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Sabbatical report

Bringing leadership to the fore in a small rural school

'Ehara taku toa i te toa takitahi', so the strength is not in the individual, it is in the collective. *White, H.*

You can't do this alone!

Background to research

The aim of my research was to investigate ways to help principals in small schools learn to balance the complexity of task completion with leadership development in staff. This involved meeting with a number of principals and leaders of small businesses in Taranaki, Manawatu, Northern/ South Wairarapa and South Canterbury to discuss:

- leadership styles
- attributes of good leaders
- issues faced by small schools and solutions
- how to encourage/recognise leadership in staff.

The purpose of my research was: to develop and grow the leadership qualities and potential in U1, U2 and U3 staff teams through purposeful, empowering learning conversations.

The cohort was small schools with less than five full-time equivalent teachers; small businesses with less than 30 staff.

I conducted my research project in the second school term of 2015.

No matter what the size of the school the end results are the same - for schools to provide a positive, safe learning environment and every possible learning outcome for all our students - the only difference is there are fewer people to share the responsibilities of meeting individual needs and providing our children with the best education possible.

So how do we do it?

Introduction:

There is no right way to lead, citing Alma Harris (Distributed School Leadership - Developing tomorrow's leaders.) An array of researchers over the years have reinforced that there is no best way of leading. They have also shown that "effective leadership is context related and context-specific", which means what is it that your children at your school need and how best can the staff at your school meet these needs?
Certainly in my schools and the small businesses I visited this was evident: different leadership styles were being used, as each school or small business I visited had different clientele.

Being a leader requires 'reading' your staff and discovering what their aspirations are, what their strengths are and whether you can develop their potential to take on leadership responsibilities. You may need to coach and encourage them to take the next step in their teaching or management careers. You will need to set realistic expectations, juggling the work demands of a small school. (Clare Crawford 2015)

What follows are some of the ideas and thoughts from the small school and small business leaders I interviewed for this project. Also included in this section are some quotes from readings that helped me to reflect and develop a positive pathway to continue my own leadership journey.

Leadership styles

Distributed leadership
Evidence shows that schools with broad-based distributed leadership tend to have cultures where there is a high degree of professional trust and where relationships between staff are positive. Where individuals do not trust each other and power struggles emerge, distributed leadership breaks down irrecoverably.

A culture of distributed leadership that grooms new leaders for the next phase must be established. (Fullan 2006: 31)

"Small schools tend to use distributed leadership without really realising it!" (Small school leader)

Distributed leadership has empirical power. There is increased evidence that distributed leadership makes a positive difference to organisational outcomes and student learning.

Distributed leadership has representational power. It represents the alternative leadership approaches that have emerged because of increased external demands and pressures on leaders. It is clear that schools engage with complex collaborative arrangements; distributed forms of leadership will be required to 'cross multiple types of boundaries and to share ideas and insights. (Wenger et al, 2000: 123)

Distributed leadership has normative power. It reflects current changes in leadership practice in schools. The *leader - follower* relationship, on the other hand, implies a power imbalance, in distributed leadership *all relationships* are important and leadership can only be enacted if there is mutual trust and agreement about the way tasks are undertaken.

Distributed leadership is easier to do when the leader identifies staff capable of taking on responsibility.

"*The most important thing going forward is to break the boundaries between people so we can operate as a single intelligence."* (Einstein)

Distributed leadership implies that the practice of leadership is one that is shared and realised within extended groupings and teams.

Distributed leadership means that decision-making, communication and direction are provided within and across school networks. It suggests that leadership is most effective in complex systems when it is *laterally distributed and shared.*

Distributed leadership practice is a vehicle of knowledge transfer and knowledge creation, which is more likely to have a positive impact on culture and a subsequent impact on learning.

Teachers who lead innovation and change do not necessarily see their roles as that of leaders. They operate with a high degree of professional choice, autonomy and responsibility.

'Top-down' models
Those interviewed said top-down models didn't work in small schools because there is simply too much to do. In small businesses it creates too much pressure for the leader.

"It was no longer possible to run with a 'top down model' - it wasn't working and it was too big a load for the 'top'. So in order to deliver the high quality product, as a team we decided how we could work better in distributing the leadership amongst staff. This has proved more efficient and effective." (Small business leader)

Transformational leadership
Transformational leadership involves leaders motivating others to move beyond their own goals and to pursue the larger goals of the group or organisation. As cited, James McGregor Burns (1978 publication - 'Leadership') this type of leadership means leaders can inspire people with a vision that energises them and encourages them to work collaboratively towards a common goal. It means leaders must be open to full discussions with all staff. Incorporating student voice for leading teacher direction can be an option.

Attributes of good leaders

In today's world of rapid technological change, increasingly high expectations and competition for jobs for school leavers entering the workforce, effective leadership is needed more than ever.

Evidence suggests that school leadership influences student outcomes and that the impact of leadership upon student learning is significant. (Leithwood et al, 2006a, 2006b)

This research projects suggests good leaders have the following qualities:

- Relationship skills – good leaders build strong relationships with staff/students/whanau and the community
- Good administrators – you are able to keep the school running smoothly so aspiring leaders and staff know you can be relied on to ensure nothing will fall through the cracks
- Open with students/staff/whanau and the community
- Not afraid to ask staff for help when they need help
- *"Work on the business, not in it!"* (Small business leader)
- Good at collaborating with similar sized organisations
- *"Sharing in clusters is valuable."* (Small school leader)
- Work like an orchestra, where the conductor is not always the leader. The leader may change depending on who is the leader. In this way, leadership may be exercised by anyone whose ideas or actions are influential in the context of specific tasks and activities. (BES)

Issues faced by small schools and solutions

There are not enough people to do the tasks; wanting to offer more choice for students.

Be open to using people within the school community for their expertise/passion for a range of tasks, including leadership functions.

Staff stagnating or leaders not wanting to burden staff with more responsibilities.

In small schools age ranges in classes may be more than in larger schools, which creates an increased workload for teachers. However, staff still need the opportunity to take on leadership opportunities. Change areas of responsibility/rotate responsibilities every two to three years to expand staff knowledge, competencies and to foster their development.

School focus changes depending on annual targets

Use this as an opportunity to invite new leadership/ownership of the direction your staff will take in a particular curriculum area, for a particular project or for a Board-directed target. If you have been allocated fixed term units for a project, this is an ideal opportunity to use them to reward and incentivise staff.

School roll changes mean school needs change

For small schools the roll can fluctuate and may be impacted by families moving in and out of the area. As your school roll grows/or decreases be prepared to regularly discuss and review leadership/responsibilities and challenges and to make compromises, always assessing the outcome on students.

"What are we doing for our students?" (Small school leader)

Too few teachers to brainstorm

When there is a small staff, ideas for development tend to rest solely with the Principal. Consider involving the community or join with other similar sized schools to discuss development and to problem-solve.

Too much time spent on small jobs

Small schools have many of the same jobs to complete as their bigger counterparts, especially regarding communication, compliance and maintenance. Leaders need to prioritise work to ensure the important tasks take precedence and to delegate if possible. Be prepared to say no to the Board, if necessary.

"Found the load of teaching and principal so demanding that there was no time to grow professionally as a teacher so decided to move on." (Small school leader)

When recruiting staff, what should you look for?

When recruiting look for people:
- with a shared vision/passion of your school beliefs/direction
- with curriculum strengths in areas where you need support
- who are good at forming relationships with students, staff, whanau and the community
- who have leadership aspirations
- who are flexible and open to change.

> *I believe it is exciting to see leadership potential in your teaching staff and it is our job, as leaders to foster this and guide them to reach their potential, and encourage them to continue to take the next steps in their teaching/management career paths. (Clare Crawford, 2015)*

"Principals have a responsibility to grow leadership within their school." (Reed, M, …..http://www.educationalleaders.govt.nz/)

"Before you are a leader, success is all about growing yourself.
When you become a leader, success is all about growing others". (Jack Welch ,
2013 : - 16th Annual Leadership Summit

It is important to build team trust/respect before you can distribute responsibilities/encourage others to share the load. Each staff member needs to respect their colleagues and have the confidence to give and receive direction and feedback. This creates a good foundation for a shared approach to enhance student achievement.

Discover your staffs' desires. What are their professional passions/strengths?
Do they have the desire to grow their leadership skills or develop their career paths?

 If **YES** then you can begin supporting and encouraging them by:
- inviting them to lead the appropriate curriculum area/s. Involve them in appraisals/ walk- throughs relevant to their area of responsibility
- having open discussions on school direction for all areas
- getting them to suggest ideas for improvement in their or other's areas of responsibility.
- involve all staff in the review process and value their feedback
- giving them opportunities to be involved in areas relevant for a future leader, eg, budgeting, compliance documentation, discipline, communication with parents, handling sensitive parental/whanau and student issues
- standing back and allowing them to investigate/develop their ideas.

If **NO,** and there are lots of reasons for this, still involve this staff member in curriculum and staff discussions. This person may be an excellent teacher and just may not be interested or able to give any more as a leader at this time.

If you have a staff member who does not quite have the tools to be capable of taking on responsibility then with support and encouragement hopefully they will develop this over time by being part of the 'staff team' approach.   By being involved in a collaborative leadership approach they will grow in their own way.

> *In small schools it is often difficult to balance the load between having teachers in charge of various aspects of the school and curriculum versus opportunities for professional learning.*

Fostering staff leadership development requires other support, including:
- unit allocation (where possible)
- supporting their professional development, eg, promoting professional development and mentoring opportunities
- being very aware of teacher wellbeing, ie, are they coping with their new responsibilities
- providing release and cover for their students, when necessary.

The above should always be underpinned by the key leadership qualities of; *Manaakitanga*, leading with moral purpose: *Pono*, having self belief: *Ako*, being a learner: *Awhinatanga*, guiding and supporting. *(Kiwi leadership for principals: principals as educational leaders, 2008)*

Supporting documents:

School leadership and student outcomes: identifying what works and why, best evidence synthesis

The school leadership BES is a groundbreaking synthesis of 134 New Zealand and overseas research studies or reviews. The big finding of this BES is that when school leaders promote and/or participate in effective teacher professional learning this has twice the impact on student outcomes across a school than any other leadership activity.

Leading from the middle: educational leadership for middle and senior leaders
Leading from the Middle (2012) describes the qualities, practices and activities middle and senior leaders need to lead in ways that enhance learner outcomes.

Tu rangatira (English)*Tū Rangatira: Māori Medium Educational Leadership* (2010) is a model of leadership that reflects some of the key leadership roles and practices that contribute to high-quality educational outcomes for Māori learners.

Kiwi leadership for principals *Kiwi Leadership for Principals* (2008) presents a model of leadership that reflects the qualities, knowledge, and skills required to lead New Zealand schools from the present to the future.

Alma Harris, (2008) *Distributed School Leadership - Developing tomorrow's leaders*, Routledge.

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