improve

achievement. Luckily we have leaders who are prepared to break the rules and continue to do what is right for their community.

Many factors influence student learning, but it is increasingly clear that what teacher's know and are able to do is one of the most important of all, therefore, professional learning represents an enormous investment in the development of human capital, directed at ensuring that the teaching and learning in our schools is up to date and effective. This will see children progress, not National Standards. Effective leaders put time and resources into their staff. They do not make excuses regarding the community. Effective teachers will then give effective feedback and as we know effective feedback makes a difference.

However, as my colleagues have discussed with me, if current national policies are continued then teachers' focus will change and this could have an impact on what I believe is effective quality teaching. Will the introduction of NS improve the quality of teachers?

The government would have us believe the current issue of 20% of all students not achieving at a 'national standard' is the fault of the schools and the quality of the teachers. As educational leaders we know there are many factors which the government ignores, including poverty, housing conditions for some communities, lack of parenting skills, immigration policies and the high physical abuse of children which is prominent in some New Zealand homes.

I asked my parent community to come up with what they thought would assist progress and achievement nationwide, not just for our community. The following is the top 12 ideas from the parents and not in any order deliberately.

- Reduce class sizes
- Think about different learning styles
- Introduce performance based pay
- Assessment for learning
- Effective feedback
- Increasing teacher aide support which should be centrally funded
- After school programmes
- More parental involvement
- Early intervention
- Metacognition

- Summer schools
- Individualised instruction

If you asked your staff or parents to put these in order for your school on what would assist progress and achievement what would it look like.

The International Successful School Principal Project of 2002 found that effective leaders are enthusiastic, passionate and devoted to education, students and the community. In 2008 NZ joined the survey and as we all know (except governments) there is no one model.

The following information was obtained from New Zealand Principal June 2012 in an article by Dr. Darrell Latham.

Personal characteristics that effective New Zealand Principals showed the following.

- A passion for education and ensuring children were always at the centre of decisions
- Pride
- High work ethic
- External optimism
- Excellent communication skills
- Ability to work collaboratively
- Undertake critical self reflection
- Have resiliency
- Loyalty to the school and school community.

Leadership characteristics included

- The ability to manage
- The ability to communicate articulately and to consult
- Being reflective
- Having a focus on student achievement
- Quality staff and leadership team
- Continuous school improvement
- Vision and purpose
- Growing leaders
- A focus on teaching and learning

I have included these 2 lists as they support the anecdotal evidence of New Zealand principals I interviewed and have written about. I found it intriguing that Dr. Latham's views based on solid research and the anecdotal views of our country's successful principals were very similar. How come the government does not listen to the experts, the principals, who are doing a highly effective job every day.

Implications:

Through my sabbatical I have met many wonderful, inspiring, innovative and dedicated principals. They work so hard for their school community, especially the students. They have great relationships with their staff. Their staff have great relationships with their students. Yet the governments continue to ignore our knowledge, our wisdom and our professionalism and want to, in my opinion, centralise educational policy so that it continues to be a one size fits all mentality. Yes, there are some schools that are failing the students through ineffective leadership or poor quality teachers. These failing schools should not be the decider for government reforms for all schools, yet this is the clear impression. Educational leaders in our schools know that education is the key to success, yet the government will not trust us to do what is best for our communities, they will not engage in appropriate dialogue and they certainly do not support schools to be self monitoring. The current educational policies confirm this espoused theory.

As I wrote previously National Standards does not address poverty, abuse or poor parenting. The major implication for our students progressing and achieving is government policies or lack of them to address issues of warm housing, lack of food, lack of parental care and as leaders of schools unfortunately it seems we can not influence the bureaucrats.

The implication of the national standards policy provides at best a limited focus as its aim is the tail. What does this policy do for our creative children, for our high achievers and for those children who now find their possible way of being taught changed?

As I wrote, school leaders in New Zealand schools are highly effective. An implication through government policy includes that we may move away from evidence based solutions and the demise of experts. Where are the science advisors, where are the art advisors and

where are the support services for teachers. Schools need to have experts in their schools to develop teachers, to fine tune programmes, to check outcomes and do the initiatives do what they were designed to do. Do schools have these people or is it now about data tables and ensuring our students can meet an unreliable standard? League tables will not make schools accountable which is a huge implication for the government. League tables do not give information on progress, poverty, abuse, teacher engagement, the professional development that has been undertaken, how hard a teacher has worked with specific children or how satisfied the community is with the culture of the school including effective leadership. Surely the government must be concerned about this policy.

An implication for the development of school leaders is the valuable sharing of ideas and the collaboration the principals have. Will National Standards see schools using data to show that their school is superior to neighbouring schools which will then see schools and clusters stop working together?

Another implication, regardless of how the school is performing, is the ability of school leaders to be honest and to reflect about their own leadership style and their vision for the school community. Then act. How resilient are you, how persistent will you be and how committed will you be to change? Will leaders throughout the country, myself included, continue to be professionally challenged, will we seek the appropriate professional development and how will we share this with our staff? How will you develop your talents?

School leaders know that what works in one situation with a group of students may not necessarily work with another group. What each school leader and school needs to know is how to find out what is right for them. Our way at Belmont Primary will not be the best way for every school.

Conclusions:

I truly believe that New Zealand primary school children are very fortunate. I have had the privilege of visiting schools nationwide, talking to teachers about best practice for their class and having robust discussions with many remarkable principals from a wide range of schools including inner city, rural, large, small, low decile and high decile and combinations of these to discuss what effective leadership is.

The New Zealand primary school principals I met in my opinion are highly effective. Effective leaders know what they want to achieve. They know their current situation, they know what they have to do and they do it. They communicate with their staff effectively and get buy in. Our effective leaders have children's progress clearly in their vision.

All principals agree with continuous monitoring of student achievement data and using this evidence to inform planning, resources and professional development yet no one I talked to agree with the national standards reform and the one size fits all policy. Effective principals are ensuring that the national standards policy does not derail their vision for the school or students.

Effective principals reflect on their own leadership, their practice and the requirements of the students.

Effective principals surround themselves with a strong leadership team and quality staff.

Effective principals are changing the way children receive information and knowledge. Teachers are no longer transmitters of information and classrooms and teacher engagement are no longer 'traditional.' There is more personalised learning, feedback is effective and teachers are receiving more professional development

Effective principals ensure that the staff have high expectations for progress and achievement for their students.

Effective leaders understand that their position is demanding and stressful however due to passion, integrity, reflection and high self efficacy they are able to create communities where teachers are encouraged and supported.

Effective leaders realise that they need to do what is best for their school and do not clone themselves on other schools. They realise what works for one leader may not work for them however they are very willing to be involved in discussion, read, attend PD, observe best practice and then decide for themselves what would be best for their school.

Effective principals share ideas through their networks, reflect, seek feedback and act. They have passion, are dedicated and have high energy levels.

Effective leaders are figureheads and represent their school in a positive manner, have the respect of the Board, create a culture of collegiality and congeniality, while understanding they are accountable.

Effective leaders understand there is going to be continuous change and manage this change with efficiency, clear communication and with clarity as to why and all students benefit, just not a few.

Effective leaders look at the 'why' question, not how. As mentioned there is no one answer. The question is why.

Effective leaders are risk takers and break the rules because the goal is beyond personal advancement.

Effective leaders and the majority of New Zealand principals and our children are very fortunate.

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